



WHAT IS PROPHECY?

by Dr. Glenn Parkinson

THE MOUTH OF THE LORD

The Hebrew word for a prophet probably stems from an ancient word for “mouth”. It refers to one person speaking for another as a “mouthpiece”, and in particular it referred to someone speaking for God. Notice how the word was defined by God, Himself, to His greatest Old Testament prophet ...

he said to him, “I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you.” But Moses said to the LORD, “Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.

(Exodus 6:29-7:2)

When we are told that “the mouth of the Lord has spoken”, we are being told that God has spoken to us through a legitimate prophet.

PROPHECY AND REVELATION

The concept of prophecy is intimately tied to the biblical teaching about revelation. The Bible teaches that we gain knowledge about God in two ways, called *general revelation* and *special revelation*¹. Much truth about God is obtained through observation of what He has made; this is called general revelation.² However, there are crucial aspects of salvation which cannot be gathered from general revelation. The gospel of Christ is “hidden” (the Bible uses the word “mystery”) when one has only the stars and trees to observe. It must be revealed to people in words, and the contents of those words must be given by God. Thus, the Apostle Paul closes one of his letters saying ...

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey

1 Psalm 19 is a wonderful text that celebrates both kinds of revelation.

2 cf. Romans 1:18-20.

him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!
Amen. (Romans 16;25-27)

We see that prophecy has to do with the gospel, the revelation of Jesus Christ. This means that, contrary to much popular belief, prophecy was not essentially a matter of foretelling the future. While a biblical prophet may have predicted the future or had other supernatural insights as a by-product of revealing the gospel, the purpose of prophecy was not foretelling but forth-telling, telling forth the truth of salvation in Christ. Indeed, “*the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*”³

Prophecy, therefore, consists of communicating the words through which God has revealed the truth about salvation, accomplished in Jesus Christ.⁴

AS IT IS WRITTEN ...

In the Romans passage quoted above, Paul spoke of “*the prophetic writings.*” We would have no enduring benefit of God’s revelation if it had not been written down.

The first writing prophet was Moses.⁵ He was God’s principle instrument of revelation in the Old Testament, revealing the gospel of Christ in the form of a covenant (an ancient kind of treaty). This covenant promised to reestablish God’s kingdom, or rule, through an atoning sacrifice graciously provided by God, Himself. Other prophets followed, who either referred back to the covenant described by Moses, or looked ahead to when God would bring the promise to fulfillment.

Some of these people, like Moses and Elijah, filled the office of a prophet. That is, prophesying was their main job or career. Through them, God progressively revealed His saving plan over the course of Israel’s history.⁶ Others, like Daniel and David, had other careers but were still chosen by God to occasionally speak for Him. Therefore, while not all prophets occupied the office of that name, all had the gift of prophecy (more will be said about the gift of prophecy later).

As many of these prophets or their assistants wrote down what God revealed to them, the Scriptures of the Old Testament came into being.⁷

³ Revelation 19:10.

⁴ cf. John 3:31-34.

⁵ Exodus 24:4; 34:28; Deuteronomy 31:9, 24-26.

⁶ Amos 3:7.

⁷ 2 Peter 1:20-21.

PROPHECY: TRUE AND FALSE

Of course, not everyone who claims to speak for God actually does so. Even in biblical history there were many who (sincerely or not) claimed to speak for God when they were not authorized to do so.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’ But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?

“I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.

“I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

“Therefore,” declares the LORD, “I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. Yes,” declares the LORD, “I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, ‘The LORD declares.’ Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” declares the LORD. “They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,” declares the LORD.

(Jeremiah 23:16-32)

The issue of determining true prophecy was an essential one. That is why God clearly identified all new revelation with some attesting sign or wonder or miracle. We commonly use the word “miracle” to speak of any supernatural action. Biblically, however, a miracle was more than just a supernatural act; it was an attesting sign. That is, it undeniably, publicly and dramatically vindicated an individual as speaking for God. Moses said ...

“a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.”

You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?” If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

(Deuteronomy 18:20-22)

Sometimes, a prophet would speak about something God revealed that He would do in the future. Since only God knows the future, such prediction served as an attesting sign that the prophet was genuine. Other attesting signs included miracles, healings and exorcisms.⁸ While these miracles in and of themselves may have had powerful effects for good or ill at the time, their primary purpose was to vindicate the speaker as a true prophet. If there were no signs accompanying new revelation, or if the signs offered were proven unreal, that “prophet” would be exposed as false.

Note that signs were generally used only with regard to new revelation. That is, while a prophet claiming new revelation had to be vindicated personally, the revelation itself did not have to be continually re-verified over and over.⁹ Once revelation was confirmed through indisputable miraculous evidence, it was to be accepted as true and used to test what later was offered by others as prophecy. In fact, previous revelation superceded everything when it came to judging later revelation. Consider what Moses said ...

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if

⁸ cf. Exodus 4:1-9; 1 Kings 18:20-40; 2 Corinthians 12:12.

⁹ For example, a tremendous outpouring of miracles accompanied the original giving of the 10 Commandments. Once given, however, they were to be received and respected as God’s Word. God did not deem it necessary to perform a miracle to confirm them every time they were quoted!

the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.

That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you.

(Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

We must not imagine that the signs done by false prophets are of the same magnitude as real miracles. Entertainers can perform the most startling illusions, and Satan can effectively counterfeit the miraculous. Real miracles, however, can only be accomplished by God. Illusions and tricks cannot compare with dividing a sea, dropping food from heaven for forty years, or raising the dead!

Once such miracles substantiated revelation as authentic, then God's people were expected to reject any subsequent prophecy which in any way contradicted it.¹⁰ Vindicated prophecy formed a standard by which later revelation was judged.

As God spoke through a series of Old Testament prophets, a body of confirmed and consistent revelation steadily accumulated, awaiting fulfillment at the coming of Christ.¹¹

MY BELOVED SON - LISTEN TO HIM

I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

(Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

¹⁰ Galatians 1:6-9.

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:10-12.

This prophecy found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.¹² Indeed, since all prophetic revelation dealt with Christ, it is not surprising that prophecy reached its climax with Him.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Hebrews 1:1-3)

Jesus said, “for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”¹³ In Christ, God was perfectly revealed,¹⁴ and His plan of salvation was perfectly made known.¹⁵ Jesus’ words were vindicated by the most spectacular signs,¹⁶ culminating in His own resurrection.

Since the implications of His work would not be clear until after His resurrection, Jesus did not write down His message during His ministry. Instead, He chose His own prophets, whom He sent to speak for Him after His return to Heaven. Jesus promised these “sent ones” (the term is “apostles” in Greek) that the Holy Spirit would enable them to accurately remember and record His words.¹⁷ Their writings formed the New Testament.

Taken together, the writings of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets (apostles) are a complete written record of God’s revelation. They convey the promise and fulfillment of God’s plan to graciously reconcile people to Himself through faith in Jesus Christ.

Test the Spirits

The content of prophecy is, therefore, complete and in that sense there is no continuing revelation. That is why all prophecy today is tested solely by its conformity to the Scriptures, rather than by attesting signs and wonders. This is explicitly taught by the Apostle John ...

12 Acts 3:17-26.

13 John 18:37.

14 John 1:16-18.

15 John 17:1-8.

16 John 14:10-11.

17 John 14:25-26; 16:12-15.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.
(1 John 4:1-6)

This section tells us how to test whether someone is speaking for God or not. After verses 2-3 offer a specific doctrinal test of particular importance in John's own situation, verse 6 summarizes that all true prophecy will be in conformity with what "we" teach. Be careful; it is easy to become confused as to who the "we" refers to in that context. Many quickly assume that it refers to Christians in general, but that is not the case. When John refers to Christians in general, he says "you" (cf. vs. 4). John uses "we" when he speaks of himself and the other apostles (cf. 1:1-4). Therefore, verse 6 explains that all prophecy may now be judged by comparing it to apostolic teaching.

Revelation has been completely delivered and authenticated.¹⁸ Prophecy—the proclamation of completed revelation – is now vindicated by being biblically accurate rather than through the signs and wonders which originally authenticated the biblical message.

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

While revelation is complete, the ministry of prophecy continues. God still raises up people to speak His Word. The only difference is that now that Word is completely at our disposal to use and communicate.

¹⁸ While it is not clear whether Revelation 22:18-19 is meant to refer just to the Book of Revelation or to all the Scriptures, it does make a fitting end to a completed Bible.

There is no more need for offices such as prophet or apostle, and therefore no more use for attesting signs and wonders. This is not because God is less active than in the past. Quite the opposite, the ponderous historical process of authenticating revelation to one chosen nation is finally over and the real business of communicating God's word to the world has begun!

The calling to effectively speak God's Word continues today:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

(1 Peter 4:10-11)

In this sense, prophecy continued in the Early Church ...

¹⁹Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹Test everything. Hold on to the good.

(1 Thessalonians 5)

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.

(1 Corinthians 14:29)

Notice that each text carefully asserts that what is offered as an explanation of God's Word is to be tested by others. There are no confirming signs because nothing new needs to be revealed. The emphasis now is not on testing the speaker, but rather testing what is spoken by a concrete standard.

Along with new revelation, the offices of prophet and apostle are gone. Instead, God has provided the offices of Elder and Pastor to manage the completed revelation of the Bible. Pastors (Teaching Elders) are called to proclaim God's Word authoritatively.¹⁹ In general, Elders are charged to teach God's Word, and know it well enough to correct those whose attempts to proclaim it are in error.²⁰

Proclaiming God's prophetic Word is as serious a business now as ever it was in the Old Testament. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." (James 3:1) That is why it is essential to have Elders and Pastors who are called and equipped by God to handle the Scriptures accurately and faithfully.

¹⁹ 1 Timothy 4:13-14; 5:17.

²⁰ 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9-11.

Nevertheless, the gift of prophecy is not restricted today to those who are called to Church offices any more than prophecy was restricted to the office of prophet in the Old Testament. It was Moses' desire and hope that *all* of God's people might prophesy.²¹ Joel predicted that when revelation reached its climax in Christ, all of God's people would indeed be able to share in Christ's prophetic work.²²

Prophecy is a spiritual gift (a service or ministry of a believer to the Church as a whole) enabled by the Holy Spirit.²³ Its purpose is to apply the Word of God so as to strengthen, encourage and comfort fellow believers.²⁴ It is a ministry which *every* believer should seek and try to develop.²⁵ It no longer involves any "hidden" knowledge, since its content is the Bible. Neither is it an ecstatic, uncontrolled kind of experience.²⁶

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints... (1 Corinthians 14:29-30)

Far from sounding strange or weird, the above worship scenario almost sounds like a contemporary home Bible study.

Some may be confused by Paul's use of the word "revelation" in the above text. Isn't revelation completed? Yes, but revelation must not only be given; it must also be received. And while it was *given* only once, it must be *received* many, many times by different people over the course of time. The same Holy Spirit who was responsible to convey prophetic truth to the writers of Scripture is the same Holy Spirit who today "completes the connection" by giving faith to embrace the Scriptures and fully appreciate their truth.

21 Numbers 11:24-29.

22 Joel 2:28-32, cf. Acts 2:14-21.

23 Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

24 1 Corinthians 14:3.

25 1 Corinthians 14:1,31, 39.

26 Saul's notable and unusual experience (1 Samuel 19:19-24) served to protect David and was not normal for God's prophets even in the Old Testament.

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

(Ephesians 1:16-19)

Paul's prayer was that all believers would receive the Spirit of *revelation*, which he explained in terms of gaining greater wisdom to truly and personally know God and His salvation in Christ. He was not praying that something new would be revealed to us, but rather that the Holy Spirit would "open our eyes" to more deeply believe what we have already learned in the gospel. To avoid confusion with the idea of *new* revelation, we usually speak of this work of the Holy Spirit as "illumination" or "enlightenment" (see vs. 18) rather than using the word "revelation".

Of course, the actual response to prophetic communication depends upon the spiritual receptivity of those who hear.

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

(2 Corinthians 2:15-17)

The Word of God will be perfume to some, and be unpleasant to others. While it will enlighten those who love the Lord, it will leave unbelief in darkness. Even so, God is glorified even when His Word only serves to bear witness to His truth in an unbelieving world.²⁷

Today, therefore, prophecy is the effective communication of God's Word, enabled by the Holy Spirit. This ministry illuminates biblical truth to believers and serves as God's witness in the midst of a secular society.

²⁷ Luke 10:1-11; Deuteronomy 31:26; Joshua 24:26-27.



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