

Issues in Charismatic Theology

Prophecy

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

There are three fatal problems with this understanding of prophecy:

- a. What is the basis for changing the definition when the word is used in the New Testament? There must be a reason to understand prophecy differently.
- b. If prophecy is the declaration of God’s Word from Scripture, then what is teaching? How are the two distinct? Teaching is the communication of God’s revelation from the Scripture, while prophecy is the communication of God’s direct revelation to the prophet.
- c. What text were they prophesying from, the Old Testament? 1 Corinthians was one of the first New Testament books written. This view assumes a New Testament existed.

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

It is worth noting that this view of prophecy is not a common view among Charismatic theologians. However, where this view is held it serves to confuse the meaning of prophecy. This confusion does not bring clarity when addressing the error of Charismatic prophetic claims.

3. New Testament prophecy is not in error

Those that recognize that false prophecy is a grievous sin have sought to make a distinction between Old and New Testament prophecy. In defending the view that prophecy continues today, they claim New Testament prophecy is divided between apostolic prophecy (which is from God, infallible and on par with Old Testament prophecy) and the gift of prophecy (which is also from God but meant to edify, encourage and console). Although this supposed secondary prophecy is also revelation from God, it may not be accurate and the alleged prophet may speak in error.

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

In light of this, Deuteronomy 18:20-22 specifically describes the test of a prophet:

But if a prophet presumes to speak a word in My name that I have not commanded, or speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. Should you say to yourselves, “How can we recognize that a word is one the Lord has not spoken?”, when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the word does not come true, it is a word the Lord did not speak. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not fear him.

The essence of a prophet is one who claims to “speak a word in My name.” If the prophet is in error, then the Scripture instructs us to conclude the prophecy is not from God. The penalty for prophesying falsely was death. The only biblical test for a prophet is truthfulness and the flawed understanding of New Testament prophets being wrong is in stark contrast to Deuteronomy 18. The seriousness of falsely claiming to speak for God requires that someone claiming to be a prophet must not conflict with God’s revealed truth. Furthermore, the one claiming to be a prophet must also speak specifically enough to be evaluated. One can claim to be a prophet but if his words are so generic that they cannot be evaluated, this claim is hollow. Much of modern prophetic claims are of this nature.

Acts 2:17-18 proves that New Testament prophecy is of the same character as Old Testament prophecy when Peter quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel as speaking of the prophecy that was fulfilled in Acts 2. Also, Agabus introduced his prophecy in Acts 21:11 with “This is what the Holy Spirit says.” Furthermore, Paul equates prophecy with “revelation” in 1 Corinthians 14:30. This serves to demonstrate that New Testament prophecy is of the same character as Old Testament prophecy, words revealed by God.

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

Why would Charismatics believe that their prophetic claims do not have the authority of Scripture and could be in error? Because it is easily observed as not having the authority of Scripture and is often in error. This provides cover for all those times when there is some form of a specific prediction or instruction by an alleged prophet and is why so many in Charismatic congregations have learned to take it with a grain of salt.

4. Prophecy does not occur today

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is practiced in Charismatic circles today is not direct revelation from God and to claim it to be only cheapens the genuine gift of prophecy. This is why increasingly, Charismatic theologians are unwilling to claim it is authoritative as this would be equal to adding to the Scripture. The desire to have prophecy without responsibility is unfounded.

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

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

1) Montanism

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

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

2) The Muratorian Fragment

One of the first references to the early church’s view on the cessation of prophecy is from the *Muratorian Fragment*, which dates from around 170 A.D. This document contains the oldest existing list of recognized books of the New Testament canon. It explicitly states that the number of both apostles and prophets “is complete” and thereby indicates an end to prophecy.

3) John Chrysostom

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

In *Homilies in First Corinthians*, Chrysostom writes the following regarding the miraculous spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14, “This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity has produced us again another question, namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?”

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

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

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

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

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

The implication of the comparison in 2 Peter 2:1 between false prophets in the past and false teachers in the future is that teaching from the completed revelation of God will replace prophetic messages of new revelation from God. Just as prophecy was counterfeited by Satan in Israel during the days of the prophets and in the church during the first century, destructive heresy also will come in the form of those posing as teachers of God’s existing revelation. Simply put, there are no false prophets because there are no prophets, only false teachers among the church.

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

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 specifically teaches that prophecy will cease to exist. This passage was covered in our class on Cessationism as describing the prophecy that will end with the completion of the Scripture.

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

Jude 3 teaches us to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. The faith, according to Greek scholar Henry Alford, is “objective here: the sum of that which Christians believe.” What we believe was delivered to us once for all. We did not discover it but it was delivered to us, in the Bible. The faith is not continuing to be delivered but already has been delivered. It does not need to be added to for its results are lasting and complete. This verse deems continued revelation from God in the church age to have ceased with the completion of the apostolic teaching.

g. Prophecy after the close of the New Testament is condemned

Revelation 22:18-19 is an unusual warning, regarding the addition or subtraction of prophecy. While certainly the purpose of Revelation 22:19 is to guard against tampering and to preserve the text, it also warns against adding to it. This may be understood as prohibiting additional prophecy as Revelation closed the New Testament. This corresponds to prophecy being done away with the passing of the apostolic ministry.

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

5. Conclusion

There are many people claiming to receive words from God. If God is speaking to any of these people His words would be authoritative, infallible and without error. If any of them were true prophets, then we ought to be listening to God’s message through these prophets and responding accordingly. We ought to follow the ministry of true prophets of God since there are sent as the Lord’s messengers.

However, if those claiming to receive words from God are wrong, then the Bible makes it clear that falsely claiming a word from God is a very serious matter (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). Receiving such presumption leads to harm and we are called to protect ourselves from false prophecy (Mark 13:22-23). It is to the discredit of the church that so many allow prophecy to pass without examination. We must hold what God really says much more highly and not be deluded by false claims of prophecy (2 Peter 2:1).