

## The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament

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### *Introduction*

The traditional doctrine of Revelation presents obstacles towards the acceptance of any contemporary exercise of prophecy. As is well known, the standard text books in systematic theology divide God's Revelation into two categories<sup>1</sup>:

1. *General Revelation*, described as "God's witness of Himself toward all men through creation, history, and the conscience of man. It is set forth in Scripture passages such as Psalm 19; Acts 14:8-18, 17:16-34; Rom 1:18-32, 2:12-16; etc."
2. *Special Revelation*, which is God's disclosure of Himself (revelation in reality) and the interpretative Word of Scripture (revelation in Word). Quantitatively, this encompasses more than we have in Scripture."

However, even if it is granted that God has spoken to men in ways beyond what we have in Scripture, many insist that surely the situation has changed since the days of the Apostles. With the Bible inscripturated, God's final and perfect Revelation is given to men. The last word has been spoken (Rev 22:18). God has Himself closed prophecy.

It can be seen that prophecy which is identified by Pentecostals as God's word for special occasions is an anomaly that will not fit into the above theological scheme which envisages God's word as authoritative *for all times*. It is not surprising then, that theologians like Walter Chantry concludes, "All modern prophecy is spurious! God's truth has come to us in a fixed and finished objective revelation. We must not accept the new 'revelation' of neo-pentecostalism."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, these theologians point out, such Pentecostals neglect the safeguards for a biblical doctrine of Scripture upheld by the Reformers who insisted that there can be no separation between Word and Spirit. As Bernard Ramm so clearly describes, "The Spirit is indispensable for the efficacious working of the Word.... By the same token of the union of Word and Spirit, the Spirit is mute without the Word. He can only make groaning which cannot be framed into speech. The Scriptures are indispensable for the working of the Spirit. To isolate Scripture from the Spirit, or the Spirit from Scripture, is theologically mischievous."<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, Reformed Christians like Walter Chantry are aware that Pentecostals claim to uphold the Bible as God's supreme word, as is easily verified by a quick reading of their doctrinal statements. Yet in practice, the Pentecostals seem to require some contemporary additions to the written Word before it can become the full Word of God. Indeed, Chantry remarks that in charismatic meetings, "Those who attend are more elated over the words

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<sup>1</sup> C.M. Horne, s.v. "Revelation". *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Vol 5, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *Signs of the Apostle* (Banner of Truth, 1976) p.37. It will be clear that I do not hold to the "cessationist" position which says the gifts of the Holy Spirit were restricted and functioned as signs to confirm the authority of the New Testament apostles and prophets, and as such ended with the closing of the Canon. See the authoritative exposition by Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Presb. & Reformed, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1960).

of the twentieth- century prophets than over the inscripturated words of Christ and his apostles. It is the message in tongues or of prophecy that thrills participants with the conviction that God has spoken to them in their meetings.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this is often true and thus convinces those who reject contemporary prophecy that while Pentecostals may *de jure* claim that Scripture holds the ultimate authority, they have erred *de facto* by practices which deny that claim.

In view of these objections, we need to make two important clarifications that are necessary before the controversy can be resolved. To Reformed theologians like Chantry, we must ask if they are correct in restricting the practice of prophecy to the giving of inscripturated Revelation. To the Pentecostals, we ask if they could practice the gift of prophecy in such a manner that would preserve their integrity with respect to holding the preeminence of written Scriptures. The answers to these questions, if they are to be accepted as authoritative, must surely be built upon the teaching and practice of prophecy in the early church itself. For this purpose, we must first examine exegetically and then reflect on the theological implications of the relevant passages in the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians.

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## **The Gift of Prophecy**

### ***Introduction***

The church is a charismatic community, endowed with spiritual gifts and charged with a mission to witness to the world. As such, the question as to how the church should use its gifts to proclaim the message of salvation assumes crucial importance. How may the church be recognized as God’s instrument, invested with divine authority that is necessary to challenge and overrule all human opinions in a pluralistic world, and how may it receive divine directions for the ongoing life of the community? The Pentecostal answer is the rediscovery and exercise of the gift of prophecy. It is, however, a controversial answer, not least because Christians speak of it with different meanings and understanding as to what prophecy is. The purpose of this paper then is to examine the phenomenon of prophecy in the early church especially as recorded in the relevant passages in the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians, and to determine how prophecy was exercised or regulated. Because of this paper on exegetical foundations, it is hoped that it will contribute to the establishment of guidelines which will transcend denominational limitations.

### **I. Prophecy in the Book of Acts**

We may identify six key passages in the book of Acts relevant to this present study.

#### **1. Acts 2:14-21**

That Pentecost was the epochal event for the church is universally acknowledged. Christologically, Pentecost was the witness to the glorification of Christ. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was possible only as a fulfillment of John 7:39, “... the Holy Spirit had not been given since Jesus had not yet been glorified.” Ecclesiologically, Pentecost was the birth of the church as the people of the eschatological Spirit prophesied in Joel 2:28-32.<sup>5</sup> Missiologically, Pentecost was the beginning of Christian mission, when he disciples

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<sup>4</sup> Chantry, Ibid, p.23.

<sup>5</sup> Also Isa 32:15; 34:16; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26f; 37:4-14. The Spirit is given as *he epangelia* (Lk 24:29; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 38f), a word used by Paul and Luke to characterize the covenant promise of God to His people

were empowered by the Holy Spirit to become witnesses to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).<sup>6</sup>

In the context of Pentecost, it is also clear that the decisive evidence of the gift of the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of the gift of prophecy. In particular, Peter linked the speaking of tongues<sup>7</sup> with prophecy. While the identification was not explicit in the book of Joel, nevertheless, the thrust of Peter's speech is that the special relationship with God which had been previously reserved only for a few privileged prophets has become available to all believers. All are potentially prophets because all believers, regardless of age, sex and race, now possess the Spirit of God.<sup>8</sup> Here at last was the fulfillment of the wish of Moses in Num. 11:29, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"

The universal availability of the gift of prophecy for the whole church is clearly seen throughout the book of Acts (*propheteuo*, seven times in Acts 2:17-18; 19:6; 21:9 and *prophetes* in Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10). The gift, however is given only as a means to an end, i.e., to enable the church to proclaim among Jews and Gentiles the good news of God's grace and action in Christ. As M.M.B. Turner writes, "the 'Spirit of prophecy' to be given will be the effective power, not merely of Israel's witness, but also the power by which the messiah continues and deepens the New Exodus liberation and purging restoration of Israel, and so continues to fulfill to her the promises of her salvation."<sup>9</sup>

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(Acts 2:39; 7:17; 13:23, 32; 26:6; Rom 4:13, 16, 20; 9:8; Gal 3:14 etc.) Note that Peter equates the Pentecost experience with *the beginning* (Acts 11:15).

<sup>6</sup> For Paul, the reason for the giving of the Holy Spirit is the personal blessing to be enjoyed by the recipients. Luke on the other hand, portrays the disciples as receiving the Spirit not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of others. The important thing was Christ's commandment to evangelize the world through the power of the Holy Spirit (Hull, p. 164-167). J.B. Pohill writes, "It would be contrary to the text to speak of the Spirit giving a new common language. The opposite is rather the case. The Spirit gave the Christians many languages, all the languages represented by the nationalities listed in vv. 9-11... He empowers Christian witnesses to take the gospel to the many different languages of the world to create a worldwide people of God, united by a common confession in the lordship of Christ." *Acts*, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> What exactly was the tongues being spoken by the disciples? C.K. Barrett notes that "Luke appears in this narrative to understand the gift of tongues (v. 4) to mean the ability to speak in a variety of foreign languages, intelligible to those with the appropriate linguistic background (vv. 6, 8). This seems to be a different view of glossolalia from that of Paul; see especially 1 Cor. 12; 14, where speaking with tongues is generally unintelligible unless there is an interpreter, and the qualification of the interpreter is not knowledge of languages but a special spiritual gift." *Acts*, p.109.

The rare verb, *apophengesthai* provides the clue. Its basic meaning is to speak in a solemn and soberly manner, to speak with emphasis; but Knowling *Acts*, p.73 notes that it is used in the LXX for both the utterance of the prophets and for ordinary conversation (Ezek. 13:9; Mic. 5:12; 1 Chron. 25:1). Furthermore, *dialektos* means languages, the vernacular of a country (v.8). The equation of 'tongue' with *dialektos* and *apothengomai* leads us to conclude that while the utterances were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they were intelligible languages. It is instructive to note that while in Acts 2 the hearers immediately recognized the utterances as languages, the utterances of glossolalia in 1 Cor. 12 are not understood and required interpretation. Nevertheless, the miraculous element remains in that the disciples being Galileans, would not have learned these foreign languages in any natural way.

<sup>8</sup> (a) "I will pour out my Spirit upon *all (pas)* flesh, *pas* with anarthrous noun could mean 'every' or the 'whole', the 'entire' (Moule, IB, pp. 93-95). F.F. Bruce also notes that here "Luke probably sees in those words an adumbration of the worldwide Gentile mission, even if Peter himself did not realize the full import when he quoted them on the day of Pentecost" (*Acts*, p.68).

(b) "Your sons and daughters .. old men shall dream dreams": "The three lines of Hebrew poetry are parallel and synonymous statements which mean all the predicates belong to all the subjects, sons, daughters, young men, old men" Lenski, p. 75).

<sup>9</sup> Turner, p. 356.

## 2. Acts 11:27-30

In this passage, we discern several important aspects of the practice of prophecy in the early church.

- a. There were *several*, if not many, prophets (*prophetai*) present. The plurality is to be emphasized even if we could not ascertain their exact number.<sup>10</sup>
- b. What were the Jerusalem prophets doing in Antioch? Apparently, the centre of their activities was in Jerusalem but they were seen moving freely around the churches as when Agabus came down from Judea (Acts 21:10) and Judas and Silas were sent by the church in Jerusalem to encourage the Christians in Antioch (Acts 15). We concur then with Swete's historical reconstruction that "At first as might be expected, Jerusalem was the centre of prophetic activity, from which prophets, singly or in bands, went forth to visit other churches, as occasion arose."<sup>11</sup> We have several motivations being suggested for their presence in Antioch. One view is that the prophets came to Antioch as guests.<sup>12</sup> Another is that they came to enlist the help of the Antiochene Christians in their resistance to Caligula (who attempted to desecrate the Temple).<sup>13</sup> Zahn's solution is that they came "following an inward impulse of the prophetic Spirit and following the footsteps of Barnabas." The weakness in all these proposals is that they are based on more conjectures. Perhaps Haenchen (p. 376) is correct in his observation that "there is no motive here for their coming" It is best to leave the question unanswered when the text is silent. What we should not miss, however, is the fact that the arrival of prophets who were God's spokesmen denoted divine endorsement of the work in Antioch and the close kindred spirit and cooperation between Jerusalem and Antioch.
- c. What exactly did Agabus prophesy?  
Agabus stood up (*anastas*)<sup>14</sup> to deliver his prophecy in a manner of formal prediction and possibly in a congregational situation. Agabus' action was described by the word *semaino*<sup>15</sup> (to give a symbolic sign). While granting that the word can point to the allusive character of an oracle, nevertheless, it is given *dia tou pneumatos*.<sup>16</sup> In effect, Agabus was giving a message inspired by the Spirit and only as we see the prompt response of the church do we understand that it fully recognized the divine origin and authority behind the prophecy.<sup>17</sup>
- d. What was the message given?

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<sup>10</sup> "...the occurrences of the noun *prophetes* are almost plural in the NT, while in the Apostolic Fathers the situation is reversed and most occurrences of *prophetes* are singular." Aune, p.99.

<sup>11</sup> Swete, *Holy Spirit in the N.T.*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> J.N. Sanders, "Peter and Paul in Acts." *New Testament Studies*, 11 (1955).

<sup>13</sup> Wilfred L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem* (CUP 1925). p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> The word (used eighteen times in Acts) is also derived from the LXX refers to an orator getting to his feet, as in 13:16 and 15:17.

<sup>15</sup> *Esmanen* = to show by a sign, give a sign. Rengstorf, TDNT, 7, p. 264 points out that Josephus differentiates between *propheteuo* and *semaino* (*Antiquities* 7.9.5, 214; 10.13.3, 241).

<sup>16</sup> BDF, p.119, ss. 223.2 – *dia* + genitive refers to the origination. Also, Bruce (*Acts*, p. 239), "The addition *dia tou pneumatos* confirms that in itself *semaino* is not for the narrator a *tt* (*terminus technicus*) for specifically prophetic discourse. It is true that Agabus prophesied but it is equally true that *semaino* simply means 'to signify'... And the Spirit is needed in this case because he is foreseeing the future."

<sup>17</sup> Barrett elaborates, "*anastas* is not superfluous, in a seated company the prophet rises to speak. He speaks *dia tou pneumatos*; this differs little from saying that the Spirit speaks through him. What he says is occasioned by the Spirit and has the Spirit's authority." *Acts*, p. 562. Contra Munck, p. 109, who takes it as a mere sermon.

We do not know the exact words of Agabus but the main message was “that there would be a great famine over all the world.” It was possibly given with a command to help the church in Jerusalem. We must note that a prediction as a fulfillment of an event of such extent (*oikoumene*), intensity (*megalen*), certainty (*mullein*)<sup>18</sup> and the specific details that go with it (time and place, as being in Jerusalem) certainly rule out the possibility of mere human foresight.

e. What was the response to the message?

We can only marvel at the response of the church. Was it because the message was graphically presented, or that the spiritual aura that exuded from a true prophet was overwhelming? We can only speculate over the reason for such a positive response. But Luke records that the word of the prophet was accepted by the church as authentic even prior to the time when the test of fulfillment could be attempted. We have here perhaps an example where the Holy Spirit not only inspires the prophet as a channel of His message but also prepares the hearts and minds of a spiritually sensitive church to recognize and to immediately obey the given prophecy. The danger of subjectivism is also safeguarded against by the collective and unanimous decision of the whole church.

### 3. Acts 13:1-3

Here is one passage which indicates that there were prophets resident in a church in a particular city, in this case, Antioch. While some may argue that there were no prophets yet in Antioch when Agabus visited it earlier, it must be pointed out that this is an argument from silence. On the other hand, it is clear here that the prophets were in a prominent position of leadership at a very early phase of the church. It also seems that the prophets here are places on equal footing with the teachers.<sup>19</sup>

The message came when the church was worshipping (*leitourgonton*). The LXX uses *leitourgein* of Temple service of the priests and Levites<sup>20</sup> (cf. 2 Chron. 5:14; 13:10; 35:3; Judith 4:14; Joel 1:13; 2:17; Ezek. 40:46; 44:16; 45:14; H Dan. 7:10). That it was a solemn occasion is apparent from the fact that the church was fasting (*nesteuo*),<sup>21</sup> a practice that specially sensitized the believers to divine guidance (Acts 9:12; 10:10-16?); in the OT 1 Sam 7:5-6; Dan 9:3). While the agent is not explicitly stated it is reasonable to suppose that it came through one of the prophets (since Luke has deliberately

<sup>18</sup> *mellein* + future indicative denotes the certainty that an event will occur in the future (BDF, ss. 338,3; 350. Also BDAG, s.v. ‘*mellein*’ which translates it as “will certainly take place or be”).

<sup>19</sup> BDF, ss. 444, “*te... te* places the element connected in a parallel relationship.” Longenecker, E.B.C., p. 416, argues that the untranslatable particle *te* is used to connect word pairs and coordinate clauses, and to distinguish one set of coordinates from another, i.e., Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius were the prophets (introduced by the first *te*) while Manaen and Saul were the teachers (introduced by the second *te*). See also Alford, Acts, p. 139. This view is opposed by Lake and Cadbury, Acts, p. 141-142, who say “it may be doubted whether an enclitic can quite bear the strain of this interpretation. One must also allow Luke to indulge in stylistic variations. Sometimes he continues lists with *te... kai* instead of the simple *kai* repeated between each term (in between every other term)” (Acts 9:6). Also of the same view are Knowling, Acts, 2:282 and Haenchen, p. 395. One may avoid the need for a decision on the basis that prophets and teachers go together as men who understand the word and at the same time are able to teach it to others (Lenski, p. 492, Knowling, p. 282, Neil, p. 153). David Peterson suggests that the distinction between these ministries may have been ‘a matter of manner rather than of content.’ Acts p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> TDNT 4, pp. 225-232.

<sup>21</sup> It is “by fasting one withdraws in the highest degree from the influence of the world and makes oneself receptive to the commands from heaven” (Haenchen, Acts pp. 395-396); also Aune, Prophecy, p. 266

mentioned the presence of prophets on the church).<sup>22</sup> The command ('set apart for me') was indeed direct, concise and emphatic and required immediate obedience.<sup>23</sup> While there are no symbolic actions, the setting apart of the prophets to their ministry is reminiscent of the Old Testament calling of the prophets (e.g. Isa. 6:1-6 and Jer. 1:5).

The church, upon receipt of the message, entered a new period of preparation through fasting and prayer. There are various reasons suggested for this. Haenchen suggests that it was a "new period of preparation which strengthens them spiritually."<sup>24</sup> It is possible that the church was giving further deliberation on the matter while awaiting further revelations. Whatever the reason, there was no hesitation on the part of the church, once it was convinced of the genuineness and validity of the prophecy, to send off the two most eminent and gifted leaders of the church in obedient response.

#### 4. Acts 15:32-35

The context of these verses is the decision at the Council of Jerusalem where the Gentiles were accepted fully as Christians without having to be circumcised. In this joyous situation the role of Judas and Silas were described as exhorting (*parakaleo*) and strengthening (*episterizo*).<sup>25</sup> It should be clear that their qualification for the task was not that they were emissaries of the Council but that they were spiritually endowed with the gift of prophecy (*kai autoi prophetai ontes*).<sup>26</sup> It is also clear that their ministry of exhorting the Christians in spiritual growth was mainly through the oral word. Were they explaining the Jerusalem decree as being consistent with God's will in His revealed word and the signs of God's working as they exhorted the Gentiles to more godly living? This is implied by Lenski who writes that the prophets were "men who are thoroughly versed in the Word and able authoritatively to set forth the Lord's will from the Word."<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Bruce writes that Judas and Silas exercised a similar gift of prophecy as the Antiochene church itself (13:1).<sup>28</sup> If so, this would imply a new series of revelation. In any case, either view is no more than an argument from silence. The effect of their ministry is, however, clear in that by their exhortation and strengthening the church was

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<sup>22</sup> Barrett writes, "In the course of the meeting, eipen to pneuma to hagian: presumably through one of the prophets, but cf. 8:29; 10:19; 11:2; 19:1. The Spirit sometimes speaks directly. The Spirit's command leads to a special commission for Barnabas and Saul" *Acts*, p. 605. Kistemaker emphasizes the immediacy of the message from the prophets, "We must conclude that the New Testament reveals a difference between prophets and teachers. "Whereas teachers expound Scripture, cherish the tradition about Jesus and explain the fundamentals of the catechism, the prophets, not bound by Scripture or tradition, speak to the congregation on the basis of revelations" (see I Cor. 14:29-32)" Kistemaker, p. 454. So also Bruce, p. 261; Neil, p.154; Haenchen, p.396.

<sup>23</sup> BAG, s.v *de*: the particle is used with exhortations on commands to give them greater urgency (Lk. 2:15; 1 Cor. 6:20; Acts 15:36; 6:3).

<sup>24</sup> Haenchen, p. 396. Also Lenski, p. 495.

<sup>25</sup> *Parakalein* is used to translate (*niham*) and other Hebrew words with the same idea. It stresses on comfort in bereavement and promises and testifies to god's comfort given to His people when under divine judgment or to an individual in times of persecution. O. Schmotz and G. Stahlin: *parakaleo*, TDNT 5: 774-78. *episterizo* "denotes the spiritual reinforcement of the congregation." Haenchen, p. 454. cf. Acts 14:22; 15:41; 1 Thess. 2:17.

<sup>26</sup> *Prophetai ontes* "gives the reason for their superadding to the appointed business of their mission the work of exhorting and edifying" (Alford, p. 171). Peterson writes, "The emphatic description of Judas and Silas as *themselves prophets (kai autoi prophetai)* is significant in the context. It suggests that prophetic ministry involved explanation and application of apostolic teaching, such as was found in the letter, and not simply prediction, as in the case of Agabus (13:28; 21:10-11), or special guidance, as the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul for their missionary campaign (cf. 13:1-2). *Acts* p. 441.

<sup>27</sup> Lenski, p. 630.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, p. 317.

built up. The exercise of prophecy as primarily in the context of the assembled church is also obvious.

#### 5. Acts 21:4

While Paul was in Tyre, some of the disciples “by means of the Spirit” warned Paul not to continue<sup>29</sup> his journey to Jerusalem. Paul, however, simply ignored their warnings. This raises the important question as to whether Paul had been disobedient to a message that came from the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup> The solution to this puzzle lies perhaps in the understanding of New Testament prophecy which takes into account the human response of the prophets to the information revealed to them. In this case, the Tyrian disciples read their own fearful desires into their interpretation and concluded (humanly) that Paul should avoid any imprisonment in Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup>

We have here then, a clear example of how Paul carried out the testing of prophecy which he advocated for the Corinthians. He was sure that the Holy Spirit was directing him to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). When he was confronted with the prophecy, he shifted away the human elements and resolved in his heart that it was indeed God’s will for him to continue his journey. As Lenski wrote, “Paul did not consider the Spirit’s word as a warning, for the Spirit never forbade him to go to Jerusalem; these revelations only forewarned and prepared him to be ready for what awaited him” (p.862). Kistemaker concurs and writes, “Is there a contradiction between the revelations Paul received from the Holy Spirit and those which the believers in Tyre obtained? No, not at all. The Christians in Tyre heard the Holy Spirit say that Paul would meet adversities, but they did not understand the purpose of Paul’s future suffering. Conversely, Paul understood the warnings as confirmation that “he must suffer for [the Lord’s] name” (9:16). He considered these divine revelations to be symbols of God’s grace designed to prepare him for the immediate future.”<sup>32</sup> We must realize that Paul was not acting out of an impulsive decision. It is not unreasonable to assume that Paul would have had sought for spiritual guidance for such crucial events in his life. Paul was already in 19:21 resolute<sup>33</sup> in setting his direction to Jerusalem. He was under a divine compulsion (*dei*)<sup>34</sup> to go to Rome as he testified in Acts 20:22, 23. While we confidently take the view of Paul’s sense of an inward compulsion by the Holy Spirit<sup>35</sup> we, however, do not feel here the liberty to assume that he was in possession of the full details of the final outcome.

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<sup>29</sup> The prohibition is a present infinitive suggesting that Paul was to cease from his present action.

<sup>30</sup> The singular *tu pneumaticos* excludes the possibility of translating it “by means of their own human spirit”. Furthermore, the phrase *dia* when used with *to pneuma*, with or without the article and the adjunctive *hagio* (Acts 1:2; 4:25; 11:28; 21:4; Rom. 5:5; 8:11) all refer to the Holy Spirit. The other possible meanings occurring in 1 Cor. 2:10, Eph. 3:16, 2 Thess. 2:2 and Heb. 9:14 are clear from the context. This clearest reference to the agency of the Holy Spirit is Acts 11:28.

<sup>31</sup> R. Longenecker: *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Zond. 1971) p.28. “Their inspired vision foresaw the difficulties and dangers that lay ahead of Paul (cf. v.11); they drew the conclusion that he should not go up to Jerusalem (cf. v. 12).” Also Alford, p.235 and Swete, p.78.

<sup>32</sup> Kistemaker, p. 745.

<sup>33</sup> *tithesthai en toi pneumaticos*: in BDAG s.v. *tithemi* we have “to come to think of something, to contrive something in one’s mind.” Bruce (p.394) notes that it “seems intended to describe a purpose formed with intense earnestness.” Rackham (*Acts*, p.361) also notes, “Spirit” may denote whether the human or the divine spirit: but in the case of the true Christian we need not be careful to distinguish, for his spirit is governed by the Spirit of God who dwells in him.”

<sup>34</sup> Haenchen, p. 568, notes that “the *dei* of the journey to Rome can be understood as references to the divine will.”

<sup>35</sup> Those scholars who take it to the Holy Spirit are Lenski, p. 841, Bruce (*The Spirit in the Book of Acts*, p. 182). Knowling, p. 431, and BDAG s.v. *to pneuma*. Alford has *to pneuma* as referring to Paul’s own spirit

## 6. Acts 21:8-14

We have in this passage the first reference to women who prophesied (*thugateres tessares parthenoi propheteousai*). In view of the fact that Luke habitually specifies the early church prophets by name and refers to them as a distinct group, it is significant that he did not call these women prophetesses. We have here then the difference between ‘prophets’ and those who were blessed with the charisma of prophesying.<sup>36</sup> The difference lies in the fact that the gift was apparently resident in some, while the others were sporadically given utterances, i.e., the former was an *office* of a prophet while the latter was described as a charismatic function.<sup>37</sup>

Agabus’ message is here introduced in two parts in a manner reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets (1 Kings 11:29-40; 22:11; Isa 20:2-4; Jer. 13:1-11; 19:11-13. Ezek. 4:1-3; 5:1-4). First, he took Paul’s girdle and bound his own<sup>38</sup> hands and feet, then he proclaimed a message which told of Paul’s future of being bound by the Jews and being delivered by them to the Romans. The prophecy was prefaced by “Thus says the Holy Spirit” which corresponds to the Old Testament ‘*koh amar yhw*’ (Thus says Yahweh).<sup>39</sup> However, unlike the Tyrian Christians, Agabus did not venture to the conclusion that Paul ought not to go to Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> It was Paul’s companions and the Caesarean Christians who drew the conclusion and then pleaded with tears that Paul should cease from going. But this only strengthened Paul’s determination. He was prepared to remain obedient even at the cost of his life.<sup>41</sup> When they saw his determination, they stopped trying to dissuade him, praying that the Lord’s will be done.

An issue that needs to be resolved is how successful Agabus’ prophecy was. Some have pointed out the discrepancy between this prophecy and the actual fulfillment (Acts 21:27-35) since Paul was not bound (*deo*) by the Jews but by the Romans. Indeed, it was the Romans who rescued Paul from the Jewish mob.<sup>42</sup> If so, Agabus in this case has, like the Tyrian prophets, read his own interpretations into a revelation. This has led Hill to remark if “one may be forgiven for wondering if he (Agabus) was not trying to cast himself into the role of an Old Testament prophet, but not quite succeeding.”<sup>43</sup> “If we do not adhere pedantically to the details of this prophecy of Agabus, but rather look at the essentials, we recognize also the relative correctness of this type of approach. The Jews by their assault of Paul caused the Romans to arrest him, by their continual accusations they

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under the driving control of the Holy Spirit, or as Hull (p.164) describes it, an inner constraint under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>36</sup> Barrett writes, “The four prophesying daughters (use of the participle προφητεύουσαι suggests that for Luke prophecy was a function rather than an office) were virgins” *Acts*, p. 994. See also, Lenski, p.866

<sup>37</sup> So Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> *Eautou* may be interpreted as referring to Paul’s limbs, *tou paulou* being the closest antecedent but it is more likely to refer to Agabus; as such, Luke is here using a possessive genitive. BDF, ss. 148; Turner, *Syntax*, p.190.

<sup>39</sup> Haenchen, p.602; Alford, pp. 37-38; BDAG. s.v. *lego tade*.

<sup>40</sup> So Bruce, *Acts*, p.425.

<sup>41</sup> Note the emphatic position of *ego*, given a sense of personal testing in contrast to the others.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce: *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles*, p.181. Kistemaker observes, “The Spirit speaks directly through Agabus and addresses Paul. By this visible sign the Holy Spirit is telling Paul the manner in which he will become a prisoner in Jerusalem. Of course, the facts should not be pushed to their logical extreme; the Jews in Jerusalem did not bind Paul with a belt... Note, however, that the Holy Spirit predicts Paul’s binding and incarceration but not his death. By implication, his gospel ministry will continue even in prison.” *Acts*, p. 750.

<sup>43</sup> Hill, p.107-108



prevented his release from custody, and are at least partly responsible for the fact that he finally had to appeal to Caesar, and traveled to Rome as one destined for death.” We must not forget that Paul himself recognized that like his Lord, he was delivered as a Jewish prisoner into the hands of the Romans (Acts 28:17).

## II. Summary

### 1. *Who were the prophets?*

Ever since Pentecost the Holy Spirit, who had been the source of all prophecy and who had been previously limited only to the Old Testament prophets, now dwells in every believer. Consequently, by virtue of the possession of the Holy Spirit every Christian has the potential of becoming a prophet. Nevertheless, the manifestation is not uniformly distributed and by virtue of it being more regularly or frequently apparent in some, believers like Judas and Silas were recognized as prophets. These prophets may sometimes attach themselves to a local congregation but nevertheless, they had the liberty to move around in their ministry as and when they felt necessary. We have Agabus as the chief example, ministering in Antioch (Acts 11:27-30) and Caesarea (Acts 21:11-14).

On the other hand, despite the broadening of the privilege of prophetic powers, the New Testament prophets did not enjoy unlimited authority such as the Old Testament prophets did. Their authority was limited to the messages they proclaimed, as Aune says, “Prophets were regarded as leaders only insofar as their messages were accepted as divinely inspired and authoritative articulation of the will of God.”<sup>44</sup> We can see the difference in that while the Old testament prophets spoke with absolute authority, e.g. in the case of Samuel, where “the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground (1 Sam 3:19) and “All that he says comes true” (1 Sam 9:6), in the New Testament we find Paul feeling the liberty to assess prophecies directed to him and distinguishing between the divine revelations from the human interpretations.<sup>45</sup> Further, the Old Testament prophet had spiritual power over the community but the New Testament prophet does not have unrestricted rule over the others. He is himself a member of the community, subject to their evaluation and testing. In summary, “since he speaks with a sense of God-given authority, he gives authoritative instruction, though he is not above criticism.”<sup>46</sup>

### 2. *What is the function of the prophets?*

We find in the book of Acts many functions which are parallel to those of the Old Testament. The prophets were given revelations regarding events in the future (11:27f; 21:4, 10), their warnings were given in symbolic actions (10:23), they were spokesmen of the Spirit giving guidance for missions (13:1f; 15:28; 16:6) and even the more normal task of exhorting and encouraging the believers (11:23; 15:32).

We should, however, note that this is not an exhaustive list of prophetic activities<sup>47</sup> and that prophecy is not exercised in isolation. It is always exercised in the congregation and given for the growth of the whole church. We note also the distinction between prophecy and teaching. The New Testament teacher was primarily a transmitter of traditions

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<sup>44</sup> David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1983) p.211.

<sup>45</sup> For a good study of the differences see Wayne A. Grudem: *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Uni. America Press 1982) pp.18-20.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich, G., *Prophetes* in TDNT vol. 6, p.848.

<sup>47</sup> For the thesis of the prophets’ role in creating the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel traditions and its refutation, see Hill, chapter 7.

concerning Jesus and an expositor of Scriptures. On the other hand, the prophet spoke on the basis of a direct revelation from God, bringing forth a message directly relevant to an immediate situation.<sup>48</sup>

### *3. What was the relationship between the prophets and other leaders?*

In view of the manifold functions of the prophets, we are not surprised that they play a role in the leadership of the church (Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3; 15:32-35; 21). However, their leadership is always exercised in cooperation with and mutual submission to the other leaders of the church. Aune goes even so far as to say that “The prophets serve as resources for divinely authenticated information, but it is up to the authorities to ratify that information and to act upon it” (Acts 15:28; 21:10-14).<sup>49</sup> It is only natural to see that leadership in the early Christian community is exercised collectively for after all, the Holy Spirit is a spirit of unity and order.

### **III. Theological implications**

It is clear that the Reformed theologians are wrong in identifying what is prophesied with what has been inscripturated. On the contrary, we note that the content of some of the prophecies in the book of Acts are not recorded at all. Luke is silent as to what the disciples prophesied at Pentecost. The same is true of Judas and Silas in Acts 15. It would appear that the Reformed theologians, in their obsession with objective certainty (which is true of the inscripturated Word) have overlooked the existential dimension of prophecy. At least in Acts, we must note that a message from a prophet is often directed specifically to a particular person or group and for a particular purpose. The message is historically specific. As such, a prophecy exhorts or demands only the obedience of those people concerned and hence, the details were never recorded.

Furthermore, the existence of written Scripture (the first disciples had the Old Testament) does not rule out the further reception of God’s messages from the prophets either. It is true what we must never dichotomise the Word from the Spirit. We can be sure too that the early disciples would reject any prophecies which were proven to be contradictory to what they had already received as God’s word in the Old Testament and the received traditions of the words of Christ. But they remained open to accept the spoken message of a prophet as endowed with divine authority even though this message did not have to be binding on subsequent generations of Christians.

All this does point to the fact that the traditional doctrine of General and Special Revelation (restricted to inscripturated revelation) is too restrictive. Likewise, Bernard Ramm’s insistence of the indissoluble union of Word and Spirit, while encapsulating a nonnegotiable truth, must not be taken to be an exhaustive truth. True, the Spirit does not bypass the written Word. But this does not necessarily entail the conclusion that the Spirit can speak only through the written Word. Such a conclusion would rule out as self-deception the testimonies of many godly Christians who report how the Holy Spirit had prompted them to very specific acts of obedience through other human agencies or even

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich, p. 854. The difference between teaching and prophecy is evident from Gordon Fee’s assertion that for Paul, prophecy consisted of “spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, intelligible messages, orally delivered in the gathered assembly, intended for the edification and encouragement of the people.” Fee, p. 595.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.205

circumstances (e.g. the missionary calling, and more specifically, the visions of Sadhu Sundar Singh).

The need to choose between the two positions may, however, be forced and unnecessary. We must be open to prophecy today, but even in cases where the content of the prophecy-message is not directly dealt with at all in Scripture, we must always ensure through testing that these messages are not inconsistent with what the church, the body of believers, has always understood to be the basic intent of Scriptures. The last statement only serves to emphasize how important it is for any believer to have a thorough grasp of Scripture if he is to be equipped in the testing of prophecy.

It is at this point that, all too often, Pentecostals are ill-prepared for the task. Perhaps this is due to an anti-intellectualistic attitude which characterized the early beginnings of Pentecostalism, which drew many members from the lower economic class. More disturbing, however, is the common syndrome whereby a congregation, having been fed with half-inspired prophecies, develops a palate which finds the preaching of the written word of God tasteless (c.f. Jonathan Edwards). Perhaps this weakness can be remedied if the Pentecostals recognize that ‘teaching’ is also a spiritual gift. Prepared discourses such as a sermon) even if they lack the immediacy of the Spirit’s inspiration, can become powerfully prophetic.

We are also made acutely aware of the fact that we do not have any fool-proof safeguards in the testing of prophecy (much as rationalistic theologians are uncomfortable with this). The testing of prophecy is not a mere legalistic and rational procedure carried out with impeccable logic. In the final analysis, it is only the person (better still, the congregation) with the gift of discernment who will be spiritually enabled to judge the divine origin and the authenticity of any given utterance. The exercise of the gift of prophecy and its evaluation, like any other charisma of the Spirit, is an exercise of faith, a faith which believes that even as the Holy Spirit speaks through a prophet, He is also at work in those who hear. The hearers know that the prophet has indeed spoken the Lord’s Word.

The above comments may appear to leave us extremely vulnerable to the dangers of subjectivism. This will, however, be minimized if we recognize that prophecy is above all a public gift and the context, par excellence, for the exercise of prophecy is when the congregation is at worship (cf. the Acts passages above and 1 Cor. 12-14). As a public gift, prophecy is firstly beneficial because the Lord is able to speak to a whole group of people at once, and to focus the attention of the group on the same word, at the same time. Secondly, because of our prejudices, we are sometimes unable to ‘hear’ the Lord speaking to us about a particular issue (even through reading the Bible!). Through prophecy, the Lord is able to penetrate our resistance of hearing that word, simply because it comes from outside ourselves – we cannot rationalize it away as being ‘just our own thoughts’. Thirdly, prophecy, as an instrument of corporate guidance from the Lord, can be tested by others. We are led here to a very legitimate area of concern expressed by those who object to the contemporary exercise of prophecy, namely, that the Pentecostal have strongly encouraged the exercise of the gift of prophecy in the assembly but unlike the Biblical Christians, they seem to pay less attention to the gift which is closely paired with prophecy, i.e., the evaluation of prophetic utterances by the community, an evaluation aimed at determining whether the word is a genuine word of the Spirit, or a word to be ignored and rejected. We can only guess at the reasons why this is so. Perhaps the Pentecostals find it a difficult process. Perhaps they find it often unnecessary because

so much of Pentecostal prophecies appear entirely biblical in content, and therefore must be Spirit-inspired. But the non-Pentecostal retorts, “Is there any difference then between the Pentecostal’s ‘Thus says the Lord’ and the evangelist who quotes ‘The Bible says...’?” Could it be that the Pentecostal is fearful (subconsciously) that notwithstanding some genuine exercise of prophecy, much of what passes off as prophecy is only too humanly-inspired (what Catholic charismatic call ‘non-prophecy’ as distinct from false prophecy)? The Pentecostals owe the wider Christian body a better handling of a precious gift of God if they are to convince the latter that in exercising the gift, they are not disregarding their claim that they uphold Scripture as “the all sufficient rule for faith and practice”.

From this brief survey of the issues surrounding the controversies, we can see how the gift of prophecy is a complex manifestation of God’s grace to his people. On the one hand, it is only too easy to be so intoxicated by the experience of God’s grace as to rush headlong regardless of the dangers of abuse and misuse. On the other hand, one can be so disconcerted by these distortions as to neglect, to our greater poverty, a very powerful gift which God has given for the edification and upbuilding of the church. Perhaps the recovery of the fullness of this gift is a task beyond any one tradition working in isolation. But in view of the intensifying spiritual conflict today, it is hoped that Christians of all traditions (be they Reformed, Dispensationalist or Pentecostal) will feel the urgency of coming together in fruitful and constructive dialogue.

## ***II. Paul’s Teaching on Prophecy in 1 Corinthians***

### *1. Context*

While Paul has made many references to the gift of prophecy elsewhere, it was in 1 Cor. 12-14 that he addressed the issue more clearly and exhaustively. The church at Corinth offered Paul the unique opportunity to address the gift of prophecy as a practical and pastoral issue. Being located in a cosmopolitan city where permissiveness and sexual liberty was rife, it was only too easy for the decadence of the world to creep into the church. Hence, the church was plague with party strife, theological disputes and immorality. In the one-up-manship atmosphere, it comes as no surprise that the congregation was giving a greater value to the more overt and sensational gifts of the Spirit. This was in fact due to a distorted view of true spirituality. “They imagines that the more the influence of the Divine Spirit deprived a man of his self-consciousness and threw him into an ecstasy, the more powerful was that influence and the more sublime the state to which it raised the man; whereas the more the inspired person retained his self-possession, the less did his inspiration partake of a Divine character.”<sup>50</sup> It is clear then that despite its great endowment of spiritual gifts, the church was without love and unity.

Paul’s approach to the problem at Corinth is an excellent model of solving a pastoral crisis. He identified the interest of the congregation and while he accepted their right emphasis, he nevertheless corrected their errors by leading them to where they should be. As Longenecker observes, “In dealing with those who were over-emphasizing and misusing the pneumatic element in Christianity, Paul meets them on their own ground. Thus he agrees that the gift of tongues is a genuine supernatural ‘charisma’ and that his own revelatory visions possess real validity...Evidently Paul was an ecstatic. But the fact

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<sup>50</sup> Godet, 2:174-175

that he mentions these experiences nowhere so fully as he does in the Corinthian letters indicates that in that correspondence he has a definite purpose in referring to his own prophetic ecstasies... In order to win his ecstatically minded addressees, his approach is that of an ecstatic to ecstatic."<sup>51</sup> In particular, he sought to impart a correct understanding of the purpose of spiritual gifts.

a. Their common origin

While the Corinthians were eagerly competing with each other in publicly displaying their gifts Paul reminded them that for all their varieties, the gifts are in fact the manifestations of the same Spirit. They are indeed given to all<sup>52</sup> as the Holy Spirit apportions<sup>53</sup> (1 Cor 12:11). Contrary to their misconception, these gifts are experiences of grace and not the reward of spiritual merits or attainments. In Dunn's words, "the exercise of charismata does not presuppose or depend on a 'state of grace', nor on the charismatic's having reached a certain degree of sanctification; charisma is something given, something unachieved, uncontrived. Nor again does the manifestation of charismata make the believer more holy. There is no immediate causal connection between charisma and sanctification (*hagiasmos*)."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps Paul hoped that this realization would eliminate all feelings of pride, rivalry and superiority among the Corinthians.

b. A common purpose

Paul also reminded the Corinthians that the real purpose of the gifts is never that they might be the sole possession of an individual. It is to bring benefit to all, for the common good.<sup>55</sup> Again, this view would remedy the root problem of the Corinthians – their self-centredness and individualism must give way to genuine communal responsibility towards the community of believers. Furthermore, to illustrate and reinforce his argument, Paul took the gift that they valued most (tongues) and demonstrated why prophecy, for all its similarity with tongues (both are ecstatically induced by the Spirit and are verbal), is the superior gift because it brings about greater edification.

## 2. *The phenomenon of prophecy discussed*

a. A revelation

It should be clear that for Paul, prophecy is nothing less than inspired speech. It is a charisma of the Spirit and must not be confused with skill, aptitude nor talents. Prophecy occurs only as long as the Holy Spirit is speaking through the human agent. Prophecy is not learned, nor is it a declaration from prior mental preparation. It is a spontaneous utterance, a revelation (apocalypses).<sup>56</sup> It is the unveiling of information, supernatural secrets that would otherwise be unknown to human subjects. Indeed, prophecy and

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>52</sup> Note *panta* (all) *to en kai to auto* (The one and the same Spirit); and *idia ekastoi* (to each one individually) points both to equality and individuality (see Turner, *Syntax*, p. 191) in the experiences of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>53</sup> *Diareseis* means allotment (BDAG), distributions (Conzelmann. P.207, Barrett, p. 283) and not varieties. *Boulomai* may refer to decisions of the will after previous deliberations have been made (BDAG, s.v. 'boulomai').

<sup>54</sup> James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p.254

<sup>55</sup> *pros to simpheron*: BDAG, for (someone's) advantage. Robertson & Plummer, p. 264, "with a view to advantage" i.e., "the profit of all. Moule, IB, p.53, "The *pros* + accusative normally means 'according to'; but in transferred senses, it means 'tending towards, leading to, concerning, against, in view of'".

<sup>56</sup> *Apokalypso* is used twenty-six times in the New Testament, *apokalypsis* eighteen times, and in all cases, the terms refer to an activity of God, Christ or the Holy Spirit. See BDAG, s.v. 'apokalypsis'.

revelation are near synonymous in 14:26-32. In the final analysis, God is the subject of prophecy.

A necessary corollary to the above is that the office of a prophet is not humanly conferred. It is not a human institution but the sovereign distribution and gift of the Holy Spirit. In fact, 1 Cor. 12:28 states that it is God alone who appoints prophets. As such, Paul does not exhort the Corinthians to seek to become prophets but rather, that they desire to prophesy.

b. Consciousness retained

The prophet is a man who retains his full self-awareness, in contrast to the frenzied ecstasies in pagan religions. This is especially clear in 1 Cor. 14:29-33 where we see that by his ability to stop his prophesying to allow another to speak, the first prophet was surely in control of his faculties. By the same token, the second prophet could wait for his turn and restrain from bursting out uncontrollably into prophecy.<sup>57</sup> Surely it is only because a prophet retains a full consciousness of himself and his surrounding (i.e., taking cues from others) that Paul could reasonably expect orderliness in the meeting. How else could they take their turn?

c. An inspired speech in the congregation

Prophecy is an inspired speech to be proclaimed by word of mouth in the midst of a congregation. Again we see the focus of the New Testament on the edification of the community rather than the individual in isolation. Here, prophecy is also to be distinguished from the written prophecy in the Apocalypse and the symbolic actions of the book of Acts or the Old Testament prophets.

3. *The function of prophecy*

Prophecy is important for Paul because it builds up the congregation.

a. The exercise of prophecy brings edification (*oikodome*), also 'upbuilding, strengthening'. This metaphor which views the church as a house or temple in the process of being built is a common motif in Paul's writings. Paul in fact identifies himself as a founder and builder of the churches (Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:9f; 2 Cor. 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Eph. 2:21). Likewise, he is always exhorting believers to contribute their utmost in building up one another (Rom. 14:17ff; 15:2f; 1 Cor. 10:24; Eph. 4:29; Phil. 2:4; 1 Thess. 5:11). This is achieved through acts of love (1 Cor. 8:1), a self-denial (Rom 15:2), giving consideration to others (Rom 14:19), the proper exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:26) and even church discipline (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:9). Prophecy then in Paul's view is superior<sup>58</sup> to glossolalia because it builds up the whole church, as the comparison below clearly shows:

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<sup>57</sup> v.32 is a maxim or proverb as indicated by the omission of the article in all three places. So Robertson & Plummer, p.323. This view is supported by *hypotassetai*, a gnomic present. Friedrich, p.851: "They cannot influence the revelation itself. This comes from God with no cooperation on their part. But the proclamation of what is revealed to them is according to their own will and it does not have to follow at once. Revelation does not cause a cleavage of personality which makes man an involuntary instrument."

<sup>58</sup> Notice how Paul in 1 Cor. 14:39 advised the Corinthians to "earnestly desire to prophesy and do not forbid the speaking in tongues". But as Robertson & Plummer, p. 328 remarks, "A vast difference; the one gift to be greatly longed for, the other only not forbidden."

Chapter 14	Glossolalia	Prophecy
i. v2	No one understands (it is unintelligible)	It imparts messages to men
ii. v2	In the spirit the speaker speaks mysteries ( <i>mysterion</i> )	Speaks to men for their edification exhortation and consolation
iii. v14	Emphasis – there is a lack of understanding, even to the speaker. The mind ( <i>nous</i> ) is unfruitful.	Joins the <i>pneuma</i> and the <i>nous</i>
iv. v2	Edifies one man	Edifies the entire church
v. vv22-24	Inadequate as an evangelistic agency – a sign misunderstood	A message that leads to conviction and repentance

Notes to the above table:

i. “Prophecy was the power of seeing and making known the nature and will of God, a gift of insight for building up men’s characters, quickening their wills, and encouraging their spirits.” (Robertson & Plummer, p. 306). “Mysterion in the N.T commonly means ‘truth about God, once hidden, but now revealed’... Mysteries must be revealed to be profitable; but in the case of Tongues without an interpreter there was no revelation and therefore no advantage to the hearers.” Ibid, p. 306

ii. Dunn, p.233: “Prophecy communicates at the level of the mind; it does not absolve the believer or the believing community from reasoning about their faith; on the contrary, where prophecy is active the community is compelled to think about its faith and life even more.” This is certainly a great contrast from mantic prophecy in the giving of Greek oracles. Conzelmann, p.237: “The ‘spirit’ is subordinated to a rational theological judgment,

iii. It is not denied that the exercise of tongues builds up the speaker. *Eautoi* is a dative of advantage. “But as Chrysostom says, What a difference between one person and the Church!” c.f. Robertson & Plummer, p.307.

iv. How do tongues and prophecy serve as signs (*eis semeion*)? Barrett (p.323) has it to “serve as a sign” while Moule (IB, p.70) taking the *eis* in the final and consecutive sense (with a view towards, resulting in), translates *eis semeion* as “intended as a sign”. Also Robertson & Plummer, p.317.

We note first of all that in the LXX, *semeion* often means “an indication of God’s attitude” (e.g. Gen 9:12-14). Likewise, in the NT *semeion* can mean “an indication of God’s approval and blessing” (Acts 2:22,43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 15:12; Lk. 2:34; Gen 2:11; 4:54; 9:16; cf. Barnabas 4:14; 1 Clement 51:5) or “an indication of God’s disapproval and a warning of judgment” (Lk. 11:30; 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19; perhaps Mt. 12:39; 16:4; cf. 1 Clement 11:2). Also see Grudem’s discussion, pp. 193-196).

In this case then, tongues are a sign of judgment because they expose the unbelievers by their unrepentant reaction (just as they rejected Christ’s parables, cf. Mk 4:11-12), so Robertson & Plummer, p.317 and Barrett, p.323. On the other hand, prophecy serves as a

sign of grace because its convicting power and working of faith is a sign of the gracious presence of God in the congregation (1 Cor. 14:22).

In prophecy the unbeliever is convicted (*elenchetai*), judged (*anakrinetai*), and his heart is laid bare (1 Cor. 14:25). Hering, p.152, suggests that this seems to involve thought reading but Barrett, p.326, points out that “The moral truth of Christianity, proclaimed in inspired speech, including no doubt the testimony of those who had been fornicators idolaters and the like, but had been washed, sanctified, and justified (6:9ff), the prophetic word of God, which is sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12) are sufficient to convict a sinner.” E. Schweizer also finds here a litmus test of authentic worship, namely, the impression it leaves on the ‘outsider’ or casual visitor as well as the value it promotes in helping believers and catechumens.<sup>59</sup>

b. Prophecy builds up by *paraklesis* and by *paramuthia*. The former term means either comfort for the sorrowful (Lk. 2:52; 6:24; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; 1 Tit. 4:13; Heb. 12:5) or encouragement to the discouraged (Rom. 15:4, 5; 2 Cor 7:4, 13; Philem. 7). The latter term is translated consolation (so 1 Cor. 14:3; cf. John 11, 31 where Jesus consoled Mary and Martha, and 1 Thess. 5:14 where Paul urged, “comfort the feebleminded” Anthony Thiselton aptly captures the full dimensions of prophetic ministry when he sees prophecy “combines pastoral insight into the needs of persons, communities, and situations with the ability to address these with a God-given utterance or longer discourse (whether unprompted or prepared with judgment, decision, and rational reflection) leading to challenge or comfort, judgment, or consolation, but ultimately building the addressees.”<sup>60</sup>

We see then that prophecy brings to the whole man, to spirit, mind and heart. Through its ministry believers are called to and equipped or service (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14). Through it the church is prepared for the future (1 Thess. 4:15-18). It is no wonder that Paul wanted it to be sought above all the other gifts – 1 Cor14:1, “Seek earnestly (*zeloute*) the spiritual gifts. Especially (*hina*)<sup>61</sup> that you may prophesy”. But contrary to the Corinthians’ spirit, its greatness rests on its service. In Barrett’s words (p.316), “He (the prophet) is greater because he is a better servant” (Mk 10:43).

#### 4. Nevertheless, prophecy is imperfect (*ek merous*)

a. It is only a portion of what God has for His people. When the perfect comes, prophecy will pass away (1 Cor 13:8-10). There are several views on the meaning of *to teleion*. Some, like Warfield, argue that the power of working miracles (in this case including prophecy) was not extended beyond the disciples upon whom the Apostles conferred it by the imposition of their hands.<sup>62</sup> Others like Merrill Unger identify the ‘perfect’ with the canon of Scriptures.<sup>63</sup> These positions fail in the face of 1 Cor. 13:9 in that since knowledge is not rendered superfluous, by the same token the same may be said of tongues and prophecy. The better explanation then is to view *to teleion* as referring to the

<sup>59</sup> R.P. Martin, p.73 and E. Schweizer *Church Order in the New Testament*, (SCM, 1961) pp.101-103.

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Thiselton, p. 964.

<sup>61</sup> *Hina*, an independent wish or exhortation, can in the NT be used absolutely with the sense of an imperative e.g. Eph. 5:33; 2 Cor. 8:7; Mk 5:23 (Zerwick, ss.415).

<sup>62</sup> B.B. Warfield: *Counterfeit Miracles* (Banner of Truth, 1918) p.23.

<sup>63</sup> Merrill Unger: *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids, 1973) p.82. Also F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (Moody, 1973) pp. 42-43.



parousia, the consummation of this age.<sup>64</sup> Prophecy, while imperfect, is a useful provision from God for this age.

b. Prophecy is imperfect because it is channeled through fallible human agents. The prophet has only a glimpse of the subject revealed (*ek merous*,<sup>65</sup> 'in part'), and the prophet himself may face difficulty in fully understanding the revelation given him (*en ainigmati*, 'in an indirect image as in a mirror,' 1 Cor. 13:12). Much less then is he able to communicate perfectly such sublime spiritual experience that he has encountered.

##### 5. *The need for regulation*

In view of the imperfections of prophecy Paul was insistent that the use of the gift must be properly regulated.

a. Firstly, the number of prophetic utterances must be limited (1 Cor. 14:29) to two or three.<sup>66</sup> Ciampa & Rosner interestingly remark, "Paul does not say "if someone prophecies," but *two or three prophets should speak*. While tongues are not to be forbidden, prophecy is essential. Paul wants two or three prophets to speak and establishes guidelines that would keep a congregation from ever experiencing more tongue-speaking sessions than prophet sessions."<sup>67</sup> Paul feels that the congregation will benefit more if it limits the number of prophecies in order that it may have more time to evaluate, test and act on the prophecy should its authenticity be accepted.<sup>68</sup>

b. Secondly, with respect to order, the prophecies must be given in turns and the opportunity to prophesy is to be passed on willingly. When another prophet gives indication that he has received a new revelation the prophet then speaking must end his prophecy (*sigato*<sup>69</sup> – let him be silent). This regulation is given in recognition of the possible intrusion of the human element into the prophecy. The limitation of time would minimize the possibility of human distortion and ensure that there will be no single prophet dominating the session. It is a procedure that demands the mutual submission of members of a congregation to one another.

c. Thirdly, women are also given the opportunity to prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5). It would appear that because prophesying is only a reporting of what God has revealed and does not necessitate the assumption of authoritative position that Paul allows this practice. On the other hand, he forbids the participation of women in 1 Cor. 14:34 because the latter

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<sup>64</sup> Robertson & Plummer, p.297; Godet, p.2.250; Bruce, p.128; Hering p.141, Barrett, p.305, Conzelmann, p.226. Barrett, p.306, however, argues that *to teleion* connotes totality (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20) – "in particular the whole truth of God. This totality is love; in comparison with it, other things (true and valuable in themselves) may be left behind like the ways and achievements of childhood." See succinct argument that *to teleion* is "related to the parousia" in Carson, pp. 69-72.

<sup>65</sup> *Meros* means 'part' in contrast with the whole. See also 2 Cor. 11:14; 2:5; Rom 11:25. Conzelmann sees its meaning as 'fragmentary' in Hellenistic Greek (p.226).

<sup>66</sup> *duo ē treis* really means approximately for a small number rather than an exact count (BDAG. s.v. 'duo') 'One by one' here does not mean everybody but those to whom the spirit of prophecy comes.

<sup>67</sup> Ciampa & Rosner, p. 714.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon Fee, however, suggests that the instruction is "intended to limit the number of speakers in sequence, not the number of prophecies at any given service." He adds that control or order is possible as "way. It is indeed the Spirit who speaks, but he speaks through the controlled instrumentality of the believer's own mind and tongue. In this regard it is no different from the inspired utterances of the OT prophets, which were spoken at the appropriate times and settings. *1 Corinthians*, p. 692.

<sup>69</sup> The Apostle does not say *sigesato*, 'let him *at once* be silent', but *sigato*, which need not mean that.

context involved the evaluating of prophecies, an activity which involves the authoritative instructions and determination of doctrines.<sup>70</sup>

d. Fourthly, prophecy is to be evaluated. This is the great difference between NT prophecy and OT prophecy. In the latter case, the prophets are to be tested but in the former case, the congregation is to evaluate the speech or message of the prophet.<sup>71</sup> Unlike recognized prophets of the Old Testament or Christ's apostles in the New Testament, prophets in the New Testament did not enjoy an absolute and unquestioned authority.

Once a prophet was tested and approved in the Old Testament, God's people were morally bound to obey him. To disobey such a prophet was to oppose God... By contrast, New Testament prophets are to have their oracles carefully *weighed* (14:29; so also 1 Thess. 5:19–21). The word *διακρίνω* (*diakrinō*) suggests that the prophecy be *evaluated*, not simply accepted as totally true or totally false. "The presupposition is that any one New Testament prophetic oracle is expected to be *mixed* in quality, and the wheat must be separated from the chaff."<sup>72</sup>

This observations then should allay the reluctance of the congregation to test all prophecies (cf. 1 Thess. 5:19-21) even if it is couched in the very words of the Lord. Carson emphasizes, "There is an important corollary to this testing. If this was the common practice in churches regulated by Paul, it follows that a prophet who treated his or her prophecy as so immediate and direct and untarnished a product of divine inspiration that it should be questioned by no true believer, would not only be stepping outside the Pauline restrictions but would, presumably, ultimately fall under the suspicions of the church."<sup>73</sup>

Paul's command in 1 Cor. 14:29. '*kai alloi diakrinetosan*' (RSV, 'let the others weigh what is said') raises two related issues:

i. Who are 'the others' (*hoi alloi*)?

One popular view is that Paul is referring to 'the other prophets'<sup>74</sup> but this view is contradicted by what Paul's instructions are elsewhere. For example, 1 Cor. 12:3 gives a test which any member could apply. The testing in 1 Thess. 5:21 also involved the whole congregation (so also 1 John 4:1-6 and Acts 17:11). Furthermore, if Paul had meant to say "Let the rest of the prophets judge," he would have used *hoi loipoi* ('the rest of the prophets').<sup>75</sup> Finally, if prophecy comes with divine authority and with the expectation of

<sup>70</sup> This is the view of James Hurley: *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Zond. 1981) and W. Grudem, *Ibid*, pp.239-255.

<sup>71</sup> The view that the prophecies, not the prophets are to be judged is pointed out by Grudem (p.105), Best, p.240, Hill, p.119. The RSV captures it very well in the translation "Let the others weigh what is said". Ciampa & Rosner rejects the view that the evaluation involves interpretation of prophecies, citing BDGA on "weighing" as "to evaluate by paying careful attention to, evaluate, judge" or, more specifically in this case, to "pass judgment on" them. *Acts* p. 715.

<sup>72</sup> Carson, pp. 94–95. Carson also points out that, "There are instances of prophecies in Acts that are viewed as genuinely from God yet having something less than the authority status of an Old Testament prophecy" Perhaps most startling is Acts 21:4 where certain disciples "by means of the Spirit"—almost certainly a signal of prophecy, see 11:28—tell Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Paul goes anyway, persuaded that he is being prompted by the Spirit to visit the city." *Ibid*. p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Carson, p. 121.

<sup>74</sup> So Grosheide, p. 338, Hodge, p.169, Lenski, p.611, Robertson & Plummer, p.322.

<sup>75</sup> See Godet vol2, p.303. Carson agrees with Godet, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 120.

the response of the whole church, it would be inconceivable that the testing procedure demanding vital decisions would leave both the congregation and its leaders in the cold. We do not deny that it is natural that the more mature and spiritually discerning members will play a more prominent role but certainly, this does not necessitate the above restriction.

What is the meaning of *diakrino* or *diakriseis pneumatōn* (also 1 Cor 12:10)?

ii. Dunn<sup>76</sup> has argued that “in this context *diakriseis pneumatōn* is best understood as an evaluation, an investigation, a testing, a weighing of the prophetic utterance by the rest (of the assembly or the prophets) to determine both its source as to its inspiration and its significance for the assembly.” This view is, however, vulnerable to the following objections: Firstly, as Barrett in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, p.274, points out, “It is impossible to find a consistent rendering of the word *distinguish* (*diakrinein*), because Paul did not use it consistently” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:10 meaning distinguishing between spirits; 1 Cor. 11:29 meaning discerning; 1 Cor. 6:5 meaning to give legal judgment; Tim. 14:1 meaning disputes over opinions). The word is also used differently on other occasions e.g. in the exorcisms by Jesus and in Acts 13:8; 16:16-18. In view of the wider semantic range of the word it might be perhaps better to adopt the definition by Robertson and Plummer<sup>77</sup> i.e., “The gift of discerning in various cases (hence the plural) whether extraordinary spiritual manifestations were from above or not.” Gordon Fee, seeking to place the word in the immediate context concludes, “that Paul is referring to the same phenomenon as in 14:29, but is using the language of “spirits” to refer to the prophetic utterances that need to be “differentiated” by the others in the community who also have the Spirit and can so discern what is truly of the Spirit.”<sup>78</sup>

To summarize, testing of prophecy and distinguishing the spirits is necessary as “claims to prophecy must be weighed and tested” since “[w]hile the speaker believes that such utterances of discourses come from the Holy Spirit, mistakes can be made, and...believers, including ministers or prophets, remain humanly fallible.”<sup>79</sup>

In passing, we would like to consider the suggestion that an interpreted tongue (*hermeneia glossōn*) is equivalent to prophecy.<sup>80</sup> This suggestion seems very plausible in view of the fact that both gifts are verbal, ecstatically induced by the Spirit and both may be exercised in the congregation to edify the believers. However, there seems to be several difficulties confronting the suggestion. Firstly, it is not justified to conclude the exact equivalence of the gifts on the basis of the same effect of edification because after all, all gifts do edify. Secondly, the contents of the two gifts seem to be different, i.e., in glossolalia the speaker directs his prayer and thanksgivings *towards God* (1 Cor. 14:2, 14, 16-17) but in prophecy, a message *from God* to the church is involved. It is significant that Paul never described the content of an interpreted tongue as *oikodome*, *paraklesis*, or *paramythia*, but simply described it as a mystery now being revealed for the edification of

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.234. For a more detailed discussion see Grudem, pp. 60-62; Aune, pp.219-222; Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, p.328. Carson, p. 120 agrees with Godet.

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, p.234.

<sup>77</sup> Robertson & Plummer, p.267. Other writers who adopt the wider meaning are Groshede, p.287, Lenski, p.503f, Bittlinger, p.46

<sup>78</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 597.

<sup>79</sup> Thiselton, p. 975.

<sup>80</sup> So, Bittlinger,

the church. Dunn, too, has asked the question, “why is this somewhat cumbersome two-stage gift necessary? If the Spirit wishes to edify the assembly, why tongues at all?”<sup>81</sup>

#### 6. *Criteria for the testing of prophecy*

Granted that the authority to evaluate prophecy lies with the whole community, wherein is the source of that authority and by what criteria should the community evaluate and regulate the gift? The answer lies in the nature of the church itself. The church is the local expression of the body of Christ. It is as a whole ‘taught by God’ (1 Thess. 4:9), the members all being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). As such, they are men of the Spirit (*pneumatika*) and participants in the fellowship of the Spirit (*koinonia*). In short, the church itself is a charismatic and prophetic community. Again, it is reasonable to expect that when the Holy Spirit speaks through a prophet, He at the same time prepares the congregation to recognize the message. In short, the power to evaluate prophecy is itself a gift of the Spirit. Only with this in mind do we proceed to consider the criteria below.

##### a. The test of kerygmatic tradition (Scriptures)

The ground rule for all Christian teaching is that prophecy must always be subordinate to the apostolic writings (1 Cor. 14:37-38), with its central confession that “Jesus is Lord (*Kurios*)”<sup>82</sup> (1 Cor. 12:3). If a prophecy is found to be in accord with scriptures it is to be accepted, but if it is found to be contrary to scriptures it must then be rejected. True spirituality is not measured by the degree of ecstasy but by its loyalty to the revealed teaching of the Spirit in scriptures, and by its promotion of Christian obedience. Paul is here following the example of the Old Testament (Deut. 18:2f; 13:2-6) in insisting that it is the content and not the manner which is the criterion.<sup>83</sup>

##### b. The test of love

Given the centrality of love (*agape*) in 1 Cor. 13, it is natural that for Paul the crucial test of prophecy and indeed any charismatic phenomena, is love. Without this love (expressed in action), even the highest religious experiences is without Christian significance and spiritual profit. As 1 Cor. 13:1-4 makes it clear, it is possible to experience much charisma without love. On the other hand, when charisma is expressed in gracious,

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<sup>81</sup> Dunn, p.248. It is interesting to note the conclusions that glossolalia has no discernible linguistic structures or forms. How glossolalia therefore is ‘translated’ into coherent language for the congregation remains a mystery. Kildahl also points out how different individuals recognized as having the gift of interpretation have come out with different messages from the same glossolalic statement. Cf. W.J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels* (Macmillan, 1972) ch.4 & 5 and J.P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1972). Conzelmann, p.234, on the other hand writes, “(tongues) must be meaningful, must be logical in itself. For it can be translated into normal language.” Carson agrees with many scientific studies which show there is no evidence of tongues exhibiting linguistic structure, but following a cue given by Vern Poythress, allows for the possibility that tongues could be coded language. Tongues are then cognitive and as such may convey some informational content. See *Showing the Spirit*, pp. 79-88.

<sup>82</sup> This is more than just a verbal confession as R.P. Martin writes, “As Christians invoke this name, they place their lives under the unshared control of the exalted Lord, and by ‘confession’ they expressed their willing obedience to his power and direction in their lives.” *The Spirit and the Congregation* (Eerdmans, 1984) p.10.

<sup>83</sup> Dunn, p.320. “Only that power which reproduces the image of Jesus Christ is to be recognized as the power of God.”

humble love, it will not fail to edify the community. The proof of the spiritual man is not so much charismatic experiences as love.<sup>84</sup>

*c. The test of oikodome (upbuilding)*

Prophecy, like all gifts of the Spirit, is given to afford opportunities for service (diakonai). It is given for the common good. When a true gift is properly exercised it will build up the congregation in unity and love. Conversely, a false gift will bring adverse effects on the congregation, such as disunity, hurts between the members and even the stumbling of the hearts of outsiders.

It should be emphasized that the above tests do not constitute a fool-proof safeguard against false prophecy. It is not a mere legalistic and rational procedure carried out with impeccable logic. In the final analysis, it is only he (or the congregation) who has the gift of discernment (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:29) who will be spiritually enabled to judge the divine origin and the authenticity of any given utterances. As Dunn (p.297) said, “The test of kerygmatic tradition could most easily degenerate into a set rule of faith; but at this stage confessions were more into the nature of slogans than dogmas, slogans which are needed to be interpreted afresh in different situations. And the tests of *love* and *oikodome* are criteria which by their nature could not be used in an arbitrary or casual or legalistic way. In other words, *the application of such criteria in assessing charismata would have itself to be charismatic* – that is, carried through in conscious dependence on the grace of God and the inspiration of the Spirit.”

### **III. Conclusion**

Prophecy for Paul, then is a gift to be highly valued and sought by the church. Its proper employment will bring much profit to the church but it is a treasure which must be carefully guarded for it is only too easy to abuse it. The church must, however, not evade nor to put aside any gift because of the responsibility that accompanies it, nor because her attempts to attain higher spiritual maturity promises only a greater intensity of spiritual conflict (with the forces of evil). She must in faith and courage take the step of obedience to recover and to exercise all the gifts endowed upon her, including the gift of prophecy. In particular, it is assured that the gift of prophecy, when properly exercised, will bring about edification not because the congregation has been exalted but that the church will be ushered in all her vulnerability, into the very presence of God, who seeks that men worship Him in spirit and in truth.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

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<sup>84</sup> It is interesting to note that *Didache* (11:8, 11): “But not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, except he have the behaviour of the Lord. From his behaviour, then, the false prophet and the true prophet shall be known... But no prophet who has been tried (*dedokimasmenos*) and is genuine (*alethinos*) though he enact a worldly mystery of the Church, if he teach not others to do what he does himself, shall be judged by you (*ou krithestai eph hymon*): for he has judgment with God, for so also did the prophets of old” (Loeb 1:327).

BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Danker, F.W., Arndt, W.F., & Gingrich, F.W., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3ed. (Uni. Of Chicago 2000).
BDF	Blass-DeBrunner. Ed. R.W. Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i> . (Uni. Of Chicago, 1961).
EBC	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
IB	Moule, C.F.D. <i>An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek</i> . (CUP, 1959).
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, Trans, G. Bromiley (9 vols., ET Grand Rapids, 1964-74).

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