

The Holy Spirit even makes us speak to men in prophecy, that is, he makes us humble and docile “channels” of the Word of God. Prophecy is made in boldness, to show the contradictions and injustices openly, but always with meekness and constructive intent. Penetrated by the Spirit of love, we can be signs and instruments of God who love, serve, and give our lives.

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A Pentecostal Perspective on Prophetic Gifts

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Introduction

From the beginning of the modern Pentecostal Movement, Classical Pentecostals have understood themselves as standing within a very long prophetic tradition. When they think of the gift of prophecy, they think first of the Old, and then of the New Testament prophets and they value the prophetic gifts outlined by Paul.² They acknowledge the continuation of prophetic manifestations throughout the course of the Church’s history.³ Such manifestations have at times been subject to diverse responses, especially by Christian leaders who have not always understood or appreciated these gifts.⁴ They also believe that the Holy Spirit, with his many charisms, has been poured out upon this modern movement at this point in history, in keeping with the promise of Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:16-21.⁵ They contend that this relatively recent

¹“Francis’ Pentecost Homily,” [ZE140608] *ZENIT: The World Seen from Rome* (June 8, 2014).

²See, for example, Donald Gee, *Concerning Spiritual Gifts: A Series of Bible Studies* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, [1928] revised 1972), 48-54; Donald Gee, *Ministry-Gifts of Christ* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1930), 38-45. Gee’s work is generally representative of Pentecostal thinking on the subject.

³Eddie L. Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity: A 20th Century Look at Church History from a Pentecostal/Charismatic Perspective* (Chicota, TX and Tulsa, OK: Hyatt International Ministries, Inc., 1996).

⁴Examples range from the decisions rendered by the bishops against Montanism, to the arguments for cessationism, to the claims made by those who condemned Edward Irving, to those who confuse preaching with prophesying.

⁵Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology*, JPT Supp. 16 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Larry R.

outpouring of the Spirit has been instrumental in forming an eschatological “community of prophets” at this present time, which serves as a harbinger of the end of the age.⁶

Even today, many people are caught up in following alleged prophets, or in accepting every word spoken with the claim, “Thus says the Lord.” It is for this reason that the topic of prophetic gifts is an important one for Catholics and Pentecostals to study together. Thirty-five years ago, the late, former-Pentecostal turned independent Charismatic evangelist and promoter of the prosperity gospel, Kenneth Hagin, wrote, “For years I have travelled extensively in ministry. Everywhere I go there is always somebody who has a ‘word’ from the Lord for me – sometimes two or three. In all these years only one or two of them have been correct.”⁷

In 1977, Hans Reudi-Weber, a theologian working with the World Council of Churches, raised some pointed questions to ecumenists about the nature of this charism and its sister gift, the discerning of spirits. He noted that an

. . . almost total lack of ecumenical reflection on prophecy remains a disturbing fact. The danger is great that the terms “prophet” and “prophecy” are being filled with all kinds of content. The Bible is then easily misused providing only proof texts for statements and decisions which in fact are not *submitted to the judgment, grace and direction of the biblical testimony*. A study on prophetic vocation in the New Testament and today is therefore of great importance to the ecumenical movement.⁸

Reudi-Weber also pointed to the importance of what he understood as the discerning of spirits. He complained that any relevant Old Testament passage “consists mainly of negative tests, as difficult to apply today as they were in Old Testament times. Is it possible,” he wondered, “to receive better criteria from New Testament texts on prophecy?”⁹ It is this task on which the International Catholic-

McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic* JPT Supp 8, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 99-106.

⁶Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* JPT Supp 1 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 58-121.

⁷Kenneth Hagin, *How You Can Be Led by the Spirit of God* (Tulsa, OK: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1979), 108.

⁸Hans Reudi-Weber, “Prophecy in the Ecumenical Movement: Ambiguities and Questions,” in J. Panagopoulos, Ed., *Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today* Supp. Nov Test 45 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 222. Italics mine.

⁹Weber, “Prophecy in the Ecumenical Movement,” 227.

Pentecostal Dialogue has chosen to work. It is not a simple task, but it is an important one. The questions are, “Where do we start?” and, “How do we proceed?”

Setting the Prophetic Stage

Scripture speaks often of prophets and of prophecy. It provides many oracles within a larger context that we can examine in our quest to determine the nature of this charism. In the Old Testament, prophetic oracles played several roles. Some came as prescriptive words, that is, words of instruction (Micah 6:1-5; Haggai 1:8). Others came as warnings or even as judgments (Amos 1:3-2:16). Still others carried promises (Jeremiah 31:31-40). Sometimes people readily accepted the words of the prophets, resulting in an action such as repentance for which the prophet called (Jonah 3:1-10). But society probably would describe prophets as eccentric or unconventional people, that is, they did not always fit the standard by which Israel thought people should speak or act, even when speaking on behalf of God. Prophets did strange things. They made challenging statements. People seldom perceived prophets as bearers of good news. Their words carried momentous consequences because of the actions of Israel, about which the people and their leaders were often in denial. The people of Israel did not always appreciate hearing the prophetic words through which God sometimes addressed them. As a result, they did not often embrace their prophets; they stoned (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34) or otherwise murdered them (Jeremiah 26:23).

Still, the prophetic tradition is deeply rooted in the whole of Scripture. It begins as early as Exodus¹⁰, when the Lord called Moses to serve, quite literally as his mouth (*peh*), speaking the words (*dabarim*) of Yahweh to Pharaoh. When Moses recoiled at Yahweh’s plan, claiming a speech impediment, Yahweh told Moses that his excuse was unacceptable. Moses would still carry the words that Yahweh wanted Pharaoh to hear. God then instructed Moses to pass his message along to Aaron, the elder brother of Moses. Aaron would act as the mouth (*peh*, Exodus 4:16) or “prophet” (*nābī’*, Exodus 7:2) of Moses. Another way to say it is, that while Yahweh would remain invisible to Pharaoh, Moses would act in the role of God (*’elōhīm*) (Exodus 4:16; 7:1) before

¹⁰Taking the point of the Phrygian Montanists, Tertullian argued that prophecy began with the *ecstasis* that Adam experienced as he slept, in Genesis 2:21-22, providing the inspiration that led him to make the prophetic pronouncement (v. 23) that pointed ultimately to the great mystery (*sacramentum*) described by the Apostle in Ephesians 5:31-32. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48:4-6; Tertullian, *On the Soul* 11:4. For Tertullian’s understanding of the relationship between sleep and the ecstasy that leads to prophecy see Tertullian, *On the Soul* 48:3.

Pharaoh, while Aaron would serve as Moses' prophet (*nābīʿ*). According to this simple definition, then, the person who prophesies is someone who speaks, to use a Petrine formulation (1 Peter 4:11), "the *very* [emphasis is the author's] words of God (*hōs logia theou*)" to another individual—nothing more. Indeed, to add to these words was a presumptuous act, which was later singled out as a capital offense, deserving of death (Deuteronomy 18:20). When one who carries a word from the Lord does so on a regular basis, that person is called a prophet, or in the case of a woman, a prophetess, such as are Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Anna (Luke 2:26).

There were those who prophesied falsely. Jeremiah 27-28 provides a case in point. The prophet Jeremiah delivered an oracle from the Lord to a group of priests and the people of Judah, only to have it countered shortly thereafter by another prophet, Hananiah. Jeremiah prophesied that the Lord had given "*all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant*" and "*all the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson . . .*" (Jeremiah 27:6-7). A bit later, Hananiah confronted Jeremiah before a similar audience with a very different word (Jeremiah 28:2-4). "*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,*" proclaimed Hananiah, "*I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place. . . King Jeconiah . . . and all the exiles from Judah. . .*"

Who were the people to believe, and how were they to make their decision? In the end, they recognized that Jeremiah had been right, for Hananiah died just as Jeremiah promised, and Judah became the slaves of Babylon, not for two years as Hananiah predicted, but for seventy long years, in keeping with Jeremiah's prediction of three generations. In the short term, they believed Hananiah. In the longer term, time proved Jeremiah's word to be the true word from the Lord just as it proved Hananiah to be a false prophet.

Through the centuries, many people have made claims regarding the inspiration of a specific "word" or "message." Sometimes these words have been genuine, like Jeremiah's word proved to be. At other times they have not been true, as in the case of Hananiah. As a result, Hananiah was labeled a "false prophet." *Jesus warned that false prophets would come, and he told his followers that they could know these frauds by the fruit that they bore* (Matthew 7:15-20). Some, Jesus promised, would even be able to produce "*great signs and omens [wonders], to lead astray, if possible, even the elect*" (Matthew 24:24).¹¹ Half a century later, the Apostle John wrote that there were already many false prophets who were busy pedaling their wares. "*Do not believe every spirit,*" he

¹¹All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

warned his readers, “but *test the spirits* [emphasis is the author’s] *to see whether they are from God*” (1 John 4:1). The analysis of their sayings meant that listeners should assess their content.

If the person who prophesies is to convey a message from God to a particular audience, one must ask first, how that message is received. That is, who stands behind this message and what is the process of inspiration? Importantly, in Scripture we understand that the prophet is always to have a prophetic consciousness that is discreet; the prophet is never confused with the one who initiates the prophetic word that the prophet is to give. First, there is God; then there is the prophet. At times, the message is believed to materialize through a strong impression or intuition.¹² While the prophet may spend time in reflection, there is much in Scripture that suggests that prophetic gifts are also spontaneous, coming only at the touch, or voice, of God.¹³ Sometimes these messages from the Lord come directly in words. There is a long tradition of the *bath qôl* in Hebrew tradition that is the audible voice from the heavens available for all to hear, though the *bath qôl* was typically a public phenomenon where many heard the voice of God. One example is when Jesus was baptized, and his disciples heard the voice of God again during the Transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35; John 12:28).¹⁴

On the other hand, Samuel’s call came as a personal audition while he was still a young boy in Shiloh, in the home of Eli the high priest (1 Samuel 3:1-18). Elijah stood at the entrance of a cave, and heard what Scripture described as “a still small voice” (AV) or “a gentle whisper” (NIV; 1 Kings 19:12). Isaiah was in the Temple when he heard the Lord say, “*Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?*” (Isaiah 6:8). As in the case of Isaiah, such an auditory experience came during a vision (Isaiah 1:1; 6:1-13; Hosea 12:10; Habakkuk 2:2-3; Revelation 1:10-11). At the same time, Jeremiah provides several clear examples of visionary encounters. He saw a vision of an almond branch (Jeremiah 1:11-13) and a vision of fig baskets (Jeremiah 24:3). The Lord asked him what he saw. Jeremiah responded with his description and the Lord told him what the

¹²Jacob H. Kaplan, *Psychology of Prophecy: A Study of the Prophetic Mind as Manifested by the Ancient Hebrew Prophets* (Philadelphia, PA: Julius H. Greenstone, 1908), 84; George Barton Cutten, *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 349-357; Walter C. Klein, *The Psychological Pattern of Old Testament Prophecy* (Evanston, IL: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1956), 84, notes that the prophetic message “may flash into his mind as a sight or a sound, and he may incorporate into his vision or audition the sensory stimulus that has precipitated the ecstasy.”

¹³Theodore H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (London, England: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1923, 1953), 32, 43-46.

¹⁴See also *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9:1.

symbolism in these visions meant. Yahweh's explanations introduced the message that Jeremiah was to convey. On yet other occasions, the Lord spoke through dreams (Job 33:14-18; Matthew 1:20; 2:12). It is significant to note that it is such visual phenomena that form or support the messages that originally led to biblical descriptions of prophets as "seers" (*rō'ēh*; 1 Samuel 9:9, 11, 19; 2 Samuel 15:27; 1 Chronicles 9:22; 26:28; 29:29; 2 Chronicles 16:7, 10).

In a unique incident following the rebellion of Aaron and Miriam against Moses, Yahweh was angry and called Miriam, Aaron, and Moses to the Tent of Meeting. Once there, Yahweh summoned Moses' siblings forward and addressed them (Numbers 12:1-9).⁶ *"Hear my words:*

*When there are prophets among you;
I the Lord make myself known to them in visions;
I speak to them in dreams.
Not so with my servant Moses;
he is entrusted with all my house,
With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles
and he beholds the form of the Lord.*

Clearly, the Lord speaks in various ways through his prophets.

The state of mind that a "prophet" has at the time of inspiration (that is, when receiving a revelation from God) has undergone considerable study, especially by members of the psychological community, though with mixed results. Often the terms "ecstasy," "frenzy," "enthusiasm," and "trance" have been used to describe all prophetic activity.¹⁵ Earlier Old Testament studies frequently viewed the process in which a prophet received a revelation as being an ecstatic one in which people entered a state "outside" of themselves, or in the words of Scripture, they were turned into someone else (1 Samuel 10:6). Writing in the 1920s, for instance, Theodore Robinson described prophetic inspiration in this way. The prophet

. . . might be mingling with the crowd, sometimes on ordinary days, sometimes on special occasions. Suddenly something would happen to him. His eyes would become fixed, strange convulsions would seize upon his limbs, the form of his speech would change. Men would recognize that the Spirit had fallen upon him. The fit would pass, and he would tell to those who stood around the things which he had seen and heard.¹⁶

¹⁵Kaplan, *The Psychology of Prophecy*, 138, 140.

¹⁶T. H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel*, 50.

This description sounds like what took place when Saul met a band of prophets on two occasions (1 Samuel 10:5-12; 19:18-24). The texts tell us that the Spirit of God possessed him; he was turned into another man; he went into a prophetic frenzy, and he lay naked on the ground for a day and a night. His actions also gave rise to the proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" It was a description that influenced biblical commentators for a generation.

There is also clear evidence in the Old Testament of prophetic guilds or prophetic schools. There appear to have been several such schools, for example, at Ramah (1 Kings 19:20), at Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), and at Jericho (2 Kings 2:5, 7, 15-18), where the students were called "sons of the prophets." Interestingly, Amos denied that he was part of such a group (Amos 7:14), in a sense, declaring his independence from human interference, and claiming that the Lord gave him his message directly. The Lord had taken him from his vocation as shepherd and fruit picker. It is likely that prophets led these schools, where they studied prophetic words given on earlier occasions, where they taught students about the role of prophets in liturgy, and where they trained students or encouraged them to listen for the voice of God. It does not seem likely that they taught people how to prophesy as such, since prophecy is something that comes through Divine initiative, not through human conjuring.

The presence of musicians working with prophets and the presence of prophetic messages within some of the Psalms (Cf. Psalm 50:7-25; 60:6-8; 89:19-37) is suggestive of ways in which prophets may have participated in rite and liturgy. At times, the power of the Lord came upon a prophet while a musician played (2 Kings 3:15). Under David, musicians sometimes prophesied to the accompaniment of music (1 Chronicles 25:1, 3, 6). This may provide useful background when considering what Paul meant when he spoke of "spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:18-19). On other occasions, the schools of prophets formed processions (1 Samuel 10:5). One wonders whether these processions did not look something like the Krishna converts, armed with bells, drums, and cymbals, who were commonly seen marching on city streets during the 1970s and 80s. The drums would stop and the prophet would speak.

The prophetic tradition was highly valued by the writers of deutero-canonical and other intertestamental writers as well. The Psalmist (74:9) lamented the absence of prophets already in his day, though Malachi (4:5-6) pointed toward the return of the prophet Elijah. The author of 1 Maccabees acknowledged the disappearance of prophets prior to his time (1 Maccabees 9:27). Accordingly, Judas Maccabeus, the primary figure in this book, made plans for the return of a prophet in a hoped-for future (1 Maccabees 4:46; 14:41). Similarly, the author of the

Sibylline Oracles looked forward to an eschatological kingdom in which the prophet would return (3:781). Just before, during, and shortly after this same intertestamental period, the prophetic element frequently elided into apocalyptic. While prophetic and apocalyptic elements often overlapped as in Nebuchadnezzar's vision (Daniel 3), Enoch's vision (1 Enoch 1:1-3), and John's vision while "in the Spirit" (Revelation 1:1-3, 10 ff.), they also exhibit discrete characteristics. Clearly, prophecy and apocalyptic are related, but they also represent different genera. Prophecy is concerned that the message represents exactly what God wants said, while apocalyptic tends to convey its often-pessimistic message in a dualistic fashion while employing specific types of symbols.¹⁷

Prophetic Gifts in the New Testament

It is little wonder, then, that when John the Baptist appeared on the scene after some 300 years of prophetic absence, hordes of people went out to hear him (Mark 1:1-5). They thought that they recognized him as the voice coming in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (40:3) regarding one who would cry out from the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. They wondered whether he was *the* prophet who was to come. They recognized John's prophetic character (John 1:21), and they recognized in his message the very words of God (John 1:32-34). His clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt, his ascetic diet of locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6), and his abstinence from alcohol (Luke 1:15) set him apart. John's provocative address, "*You brood of vipers!*" (Matthew 1:7); his equally provocative question, "*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Luke 3:7); his demand for his audience to repent; and his use of apocalyptic imagery, "*The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire!*" (Matthew 7:10), were characteristics that they could easily interpret as arising from within the older prophetic tradition. As a result, there were many priests and Levites who queried him on this

¹⁷The classic study on this topic is D. S. Russell, *The Old Testament Library, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 BC-AD 100* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1964). For a concise overview of apocalyptic characteristics, including a medium or prophet, a generally pessimistic worldview, a cosmic setting, dualistic tendencies, the use of symbols, angels, and mythical beasts, and an appreciation for the transcendence of God and the hope that God will intervene in the end, see Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972). See also Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation* JPT Supp Series 30, (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2006), who emphasizes the prophetic character of the Apocalypse. Indeed, the Book of Revelation is most like the prophetic books found in the Old Testament. It contains several specific oracles spoken or written by the prophet, John, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to the Churches in its second and third chapters, for instance.

subject (John 1:19-27) as he announced that “the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6) was now making its appearance in Jesus (John 1:30-34).

The Israelites also recognized Jesus as a prophet (Mark 6:14-15; 8:28; John 4:19). He had a clear prophetic consciousness that God had sent him (Mark 9:37) to represent himself. Jesus seems to have understood his ministry as standing in the line of the Old Testament prophets who had been sacrificed by the people of Israel through the centuries (Luke 13:31-35).¹⁸ His prophetic message announced the imminence of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; 13:28-31). Yet, the incidents in which Jesus seems to have spoken prophetically never seem surrounded by, or contextualized within, anything looking like “ecstatic” phenomena.

As we think about prophets, prophecy, and the prophetic charism, perhaps a good beginning is for us to refer to a Petrine text:¹⁹

¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift (*chárisma*) each of you has received.

¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. (1 Peter 4: 10-11 NRSV)

The first epistle of Peter is not typically the starting point for discussions on the charisms, but while in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (and elsewhere) Paul tends to open up the topic of charismata in ways that demonstrate their wide variety, this Petrine passage merely summarizes all charisms as representing one of two categories. Either it is a charism of speech, or it is a charism of service.

It is not difficult to see how Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, even with all its nuanced distinctions, might be read in light of these same two categories. “Words of wisdom,” “words of knowledge,” “utterances in tongues,” the “interpretation of tongues,” “prophecy,” even “the discernment of spirits” might easily be described as charismatic endowments by which one reveals “the very words of God,” in other

¹⁸David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 157. King Jehoiakim chased the prophet Uriah down in Egypt and killed him with a sword. Cf. Jeremiah 26:20-23.

¹⁹James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 205. Dunn notes that the word, “charisma,” appears outside Paul, only here. He contends that this passage is “a typically Pauline passage” in the way it uses the term, “charisma.”

words, they are all speech gifts. We might more easily envision the other charisms in this same catalogue, “faith,” “gifts of healings,” and the “working of miracles” as gifts of service.

There are other charisms that appear in various Pauline catalogues and texts as well. Charisms such as apostles, teachers, helpers, administrators in 1 Corinthians 12:28; ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion mentioned in Romans 12:8²⁰; evangelists and pastors in Ephesians 4:11, celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8, and martyrdom which is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 13:3. Manifestations such as “exhortation” might easily fit into the category of word or speech gifts, though charisms such as “apostle,” “evangelist,” “pastor,” and “teacher” might also be categorized in this way.

Table 1.1

1 Cor. 12.8-10	1 Cor. 12.28	1 Cor. 12.29-30	Eph. 4.11	Rom. 12.6-8
Words of Wisdom	Apostles	Apostles	Apostle	Prophecy
Words of Knowledge	Prophets	Prophets	Prophet	Service
Faith	Teachers	Teachers	Evangelist	Teaching
Healing	Miracles	Miracles	Pastor/teacher	Exhortation
Miracles	Healings	Healings		Giving
Prophecy	Helps	Tongues		Mercy
Discernment of Spirits	Administration	Interpretation		
Tongues	Tongues			
Interpretation				

While it is the case that we are focusing the current discussion on the charism of “prophecy,” we should keep in mind the fact that these other word-oriented charisms also involve speaking messages that God has given. We might even say that if the charism of prophecy is simply the act of conveying a message from God to those he wishes to address, then all of these other word charisms are also genuinely prophetic, belonging to what might be described as a prophetic prerogative, even if

²⁰The NRSV translates Romans 12:6-8 as: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. The NIV translates this same passage as: ⁶Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; ⁷Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching⁸; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

they are not “prophecy” in the narrow sense of the term as Paul has described it.

In the New Testament, the charism of prophecy is mentioned both in a nominal form, “prophet(s),” such as in the case of Agabus (Acts 21:10), or as unnamed individuals (1 Corinthians 12:28), or as prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:6, 22). Also, prophecy is referred to in a verbal form, such as in the case of Philip’s four daughters who “prophesied” (Acts 21:9), or in the nameless members of the Corinthian (1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:3, 31) and Thessalonian (1 Thessalonians 5:20) congregations. Prophetic gifts provided direction and guidance as in the cases of Ananias (Acts 9:10-16), Cornelius (Acts 10:3-8), Peter (Acts 10:9-10), the group of prophets and teachers who were worshipping and fasting at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), and Paul (Acts 16:9-10). By following the prophetic pronouncement the needs of a congregation were sometimes met (Acts 11:27-30). Although listeners might all recognize the prophetic word as a genuine word from the Lord, how that word was to be understood, or applied, was sometimes the subject of considerable debate (Acts 21:8-14). What is clear from these examples is that from time to time God speaks through the charism of prophecy, but observers must test or discern, accept or reject, all such claims to speak on behalf of God (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22).

Unlike the early prophets of the Old Testament, who often experienced the Spirit in more ecstatic ways, the Pauline notion that within the worshipping congregation, “the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet” is in keeping with a God who is orderly (1 Corinthians 14:32). This further suggests just as clearly, that those who prophesied in Paul’s day had a level of self-control that differentiated their actions from those of the earliest prophets.²¹

It may still be worth mentioning that the philosopher, Celsus, writing about AD 178, claimed that he knew of “many, who, although of no name, with the greatest facility and on the slightest occasion, whether within or without temples, assume the motions and gestures of inspired persons; while others do it in cities or among armies, for the purpose of attracting attention and exciting surprise.”²² He went on to observe that

²¹George Barton Cutten, *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912) 343-344. Cutten described early prophetism this way: “The inspiration of the early Hebrew prophets conforms rather more closely to our idea of possession than to that of inspiration, if we may judge from the accounts which we have in the Old Testament. By the use of music, dancing, and other exciting means, a highly contagious ecstasy was developed, in which the participants prophesied. The influence of the nomadic, prophesying troops which traversed the country was felt by those who came in contact with them.”

²²Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.9. In a sense, this is not unlike either the actions of certain Old Testament prophets, Saul, for instance, nor the description given by

they sometimes “added strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all; but they give occasion to every fool or imposter to apply them to suit his own purposes.” While this may sound as though these people first prophesied and then spoke in tongues, that is not a necessary conclusion, for the Old Testament prophets were sometimes accused of engaging in “dark sayings” as well.²³ It seems likely that there may be a range of responses that are possible during the process of prophetic inspiration, though Paul, at least, calls for order (1 Corinthians 14:32-33). In both cases, there seems to be a heightened awareness that God is speaking, that God wants individuals who hear his voice or see his vision to convey, or to act upon, what they hear or see before a specific audience.

There is little doubt that the New Testament writers took seriously the charism of prophecy and the existence of prophets in their day. Indeed, the Church was established “*upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:20). This reference seems to suggest an ongoing role for such people within the life of the New Testament church. That point is not to deny that the Old Testament prophets have a role here, but it would be surprising to find that New Testament or early Christian prophets do not also have a role. The Church is not yet institutionally stabilized, and those who have been called and commissioned as apostles or as prophets have an ongoing role to play. One might even argue that they have a primary role, given that in the lists found in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and 12:29, as well as here in Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11, apostles and prophets always rank first and second positions. That role is probably something like what Ephesians 3:5-6 states: New Testament prophets were recipients, along with apostles, of revelations “by the Spirit” (*en pneūmati*) according to which “*the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*”

Apollonius of Hierapolis, who wrote that Montanus “became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner *contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning* [italics mine].” Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.7. I think that it is important to note that it was only the prophetic *tradition* as understood by Apollonius that was violated.

²³Origen, *Against Celsus* 7:10. “The prophets have therefore, as God commanded them, declared with all plainness those things which it was desirable that the hearers should understand at once for the regulation of their conduct; while in regard to deeper and more mysterious subjects, which lay beyond the reach of the common understanding, they set them forth in the form of enigmas and allegories, or of what are called dark sayings, parables, or similitudes. Cf. Hosea 12:10; Ezekiel 20:45-49.

My sense, however, is that we should avoid the term “office” as much as possible when speaking of prophets for two reasons. First, while the term typically translated “office” (*diakonia*) applies to deacons, priests, and bishops, neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer employs this term in conjunction with either apostles or prophets. Second, as the term “office” came to be used more widely in the Church institutionally, it seems to have taken on a quality of authority, not necessarily of service (*diakonia*), that the New Testament writers did not intend when they spoke of prophetic gifts.

Various New Testament texts suggest that “prophecy” (*prophēteía*) and related terms such as “prophesy” (*prophēteuo*), “prophet” (*prophētēs*), “prophets” (*prophētikós*), and “prophetess” (*prophētis*) hold a range of nuanced meanings. There were prophets who seem to be associated with specific cities, such as Jerusalem or Antioch (Acts 11:27; 13:1). There were prophets who played an itinerant role (Acts 21:10). There were also those people who prophesied, but who Scripture never designated as prophets or prophetesses (1 Corinthians 14:1, 5-6, 24, 31). Indeed, Paul seems to suggest that prophecy is potentially available to everyone within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:1, 5, 39), and while it is valid to seek such a gift for purposes of ministry (1 Corinthians 14:3, 31), it must be recognized that the bestowal of this gift rests with the Holy Spirit, who distributes each of the gifts in a sovereign manner (1 Corinthians 12:11). It must further be understood that while the Holy Spirit, who indwells all of those who follow Christ (Romans 8:9), is the source of all charisms, and as a result of this indwelling, the potential for prophetic speech lies within each Christian (Acts 2:17-18, 38), not all are called to serve as prophets, or even in a prophetic capacity (1 Corinthians 12:29).

Prophetic gifts play a variety of roles, or satisfy a variety of purposes. 1 Corinthians 14:3 mentions three of them: upbuilding or edification (*oikodomène*), encouragement or exhortation (*paráklēsin*), and consolation or comfort (*paramuthian*). But prophetic gifts appear to have more than these three purposes. Luke, for instance, illustrates that prophetic words can provide direction, such as when the prophets and teachers worshipping in Antioch were instructed by the Holy Spirit to separate out Saul and Barnabas for what would become known as Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13:3). In Acts 11:27-30, Luke records a second account in which Agabus prophesied that a famine was coming over the whole earth, and he notes that this prophecy came to pass during the time when Claudius was Caesar. Unfortunately, all we have is a brief summary of what Agabus said. What we do not have is a record of the oracle as it was given. What is possible for us to ascertain, then, is that whatever Agabus said, that is, whatever the words that he used in the

oracle regarding this famine were, the people in that congregation understood it to be a warning on which they needed to act. As a result, they took up an offering for the Church in Jerusalem.

Luke gives a third account of prophetic activity when he records the encounter between Agabus and Paul, as Paul is about to leave Caesarea while continuing his journey to Jerusalem. Agabus engages in two activities that were common among Old Testament prophets. First, he engaged in what is known as a symbolic action. He took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands with it (Acts 21:11). Symbolic actions are not present in all prophecies, but they were used by several Old Testament prophets, for instance, by Isaiah, when he walked naked and barefoot through the streets for three years, and then used his action to illustrate the judgment God was bringing to Egypt and Ethiopia (20:2-6). They would be taken captive and marched naked and barefoot through the streets to shame them. Jeremiah engaged in symbolic actions when he was commanded by the Lord to purchase, wear, and then hide, some underwear until it was rotten and then dig it up and use it in a symbolic action to prophesy that just as the underwear was ruined, so the Lord would ruin the pride of Judah (13:1-11). Later, Jeremiah wore a yoke, first of wood and then of iron, to make his point about the upcoming captivity of Judah (27:1-28:17). And then there is Hosea, whose marriage to the prostitute, Gomer, at the command of the Lord, symbolized the unfaithfulness of Israel (Hosea 1:2-8, 3:1).

In addition to using a symbolic action, Agabus employed a messenger formula to introduce his message (Acts 21:11). "Thus says the Holy Spirit . . ." (*Táde légei tò pneŷma tò hágion*) clearly corresponds with messenger formulas like "Thus says the Lord," or "says the Lord" that are encountered in nearly all the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Isaiah 7:7; Jeremiah 2:2; Ezekiel 6:3, 11; Hosea 2:16, 21; Amos 1:3, 6; Obadiah 1; Micah 2:3; Nahum 1:12; Zephaniah 4:2; Haggai 1:5; Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 1:4). Such widespread usage of a messenger formula is intended to signal that what follows is a word from the Lord delivered by the person speaking. But it does more than that. For a person such as Agabus to ascribe what follows to "the Lord," or in this case to "the Holy Spirit," places a burden upon him that he has, indeed, received this message from God. This messenger formula, "Thus says the Holy Spirit" is consistent with Luke's development of pneumatological thinking in his two-part series, Luke-Acts, but it also stands in continuity with the Old Testament usage of "Thus says the Lord." At the same time, it acts as a kind of exclamation point at the beginning of the "word" or message that suggests something like, "Now pay attention because this is an important word from the Holy Spirit."

This messenger formula is also not dissimilar from Jesus' own words, "Verily, verily, I say unto you," or "You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you," which was rooted in the authority that the Father had granted to him, each time he used these clauses. As a result, these messenger formulas call for our attention, but they also assume that what follows will require study, interpretation, and testing by the community of faith. When the saying is found to be true, it will require the community of faith to own, and to follow, it as a word from the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The message conveyed by Agabus was simple enough. The words of his prophecy are, "This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles" (Acts 21:11). Even though Agabus used the messenger formula, and performed the symbolic action, the message itself gave way to multiple interpretations. Agabus simply made a statement of fact, grounded in the future. The simplest way of understanding his message was that when Paul reached Jerusalem, the Romans would take him captive and he would become a Roman prisoner. Upon hearing these words, the people understood these prophetic words as a warning for Paul not to proceed with his plan to go to Jerusalem. As a result, they pleaded with him not to continue his journey (Acts 21:12). But that was not the end of the Lukan account.

Paul did not view Agabus' words as a warning to him. Luke previously noted when Paul was in Ephesus (20:22) he informed the saints that he was "captive to the Spirit" (*'idoù dedeménos egò tò pneúmati*) and on his way to Jerusalem as a result. At the same time, Luke reported in Acts 21:4 that just days before his arrival in Caesarea, during a weeklong layover in Tyre, "Through the Spirit [*toũ pneúmatos*] they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem [*mē 'epibaínein eis 'Terosóluma*]." The "they" is not specifically identified in this case, but given the fact that the "warning" came through the Spirit, it was probably a prophetic message. Unfortunately, we do not have the oracle given in Tyre; we have only a summary. The question is whether Luke's declaration that there were those in Tyre who "warned [literally: *elegon*] Paul not to go to Jerusalem" means that Paul had received a prophetic word directing him not to go, or as in the case before us, the word was simply an announcement that he would be taken captive upon his arrival in Jerusalem and thus, the people in Tyre had heard what the people in Caesarea now understood. Since Luke was with Paul in both places, and he clearly sides with the people in Caesarea (Acts 21:12), that is, "we and the people" urged Paul not to continue his journey, it may be that Luke is simply stating his personal thoughts that the prophetic word

given in Tyre, and now in Caesarea, was to be understood by Paul as a warning not to proceed.

Paul ends up taking control of the situation, however, by telling the Christians in Caesarea, as well as the chronicler of these events, namely Luke, who were begging him not to go forward, that their understanding of this event led to a gut-wrenching experience with much weeping and the breaking of Paul's heart. Paul informed them that not only was he prepared to go on with his journey, he was also prepared, if necessary, to die (Act 21:13). His interpretation of Agabus' prophetic announcement, then, must rely upon his own experience that is based upon Acts 20:22. He was "captive to the Spirit" as he headed toward Jerusalem, not knowing at that time what would happen to him upon his arrival. In the end, the group acceded to his wishes (if not to his interpretation!) and prayed that "The will of the Lord be done."²⁴

Admittedly, this passage describes a rather messy situation. Perhaps that is why Paul makes it clear that one of the most significant things we can do when confronted by prophetic words is to test them. Jesus noted that the evaluation of the fruit of the "prophet" was a valid means of testing. We have seen that, in some cases, whether the prophecy comes to pass, that is fulfillment over time, is also a valid test. The apostle John instructed his readers to "test the spirits" (*dokimázete tà pneúmata*) to see whether they are from God, while the apostle Paul used the same verb (*dokimázete*) when exhorting the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:19-22) not to despise prophecy, but rather, to test it, keeping the good and discarding the rest. This ability is likely the same thing as Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12:10, the discerning of spirits (*diakríseis pneumátōn*), for he uses it also in 14:29 (*diakrinétōsan*) to describe the activity that those in the Corinthian community who listen to prophecy, are to undertake.²⁵

It is commonly understood that both *diakrisis* and *dokimazo* refer to the same reality, the act of judging, testing, or discerning. The fact that they are both employed in the case of prophecy, the judging, testing, we may construe them as referring to distinguishing what spirit underlies the prophetic word or inspired speech. The Pentecostal team has noted in

²⁴J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973), 64. Lindblom cites the account of two contradictory prophets in 1 Kings 13:1-32, noting that, "The object of this story was to give this lesson: when a revelation that you have received is contradicted by the revelation of another prophet, you have to obey the divine voice that you have heard yourself."

²⁵See, for instance, the discussion in David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979). 133-135 on 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 151-152, and on 1 John 4:1. Hill treats them each as referring to the same thing, namely the discerning of spirits. Similarly, David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 221.

some detail the significance of this gift for evaluating inspired speech in their discussions with the World Communion of Reformed Churches.²⁶

A final test for distinguishing between true and false prophecy comes down to protocol. Paul set forth a protocol for how a congregation may evaluate prophetic utterances. It required testing. If observers can test the person who prophesied by the fruit that they bore in their lives outside the congregation, it was the case that the fruit of their actions within the congregation could, and should, also be evaluated. Do they look forward to bringing something to the congregation that will edify, encourage, comfort, or confront the congregation in a manner that is loving and not self-serving? Are they willing to follow the rule, the protocol set forth by Paul? Are they willing to allow others to assess their words to determine their value for the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:29)? Are they willing to take turns, allowing others to go before them (1 Corinthians 14:30)? Are they willing to exercise self-control, allowing for an orderly progression of gifts within the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:32)? Are they willing to embrace only what is good in their messages, and set aside that which is not (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22)?

Ultimately, within the New Testament, it is difficult to state categorically that it contains many prophetic oracles that we can examine, outside of some of Jesus' teaching as well as John's prophecy in the Revelation. However, there is one such passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 that calls for a brief analysis. In this passage, Paul provides a word that he declares to be one given "by the word of the Lord" (*'en lógo kyriou*). At the end of this "word" or message, Paul exhorts his readers to "encourage (*parakaleite*) one another with these words," one of the roles that prophetic messages might take (1 Corinthians 14:3, 31).

The two theories regarding this passage are (1) this is an independent and previously unrecorded saying of Jesus²⁷, or (2) this is a prophetic word that Paul has chosen to incorporate at this point in his concern to address the worries of the Thessalonians about those Christians who had already died.²⁸ If this is an oracle that was given through an unnamed prophet in the early church, this "prophecy" would seem to reiterate

²⁶ "Experience in Christian Faith and Life: Worship, Discipleship, Discernment, Community and Justice," in *Reformed World* 63(1) (March 2013): 18-27; Paragraphs 72-113, especially paragraphs 74-82; Wolfgang Vondey, Ed. *Pentecostalism and Christian Unity, Volume 2: Continuing and Building Relationships* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 217-267.

²⁷ So, Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 141.

²⁸ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 193. Best views this as the "most probable" view for this passage; so too, David Aune, *Prophecy in Ancient Christianity*, 253-256.

some of the teaching of Jesus in more apocalyptic terms than are found in Mark's account of Jesus' teaching on the return of the Son of Man (Mark 8:31-9:1). The oracle read:

We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.
(1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)

Among the questions that might arise if this is a genuine word of the Lord given through an anonymous prophet, is whether such ideas were prevalent in that time. The answer is that 2 Baruch 30:1-5 and 50:1-4 carry one of the important ideas found in this saying, the idea of a resurrection of the dead, the re-uniting of the living and the dead, and all of it taking place upon the coming of the Anointed One.

Post-Canonical Use of Prophetic Charisms

The early Fathers continued to highly value the gift, or charism, of prophecy, some of whom, it appears, prophesied spontaneously on occasion. When Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, visited the congregation in Philadelphia (Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians* 7:1-2), Syria noted that when he proclaimed with a loud voice, "Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons," his words had come both unexpectedly to him and without previous knowledge of the congregation's situation. It was "the Spirit" who "proclaimed these words," he said. Thus, his call for unity among the Philadelphians came as a charismatic manifestation, a prophetic word given during a sermon, a prophetic word to which Bishop Ignatius bore witness.

Polycarp had a prophetic vision before his martyrdom (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5 and 12), which the congregation in Smyrna accepted as constituting a valid prophecy. The early 2nd Century Syrian liturgical manual known as the *Didache* (11:3-12.1, 13:1, 3-4), knew of both resident and itinerant prophets, and allowed them considerable freedom in speaking and in praying. The *Shepherd of Hermas* (Mandate 11), written from Rome during the first half of the 2nd Century, was concerned

with the presence of false prophets, who preyed upon the weak within the congregation. It offered several pointers on how to detect them.²⁹

As the patristic period developed, prophetic gifts continued to exist. According to Irenaeus (Gaul), if one did not accept the ongoing presence of such charisms in his day, one could not be a fruitful Christian (*Proof of Apostolic Preaching* 99). He contended that exorcisms, prophecy, healing, and miracles were all found regularly during his time (*Against Heresies* 2:32.4).³⁰ At the same time, he accused Marcus, the Gnostic teacher, of relying upon a false “prophetess” for his teaching (*Against Heresies* 1.13.3). Justin Martyr (Palestine and Rome) spoke of prophetic gifts in his day (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 88.1). In his works *On Patience* (12:10) and *On Prayer* (4:3) Tertullian (Carthage) asserted the presence of the charism of prophecy in that North African city. He honored a woman in the congregation at Carthage, who was alleged to be a regular recipient of words and visions from the Lord in his *Treatise on the Soul* (9:4).³¹ The facts he gleaned from her vision of the soul were used to support his theological and philosophical arguments for the shape of the soul.³² Origen (Alexandria and Palestine) wrote of the gift of prophecy in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 8. Then, of course, there were the widespread prophetic claims of the Montanists (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5:14; 5.16.8-9; 5.18.5; Tertullian, *On the Soul* 9:3-4).

More importantly, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (AD 250-258), made repeated appeals to visions, dreams, and the gift of prophecy. He claimed to have experienced visions that directed his personal movements (Cyprian, *Letter* 10.4.1; 20 (14).1.1-2; 16 (9).4.1; 55

²⁹Prophets who exalt themselves, seek dominance, are bold and presumptuous, act boisterously, live luxuriously, engage in deception, demand payment for prophesying, avoid the righteous while preferring the purposeless and double-minded because they can give them what they want, may be viewed as false prophets. In short, Hermas’ warning is to watch the life or fruit of those who claim to prophesy.

³⁰Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Irenaeus and Prophetic Gifts,” Paul Elbert, Ed., *Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in Honor of Howard M. Ervin*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985), 104-114.

³¹Even during Tertullian’s Montanist period, he reported that all the revelations made through this sister were “examined with the most scrupulous care, in order that their truth may be probed” (*Treatise on the Soul* 9.4). See Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *Prophecy in Carthage: Perpetua, Tertullian and Cyprian* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 128-134.

³²Tertullian also referred to “revelations” to support his conviction that women should wear a veil in church, (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 1:7). “They who have received Him [the Paraclete] set truth before custom. They who have heard Him prophesying even to the present time, not of old, bid virgins be wholly covered.” Cf. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *Prophecy in Carthage*, 135-139. Much of Tertullian’s argument was based upon his reading of John 16:12-13a, which suggested that Jesus promised that he would provide the Church with further revelation or direction after his ascension by means of prophetic gifts.

(58).5.2)³³. He reported that entire synods of bishops in North Africa took visions and prophecies under consideration when making their appointments to ecclesial offices (Cyprian, *Letter* 39 (33).1.1-2; 40 (34).1.1). Among Cyprian's most commonly referenced texts were Jesus' words in Matthew 10:19-20. Like many during his day, he viewed Jesus' promise to his followers as a promise that upon their confession to the governmental powers that they were indeed Christians, they would be exercising a prophetic gift through that confession, since it was the Holy Spirit who gave them both the ability, and the words, to confess (Cyprian *Epistle* 10.4.1; 58 [55].5.2; 76.5; 81 [82].1).

What this brief survey suggests is that prophetic charisms were found throughout churches of the Roman Empire well into the 3rd Century. The most common among the charisms seems to have been the gift of prophecy, a spontaneous utterance or oracle believed to have originated with God and been conveyed by someone trusted to carry the words of God without interference. The charism of prophecy was followed in frequency only by healing and claims to miracles.

Despite this widespread evidence from the time, some people believed that they were losing the fervor of the apostles. First, liturgical life was becoming more stylized, that is, liturgical manuals such as the *Didache* began to appear, spelling out specific prayers and orders of worship that the churches adopted. Second, Marcion's challenge forced the Church to determine what writings it would recognize as having a place in what would become the canon of Scripture. The choices the Church made sometimes did away with regional favorites. Third, because of pressing needs caused by evangelization in the face of persecution, they developed apologetic systems that explained what Christianity was and what Christians believed. Fourth, with the rise of Gnosticism and other competing theological systems, it became more important for the bishops to address the false teachings that were involved. Finally, to help their congregations grow spiritually it became important for the bishops to articulate the doctrines of the Church clearly, hence the development of the Church's earliest forms of constructive theology, first, in the various *regulae fidei* and then in the form of creeds.

Some believed these steps toward greater institutionalization, regardless of how logical they were, had taken their toll upon the spontaneous interventions of the Holy Spirit. They longed for the days with regular performances of signs and wonders, when miracles took place on a regular basis, and when God seemed to speak directly to the

³³See also the claims of Pontius, *Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, 7.

people through gifts like prophecy, tongues with interpretation, and words of wisdom and of knowledge.³⁴

In a sense, many of them came to believe that the Church was too top-heavy and poorly led. It had too many bishops telling people what to do. They believed that when the bishops claimed to be speaking on behalf of God, in a sense, they usurped the charism of prophecy from the people. The bishops seemed to have claimed that the prophetic prerogative belonged only with them. “What happened to the Body of Christ?” some wondered. What happened to the spontaneity and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit? Where was the demonstration of the gift of prophecy? It was within such a context that the Montanists arose in the latter half of the 3rd Century. The conflict that rose between the bishops and the Montanists deeply scarred future understandings of prophetic gifts, even though Hippolytus (AD 160-236) and Epiphanius (AD. 315-403) claimed that Montanus both accepted, and taught, the orthodox doctrinal beliefs of the Church.³⁵ Further, Jerome (AD 348-420) criticized the Montanists only for making obligatory certain matters (e.g. fasts) that the Church viewed as matters of conscience.³⁶

While many historians from Adolph von Harnack onward have claimed that prophetic gifts stopped functioning once the churches established, published, and received the canon of Scripture, the historical evidence does not bear this out. James L. Ash has pointed out that while something he calls the “prophetic office” seems to have been in decline by the mid-Second century, prophetic gifts seem to have been “captured by episcopacy in some locations, particularly in Asia Minor, perhaps as early as 100 AD [sic.]”³⁷ By the time the Montanist threat had been addressed, “The charisma of prophecy,” had become “the special province of the bishop, and the relics of the dying gift were to remain ever beneath the episcopal mitre.”³⁸

By the time of the Protestant Reformation, followers identified the gift of prophecy as preaching. John Calvin, for instance, identified the gift of prophecy as “preaching” when he wrote “In the Christian Church, therefore, prophecy at the present day is simply *the right understanding*

³⁴I make this generalization based upon St. Chrysostom’s claim in his *Homilies on First Corinthians* 29.1, stemming from his ministry in Antioch (AD 386-397), that “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?”

³⁵Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 8.12; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.1.

³⁶Jerome, *Epistle* 41.3.

³⁷James L. Ash, “The Decline of Ecstatic Prophecy in the Early Church,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976), 236.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 250. If this is the case, perhaps the ultimate claim to the prophetic gift may lie in the doctrine of papal infallibility.

of Scripture and the particular gift of expounding it, since all the ancient prophecies and all the oracles of God have been concluded in Christ and his Gospel.”³⁹ In a sense, he adopted what might be described as a cessationist position with respect to the charism of prophecy by defining it in this way.

When Martin Luther left for Wartburg in 1523, he became concerned with one of his successors in the region of Wittenberg, Dr. Andreas von Karlstadt. His primary concern focused on claims made by Karlstadt regarding prophetic gifts. Karlstadt and his followers, who Luther called the “Heavenly Prophets,” claimed that they received direction on the sacraments through a “living voice from heaven.” Luther was horrified, calling his followers to follow Christ and the apostle Paul, and to ignore Karlstadt’s prophetic claims. From his perspective, the claims made by Karlstadt were extremely problematic. He charged that, “They make for confused, disturbed, anxious consciences, and want people to be amazed at their great skill, but meanwhile Christ is forgotten.”⁴⁰

As a result, the issue of continuing revelation, including any subsequent claim to the exercise of prophetic gifts, became problematic. Instead of weighing prophetic claims as instructed in 1 Corinthians 14:29, or testing everything and keeping what was good while rejecting the evil according to 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22, there was the likelihood that the Holy Spirit was being quenched. As a result, much subsequent activity was dismissed out of hand, sometimes by the assertion of a canonical dispensationalism, at other times by redefinition. The most common method following the Reformation seems to have been the assertion made by Calvin. The Canadian Old Testament scholar, R. B. Y. Scott, however, has argued, I think convincingly, against Calvin and others that while preaching and prophecy are both forms of proclaiming the Word of God, they are not the same.

In the New Testament, preaching (*kērussō*) took precedence over prophetic utterances, but that did not mean that prophecy ceased to exist. Indeed, the Apostle Paul, contended that prophecy was among the most valuable charisms because it built up the Body of Christ in a variety of ways (1 Corinthians 14:1-6). Scott demonstrated observers could hear both preaching and prophecy in the Temple courts of the Old Testament (Amos 7:10-13; Isaiah 1:12; 6:1-8; Jeremiah 26:17-19). The prophets did not simply expound and apply the message, or the written Scripture, or

³⁹David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Eds. Ross Mackenzie, Trans., *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), 269.

⁴⁰Martin Luther, “Letter to the Christians at Strasburg in Opposition to the Fanatic Spirit,” in Conrad Bergendoff, Ed. and Trans., *Luther’s Works*, 40:70.

even an inherited tradition, though they stood in a living succession of prophets who shared largely the same religious and ethical convictions. The prophets spoke as if Yahweh had, at that moment, laid hands on them and put words into their mouths. (Amos 7:15; Isaiah 6:8-10; Jeremiah 1:9). Prophecy was the declaration that the will and purpose of the living God were urgent and relevant in the present moment in which the people stood – God was calling directly for a decision to believe and obey.

On the other hand, preaching was the announcement of the Good News of what God had done, and was prepared to do, for those who would hear and believe.⁴¹ Its primary purpose was repentance (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26). Despite these helpful clarifications, it is still the case that when issues of social import (or social justice) are concerned, many advocates view their preaching as constituting prophetic speech. This assessment is frequently offered when a pastor or priest of some eminence speaks to a social issue in such a way as to counter the accepted social norm or status quo.⁴² Such assessments are sometimes also applied to Christian social movements.⁴³ It is important to note, however, that while such sermons or movements may appeal heavily to Scripture, especially to a number of Old Testament prophetic texts, they do not seem to be the same as the charism of prophecy.

Contemporary Claims to Prophecy

From time to time, people have raised questions regarding the continuation of the gift of prophecy. This was particularly true in the 19th Century. Joseph Smith made the claim that the revelation known popularly as the *Book of Mormon* should be placed alongside his version of the Bible. Later, other books were added, holding a more or less canonical status for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,

⁴¹R.B.Y. Scott, "Is Preaching Prophecy," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 (1955), 11-18.

⁴²Many have described sermons by such notables as Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert McAfee Brown, and Henry Sloan Coffin as constituting prophetic speech. See, for instance, Thomas A. Mulhall, *Lasting Prophetic Legacy: Martin Luther King, Jr., The World Council of Churches and the Global Crusade against Racism and War* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Robert McAfee Brown, Denise Larder Carmody, John Carmody, *Future of Prophetic Christianity: Essays in Honor of Robert McAfee Brown* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); André Resner, *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003); "The Future of the Prophetic Voice: William Sloan Coffin, Jr., '56BD (June 1, 1924-April 12, 2006): A Tribute, *Reflections* (Winter 2006). (New Haven CT, Yale Divinity School, 2006).

⁴³David S. Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

namely, *The Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*.⁴⁴ In more recent times, some Adventists have treated certain writings of Ellen G. White, such as *The Great Conflict*, or *The Ministry of Healing* as holding a more or less inspired status.⁴⁵ Christian Science has done much the same with Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*. In short, some have believed that there is more to be written.

During the late 20th Century, the claims made by some charismatic leaders, whether they appear in David Wilkerson's *The Vision*,⁴⁶ or the oracles of certain "Kansas City prophets" have raised questions among some Pentecostals.⁴⁷ The practice of recording and circulating certain prophetic oracles among Protestant, Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox Charismatics, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, raised similar questions afresh.⁴⁸

The fact that such claims exist does not mean that we are to understand all such claims as equally helpful, or equally harmful. To say that they are a theological impossibility today as many cessationists might suggest is not a valid position to embrace. Karl Rahner has argued as much when he says,

Therefore, anyone who absolutely rejects the possibility of special revelations offends against faith; and anyone who denies that they may occur even since the apostolic age offends against a doctrine which is theologically certain. There is nothing further to be said on the subject. Everyone, then, who

⁴⁴For an overview of the subject of continuing revelation in the LDS tradition see G. B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Form* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1932), and D. S. Crowther, *Gifts of the Spirit* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1983).

⁴⁵Several books in the Adventist tradition outline the function of the continuing gift of prophecy. Among them are A. G. Daniells, *The Abiding Light of Prophecy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1936); W. A. Spicer *The Spirit of Prophecy in the Adventist Movement: A Gift that Builds Up* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937); C. B. Haynes, *The Gift of Prophecy* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946); and more recently *The Spirit of Prophecy: Treasure Chest* (Glendale, CA: Prophetic Guidance School of the Voice of Prophecy, 1960).

⁴⁶David Wilkerson, *The Vision* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1974), 143.

⁴⁷David Pytches, *Some Said It Thundered: A Personal Encounter with the Kansas City Prophets* (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson/A Division of Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 167; Clifford Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present: An Exploration of the Prophetic Ministry in the Bible and the Church Today* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books/Servant Publications 1989), 317; Mike Bickle with Michael Sullivant, *Growing in the Prophetic* (Orlando, FL: Creation House, 1996), 239.

⁴⁸I. C. Stanton, *Has God Said? A Record of Prophetic Promptings to Our Generation* (Los Angeles, CA: International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 1980), foreword; see also Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Written Prophecies: A Question of Authority," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 2:2 (fall 1980), 26-45.

wishes to be a Christian must ask himself whether he does not live in dispositions which *a priori* exclude such revelations from God; and whether he does not seem to believe and approve of the visionary events in Scripture only because he is used to them, but not because they would not instantly rouse him to rationalistic protest should he encounter them for the first time.⁴⁹

The Apostle John gave the directive, “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God*” (1 John 4:1). If we follow this and Paul’s direction to the Corinthians (14:29) to allow for prophetic speech and then to weigh what is said; or we follow his directions in 1 Thessalonians 5: 21-22 to “*test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil*”, there is no need to “quench” (1 Thessalonians 5:19) the Spirit’s ability to motivate someone today to speak on behalf of the Lord.

The Charism of prophecy is a gift that Classical Pentecostals and Catholic Charismatics commonly share.⁵⁰ It is a place where we may build bridges. In most cases, the messages that we experience have an *ad hoc* character about them. They are typically addressed to specific people, at specific times, in specific places, for specific reasons. As the Pentecostal English theologian, Donald Gee observed in 1930, “In the midst of all the prophetic ministry in the early church, [there was] much of it doubtless transient in interest, local in application, and apparently sometimes questionable in veracity. . . .”⁵¹ There is a clear sense in these messages that none of these words are intended to supersede or compete with Scripture in any way. They simply provide immediate instruction, direction, encouragement, hope, or consolation to those who were the recipients of the very words of God.

Protect us, Lord, from being so offended by your revelations that we curse your prophets. Guard us from being so foolishly blinded by your majesty that we lose any sense of how to speak

⁴⁹Karl Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder New York, 1963), 16-17.

⁵⁰For Catholic Charismatic literature on this topic, see George A. Maloney, *Listen, Prophets!* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, no date); Bruce Yocum, *Prophecy: Exercising the Prophetic Gifts of the Spirit in the Church Today* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1976).

⁵¹Donald Gee, *The Ministry-Gifts of Christ*, 45.

as your witness. Rather, help our lips praise you for your glory.⁵²

⁵²Prayer taken from Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, Compilers, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

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