

# The Purpose and Authority of Prophets

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

The prophets of both the Old and New Testaments were spokesmen for God. They had the unique privilege of speaking and revealing the will of God in both a “fore-telling” and a “forth-telling” manner.<sup>1</sup> In fact, implicit in the very word prophecy is the idea of speaking that which cannot be known by natural means (Matt. 26:68). Many prophets were used by God to record sacred Scripture, however, not all prophets were writing prophets (i.e. Abraham, Elijah, Elisha, and Agabus). Thus we conclude that the authority to write Scripture was not inherent in the office of the prophet.

Although it was possible for prophets to speak in a non-revelatory way, and thus be in error (2 Sam. 7:3), when they spoke for God, the standard was absolute accuracy (Deut. 18:22). Typically the prophets would preface their prophecy with a statement such as **“thus says the LORD”** (Ex. 8:1, 1 K. 11:31, Is. 38:5 Acts 21:11), which notified the hearer that the prophet was speaking by direct command of God. Thus, because the prophets spoke for God, they had tremendous authority and sway over the people. This authority was subject to both abuse and Satanic manipulation, which caused God to warn the people against false prophets, and prescribe the death penalty for those who were false prophets (Deut. 13:1-13, Jer. 28:15-17, Mk. 13:21-22, 2 Pet. 2:1).

## Are NT Prophets the Same as OT Prophets?

After the close of the OT canon in approximately 432 BC we have no record of any prophets until the advent of John the Baptist (Lk. 7:26). John’s ministry was as a herald who predicted the rule of the coming Messiah (Jn. 1:23). Thus, John played an important role in linking Old and New Testament prophets (Lk. 16:16).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the NT makes mention of Agabus who was also a prophet. From the references to Agabus in Acts 11 & 21 we deduce that he was one of a number of resident prophets in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:27), Judas and Silas being others. (Acts 15:32). His ministry however, like that of other prophets, appears to have been wider than just to the church of his residence.

It is argued by some that Agabus’ prophecies regarding the Apostle Paul did not come true in exact detail, therefore he can not be a prophet equal to the OT prophets.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the charge is leveled that in Acts

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<sup>1</sup> Vine, W. E., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. “Prophecy,” Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1985, pg. 492.

<sup>2</sup> Farnell, David F., *The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments*, (part 2 of 4), Bibliotheca Sacra, Oct.-Dec., 1992, pg. 394.

<sup>3</sup> Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, pg. 1052.

21:11 Agabus predicted that the Jews would bind Paul and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles but in Acts 21:27-35, it is the Romans who bound Paul and took him, by force, from the Jews.

In answering the charge that Agabus' prediction failed to live up to the standard of accuracy required of OT prophecy let us examine the account of Paul's arrest.<sup>4</sup> First, there is nothing in Luke's account of the event, which states that the Jews did not bind Paul. Just because the Romans bound him with chains (v.33) does not mean that the Jews had not previously bound him in some fashion. Since they were beating him after dragging him out of the Temple (v. 30,32) it is in fact reasonable to assume that they had previously bound him. Secondly, in Acts 28:17, when Paul is reflecting back on the event, he says that he was delivered into the hands of the Romans, thus we conclude that Agabus' prophecy does meet the test of accuracy demanded by the OT.

Finally, we must examine what the Scriptures say in I Cor. 14 with regard to NT prophets. Apparently in Corinth there resided within the church several unnamed prophets. These prophets provided the church with edification, exhortation, and comfort by virtue of their ability to speak authoritatively for God (I Cor. 14:3). Evidently, every time they opened their mouth to speak they were not speaking divine revelation, since Paul commands that the one speaking must yield to the one who receives a revelation (I Cor. 14:29-32). The sense of this passage is that in a worship service one of the prophets may have been speaking to exhort the people, when a fellow prophet received a word directly from God. When this happened, the one who was speaking was to stop so that the whole congregation could hear what God was revealing to them. After this interruption, the first speaker could continue to speak. In order to protect the congregation from being manipulated by false prophecy, which could have originated in the mind of the speaker, the other prophets were to judge whether the new prophecy was in harmony with the previously revealed Apostolic message. The statement in verse 31 which states that "all could prophesy one by one" refers to the individual prophets, not to the congregation at large, since in I Cor. 12:29 Paul had previously stated that not everyone in the congregation were prophets.

Thus we find the notion that NT prophets were not equal to OT prophets, in terms of accuracy or authority to be without Biblical merit. This bifurcation of the gift of prophecy between the Old and New Testament is a concoction of the Vineyard movement in an attempt to justify their unbiblical practice of supporting ongoing fallible prophecy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Edgar, Thomas, R. *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996, pg. 81-4.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Grudem and Jack Deere are the major advocates of this position and are both members of, and spokesmen for, the Vineyard Movement.

## Has Prophecy Ceased?

In spite of the claims of the Vineyard movement, the Scriptures clearly teach that prophecy has ceased. This conclusion is drawn from an examination of four Scripture passages that directly speak to the issue.

First, in I Cor. 13:8-13, Paul writes that prophecy will be done away with. The Greek construction in verse 8 indicates that something causes the prophecy to reduce to inactivity. In verse 10 Paul writes that the cause of the inactivity is the coming of “*to teleion*,” translated the “perfect.” Some Bible commentators understand this reference to the perfect as meaning the completion of the NT Canon.<sup>6</sup> This idea has much to commend it, however it does not seem to adequately fit the analogy of childhood which Paul gives in verse 11, nor does it account for the obvious reference to the Eternal State in verse 12. A closer examination of the expression “*to teleion*” in its other Pauline usages reveals in our opinion a much more likely meaning of “mature” rather than “perfect” (I Cor. 2:6, 14:20, Eph. 4:13, Phil. 3:15).<sup>7</sup> If we understand “*to teleion*” in this way then the sense of the passage is that prophecy will be reduced to inactivity as the church matures, with absolute maturity coming only in the Eternal State. We believe that that this view accommodates the idea of a completed Canon, the coming Eternal State, and the maturing of Church leadership, all of which make the need for ongoing prophecy unnecessary. We believe that this view is further supported by Paul’s parallel statement in Eph. 4:11-14.

Secondly, in Revelation 22:18-19, John gives a severe warning against those who would add or subtract from the prophecy of the Revelation. As the last living Apostle, and a true prophet of God (Rev. 22:9), we believe that John’s warning was intended to cut off further prophetic activity, since the Canon was now closed and the Church had all the revelation that God intended her to have. We also believe that John was concerned about the multitude of false and competing prophets that were currently troubling the Church (I Jn. 4:1, Rev. 2:14-15, 20-21), and the best way to insulate the Church from their heresy was to prohibit any further prophecy.<sup>8</sup> This view is consistent with the nature of the book of Revelation, which details God’s plan for the ages, including the Eternal State.

Thirdly, in Ephesians 2:20, Paul states that the foundation of the Church is built upon the apostles and prophets. The whole point of the verse is to declare that the teaching of these gifted men is the foundation of the Church. Once that foundation was laid, there was no need to pour additional concrete (i.e. additional revelation). Therefore we believe prophecy ended with the death of these gifted men.

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<sup>6</sup> Unger, Merrill, F., *The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, Chicago: Moody, 1974, pg. 141-42

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, Robert, L., *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, Chicago: Moody, 1978, pg. 202-3.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, Robert L., *The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Rev. 22:18*, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, (June 1989), pg. 210.

Finally, Paul's statement in II Timothy 3:16-17 (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3), details the ability of Scripture to deal comprehensively with any and all problems faced by believers. We believe that those who postulate the need for ongoing revelation have not seriously contemplated the full impact of Paul's statement in this passage. Thus we see their need for ongoing revelation as an attack on the sufficiency of Scripture. Such attacks must be vigorously opposed.

We trust that this short study has been profitable for you and contributes to your obedient walk of faith. *Psalm 119:105*

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For further reading we recommend the following:

1. Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit – Thomas Edgar
2. Understanding Spiritual Gifts – Robert Thomas
3. Perspectives on Pentecost – Richard Gaffin
4. Signs and Wonders – Norman Geisler