

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND THE PROPHETIC CHURCH

by

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall examine one of the many gifts of the Spirit, namely, that of prophecy. I wish to deal with this gift not as an isolated phenomenon but as a focal point of the renewing presence of the Spirit among the people of God.

I single out the gift of prophecy because of all the gifts it is at once the most promising and the most challenging. It is the most promising because both in Peter's explanation of Pentecost and in Paul's teaching on the manifestation of the Spirit, the key gift is obviously prophecy. It is at the same time the most challenging gift for several reasons. In the first place, it is in the exercise of this gift that the spectre of subjectivism, sectarianism and manipulation looms large. How can the exercise of a gift that appeals to ongoing, fresh revelation co-exist with a normative Scripture?

Secondly, the gift of prophecy is challenging because it confronts us with a puzzling question, namely, how can the gift that Paul prized most highly be held in such low esteem in most Reformed and evangelical communities? How can a gift that is so prominent in the New Testament be conspicuous by its absence in communities that hold the Scriptures to be normative? In other words, while on the one hand the normative Scriptures seem to be threatened by this gift, on the other, these same Scriptures force us to ask how the exercise of a gift that it celebrates and encourages can be absent. To be sure, the subjectivistic derailments beginning with Montanus and his prophetesses, through the medieval visionaries, the Enthusiasts at the time of the Reformation, to the manipulative prophecies of our day serve as a warning that the church can ignore only at its own peril. Yet for all that, one can hardly banish the gift of revelation-based prophecy for the sake of safeguarding the authority of the Bible when that same Bible normatively enjoins the exercise of this gift.¹ That in the chaotic situation in Corinth, where several prophets would insist on uttering their revelations at the same time, Paul does not resort to the tidy expedient of a permanent cease-and-desist order remains a burr under the saddle of ecclesiastical order. Decency and good order led Paul to call for one prophet at a time, not for no prophet at any time.

In addition to the danger of subjectivism and the anomaly of the demise of the gift of prophecy, this gift is a particular challenge today for a third, closely related reason. Even if one argues theologically for the restriction of the more striking gifts to the first century, one must still come to terms with twentieth century facsimiles of the New Testament gifts. I am referring, of course, to the resurgence of the more striking gifts as experienced within and promoted by the charismatic movement. Certainly the gift of prophecy is sufficiently attested to in our day that it cannot be ignored.²

The fourth challenge wrapped up in the gift of prophecy is to understand the relationship between the prophetic gift which, according to Paul, is uniquely exercised only by some (I Cor. 12:29), and the prophetic quality that Peter on Pentecost ascribes to every Christian (Acts 2:16-21; cf. I Peter 2:9; implicit also in Eph. 3:10).

The challenge presented by the relationship between the particular prophetic gift and the universal prophetic office confronts one not simply with the theoretical challenge of achieving a systematic synthesis. The challenge is much alive today by virtue of one of the most important rediscoveries of the Reformation. I am thinking of what Luther called the priesthood of all believers, and what in the Calvinian tradition is commonly referred to as the office of all believers. As Roland Bainton has pointed out, in Christian worship the only area in which the priesthood of all believers was firmly secured was in congregational singing.³ Some four hundred years after the Reformation, the critical need of the hour is the recovery of the office of all believers. In that quest the recovery of the prophetic office is pivotal. The lubricant on the pivot could be the recovery of the special gift of prophecy given to some. We must be open to the conclusion to which Jannes Reiling comes at the end of his study on prophecy: "The renewal of this type of prophecy in the church...is, in my conviction, the prerequisite of a renewal of a prophetic ministry of the church to society."⁴ Reiling's conclusion is the key hypothesis of this paper.

I. Characteristics of the Gift of Prophecy

In exploring the question of the nature of prophecy in the Christian church, I cannot do justice to the wealth of material dealing with New Testament prophecy. Within the last two years alone at least two major works have appeared, one by David E. Aune on the phenomena of prophecy in early Christianity⁵ and another by Wayne A. Grudem specifically on the gift of prophecy in I Corinthians.⁶ The bibliographies in both of these volumes are enough to intimidate many a biblical theologian, let alone someone in systematic theology. Nevertheless, I will attempt to cull some of the material in these and other sources to bring it to bear on the biblical notion of prophecy and its relevance for the church today.

I shall begin with the only extensive treatment of prophecy in the New Testament, I Corinthians 12 and 14, and work in widening circles around this passage to other biblical material. The most intriguing facet of this passage is that prophecy is equated on the one hand with "revelation" (I Cor. 14:26, 29-30; cf. v.6) while on the other hand it is subject to the weighing of discernment of others (I Cor. 14:29). One would think that to characterize an utterance within the Christian community as "revelation" is to sanction it as unquestionable truth, entailing unassailable authority. Instead, Paul calls on "the others" to weigh this prophetic revelation.

A. Manifestation of the Spirit

The first characteristic of the gift of prophecy is as obvious as it is basic: this gift is a manifestation of the Spirit. In I Corinthians 12, as elsewhere, prophecy appears as one of many gifts. Each gift is said to be a manifestation of the Spirit (v. 7). This means that with respect to its contact with God or the Spirit, prophecy does not have a privileged position. It is not of a higher order than an utterance of wisdom or knowledge or the gift of healing. It is

difficult to determine whether "manifestation of the Spirit" is a subjective genitive, meaning that that which is manifest is the Spirit, or an objective genitive, meaning that that which is manifest is the workings of the Spirit.⁷ In either case, the Spirit is manifest through each gift. Thus, the gift of prophecy is placed on the same level as all the other gifts.

B. Intelligibility

A second characteristic of prophecy is intelligibility. In distinction from glossolalia, prophecy consists of intelligible speech. This distinguishes it from what was known as prophecy in Greek culture. There prophecy was understood in two senses: "the prophecy of inspiration," consisting of the arcane oracles of the gods, and "the prophecy of interpretation," by which these oracles are translated into intelligible speech.⁸ Whereas the prophecy spoken of in Corinthians is akin to the prophecy of inspiration in that it is associated with revelation, it is comparable to prophecy of interpretation in its intelligibility. The prophecy Paul describes however needs no interpretation. As Dunn points out, formally the two-fold understanding of prophecy by Plato is comparable to the twin gift of tongues and interpretation described by Paul. Heard by outsiders, tongues appear as utter "madness." Prophecy, by contrast, consists of speaking with the mind. Though it is directed primarily to the congregation, it is designed also to convict the unbeliever entering the congregation. No interpreter is needed.

C. Spontaneity

A third characteristic of prophecy according to Paul is spontaneity in its initiation. While one prophet is speaking "a revelation" suddenly comes to another person in the gathering of believers. Paul asks the one who is already prophesying to be silent. The fact that he does not ask the one to whom something has subsequently been revealed to wait with communicating it to the others suggests that the prophetic impulse is spontaneous and must be heeded immediately. At the same time, the fact that the one in the process of prophesying is asked to cease points to a characteristic that seemingly contradicts that of spontaneity, namely, control.

D. Control

The fourth characteristic, then, is control. It is assumed in Paul's injunction to prophesy one at a time, that one is able to cease prophesying the moment another begins (I Cor. 14:30). The control involved is underscored in the two grounds Paul gives for his injunction in the following verses. In v. 31 he anticipates an obvious objection to his injunction. A prophet could counter, "Because I am under divine compulsion to speak, because I am driven by revelation, the process and duration of prophetic utterance is entirely beyond my control." Against this objection Paul simply asserts the converse:

a prophet is indeed capable of prophesying one at a time, and thus of terminating prophecy at will. In passing Paul points to a practical reason why this is possible: the very purpose of prophecy would be subverted if there were no control. If several prophets speak at once no one would learn or be encouraged. If one speaks at a time, all may learn and be encouraged.

The control of prophecy by the human subject comes to even more striking expression in the second ground Paul gives for speaking only in turn. In v. 32 (joined to the gar of v. 31 by kai)⁹ Paul says: "and the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." The question that immediately arises is, what is the referent of "spirits"? Does it refer to the human spirit or to the Spirit of God? The plural seems to suggest that Paul is thinking of the subjective, human spirit.¹⁰ Grudem for one argues convincingly, however, that Paul is in fact speaking of the subjection of the Holy Spirit to the prophet.¹¹ Thus the reason that the injunction to silence can be heeded is that the prophet is not an involuntary instrument possessed by a divine spirit. Speaking one after another is possible because the Spirit hands himself over to the control of the prophet. Prophecy, therefore, is a specific instance of the remarkable intertwinement of the sovereign initiative of the Spirit and the extraordinary role that the human subject is enabled to play by the very work of the Spirit. The idea of "cooperation," which the Reformers rightly repudiated with respect to the act of justification, appears to be too weak a term for describing the role played by believers in the new, Spirit-directed life. In the case of the most important manifestation of the Spirit, prophecy, the human subject does not merely cooperate, but is capable of and called upon to "control" this manifestation of the Spirit. Though sovereign in initiating a revelatory prophecy, the Spirit is voluntarily subject to the prophet in the communication of the prophecy.

E. Function

Little can be learned regarding the distinctiveness of the gift of prophecy from its intended function. Paul prizes prophecy highly because it serves to edify, to console and to encourage (I Cor. 14:3-4). These functions, however, are not restricted to those with the gift of prophecy. Elsewhere Paul makes clear that the task of building up one another and encouraging each other belongs to every believer (I Thess. 5:11). In addition to edification, teaching seems to be another dimension of prophecy (I Cor. 14:31). Grudem's conclusion seems to be fully warranted: "...prophecy cannot be distinguished from other speech activities simply by means of its functions, for there is no one function that will serve as a distinguishing characteristic."¹²

F. Revelatory

What does distinguish prophecy from teaching is that whereas teaching takes the form of the exposition and application of known tradition, prophecy is based on a divine revelation. In Grudem's

words, "The distinctiveness of prophecy is always something which, Paul thinks, comes spontaneously and comes only from God.... It must be based on a specific divine revelation from God to the prophet."¹³ Elsewhere he surmises that the mode of this revelation probably took the form "of words, thoughts or mental pictures which suddenly impressed themselves forcefully on the mind of the prophet."¹⁴

G. Authority

Especially after having pointed to divine origin as the distinguishing feature of prophecy, the most difficult issue is the question of its authority. Here we are faced with the apparent anomaly mentioned earlier: a prophecy that is not only based on revelation but is synonymous with "a revelation" is not ipso facto authoritative. Others are called upon to weigh the prophetic utterance. What does this weighing suggest regarding the status of spontaneous prophecy?¹⁵

The term diakrino has a wide range of meaning. In I Corinthians it can mean to distinguish or differentiate (4:7), to give legal judgment (6:5), or to evaluate (11:29,31). In chapters 13 and 14 one could entertain the possibility that Paul is speaking of the necessity to determine whether a prophecy is true or false, whether it is prompted by the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit. Yet that is somewhat unlikely as Paul does not suggest that the problem in Corinth is true and false prophecy. Rather he has acknowledged that all the charismata are manifestations of the Spirit. The weighing activity advocated in I Cor. 14, therefore, seems closer to the testing mentioned in I Thess. 6:20-21 than that mentioned in I John 4:1-4.¹⁶ Weighing the prophetic utterance seems to entail evaluating it with a view to its trustworthiness and its practical implications for daily life.

1. Instances of Prophecy Within the Bible

Unfortunately Paul gives no description of any actual prophetic word revealed to someone in the Corinthian congregation. This makes it very difficult to determine the precise meaning of weighing or evaluating a prophecy. The only way of possibly gaining some insight into the nature of New Testament prophecy is to examine instances recorded elsewhere.

I will bypass those passages within the apostolic writings that may themselves represent prophetic revelation¹⁷ and turn to examples of prophecy that occur in the midst of the congregation.

In Acts 11:28 Agabus is designated as one of the prophets and foretells "by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world." Luke tells us that this famine indeed took place in the days of Claudius. This is a clear instance of predictive New Testament prophecy. Its words did not "fall to the ground" (Deut. 18:21-22) but were fulfilled. It is hard to imagine how one could "weigh" such a prophecy. The only response other than "wait and see" is to reject or accept this as an authentic prophecy. The only criterion one could employ, other than "natural indicators" of an impending famine, is the personal integrity and reliability of the prophet in question.¹⁸

In Acts 13:2 words are ascribed to the Holy Spirit without any indication of human agency: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Grudem argues that because no human agency is indicated this is not a true instance of prophecy. One must ask, however, whether the close connection between the Holy Spirit and prophecy attested to in Scripture does not suggest that human agency is simply assumed. If so, this would be an instance of prophecy. This conclusion is all the more likely in view of the fact that the previous verse describes those worshipping together as "teachers and prophets." Although no reference is made to a process of weighing, the fasting and praying that takes place after the disclosure and before following through on it may have been part of a process of discerning whether this was truly the will of God.

A little later in the book of Acts another instance of inspired speech occurs which, though not designated as such, is in fact a form of prophecy. Paul confronts the false prophet, Bar-Jesus, accuses him of being a son of the devil and announces divine judgment, in this instance, blindness. Although not introduced by the Old Testament formula, "Thus says the Lord," this address is clearly intended as a prophecy, as is evidenced by the introductory formula, "Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit," (Acts 13:9). Moreover, the content and effect of prophecy described in I Cor. 14 is here seen in action: the secrets of a man's heart are laid bare.

Acts 21 mentions two prophetic or quasi-prophetic activities that prescribe, or may be interpreted to prescribe, a certain course of action. The disciples at Tyre tell Paul "in the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem (21:4). Nevertheless, Paul goes--a clear instance in which a prophecy or a part thereof is laid aside. Later on, he is met by Agabus who, after binding his own hands and feet with Paul's girdle, predicts his arrest in Jerusalem. Interestingly, he introduces his prediction with a formula reminiscent of Old Testament prophecy--"Thus says the Holy Spirit." As Aune points out, this prediction is implicitly conditional. The fate predicted can be avoided by not going to Jerusalem.¹⁹ In distinction from the earlier warning, however, Agabus does not attach a prescribed course of action to his prediction. In response to the oracle, others do beg Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul heeds neither warning nor prescription nor entreaty. He is "bound in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem, "not knowing what will happen to me there" (20:22; cf. 21:13). Notwithstanding what seem to be prophetic counter-indicators, Paul goes.

These few samples of Spirit-inspired utterances demonstrate the difficulty of determining their authority. In the case of predictive prophecy, weighing seems inappropriate. Where weighing does seem appropriate, a call to set aside Paul and Barnabas for special service is heeded, while a Spirit-inspired warning to stay away from Jerusalem is laid aside. But no indication is given anywhere of the criteria that are employed in choosing a course of action.

2. Actual Words/General Content

Given the need for evaluating and weighing prophecy, in spite of the fact that the uniqueness of prophetic speech is its dependence on revelation, what kind of authority must be ascribed to prophecy? It is in considering this question that Grudem introduces a crucial distinction. He speaks of "authority of general content" on the one hand, and "authority of actual words" on the other.²⁰ By the former he means the classic Old Testament prophecy in which the prophet prefaces his address with the words, "Thus says the Lord." The prophet is convinced that the very words are given to him by God. By contrast a prophecy claiming authority only for the general content is one based on a more general sense of God's will, for example, God's demand for repentance or social justice.²¹

Applying this distinction to New Testament gift of prophecy, Grudem argues that it is invested only with the authority of general content. Hence weighing and evaluating are quite in order.

Before examining the usefulness of this distinction, we must call attention to another striking comparison between prophecy in the Old Testament and the New. As many commentators point out, the equivalent of the classic Old Testament prophets in the New is not what are called prophets, but the apostles.²² The very term apostle highlights an essential feature of the classic Old Testament prophets, namely, they are emissaries, officially sent by God. They are divinely commissioned for their task. Conversely, false prophets prophesy without having been sent. In the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is first spoken of as the supreme prophet, the culmination point of Old Testament prophecy (1:1-2), but later Jesus is referred to as "the apostle" (3:1). Paul compares himself to Moses as a minister of the new covenant (II Cor. 3:1-4:4). Similarly in I Peter 3:2 the Old Testament prophets are equated with the New Testament apostles. Grudem further points out that Paul pulls rank, as it were, on the prophets. At the end of his injunctions regarding the conduct of worship services Paul appeals to his apostolic authority: "If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing is a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, they are not recognized" (I Cor. 14:37-38).

The apparent equivalence of the Old Testament prophet and the New Testament apostle highlights the question of the authority of New Testament prophecy. The latter appears to have a lesser degree of authority than Old Testament prophecy or New Testament apostolic teaching and preaching. The question that arises is whether the distinction between authority of general content and authority of actual words helps to pinpoint the authority of New Testament prophecy.

Although we cannot go into the applicability of this distinction to Old Testament prophecy in any detail, two matters need to be noted. In the first place, as a criterion for determining authority the distinction between actual words and general content seems to be foreign to Old Testament prophecy. To be sure, a prophet often comes with the claim of speaking the words authorized by God. But there is no indication that everything a prophet utters as prophet consists of direct

quotations of divine sayings. At times the prophet inserts what may be called the actual divine words in the midst of a prophetic address as in Isaiah 5:8-10.²³ Yet there is no suggestion that the authority of the prophet's message hinges on the direct quotation formula. The prophet is God's mouth in his office as prophet, regardless of whether the words he speaks came to him audibly as a verbatim message from God. When Jeremiah is confronted by Hananiah's "Thus says the Lord," he does not counter immediately with his own "Thus says the Lord." He calls Hananiah and all the people to "hear now this word which I speak" (Jer. 28:7). There is no indication that the following words are anything other than a Spirit-directed immediate response to the situation. Not until some time after the confrontation with Hananiah does the word of the Lord come to Jeremiah with the instructions to communicate this message expressly with the introduction "Thus says the Lord" (vs. 12-13). Yet there is no reason to believe that Jeremiah's initial response is any less the Word of the Lord or any less authoritative than the subsequent message from God.

In the second place, one must ask whether the distinction of general content or exact words is at all a helpful criterion in the original setting in which one is confronted with a speaking prophet. Once a prophet's words and messages have been inscripturated as being indeed "the Word of the Lord" one can readily acknowledge the authority these words possess. In the process of accepting a prophet's utterances as true prophecy, however, the criterion of exact words or general content is of little help. As Grudem rightly says, the prophecy comes with a claim of authority. But so does false prophecy. How does one know that this claim is true? Surely a criterion such as general content or actual words is of no help.

Identical questions may be asked regarding the applicability and usefulness of the distinction with respect to New Testament apostolic utterances and New Testament prophecy. To be sure, Paul speaks with authority as an apostle of Christ. But rarely does he claim to be speaking with the exact words of God. Even in the Corinthian situation, he does not place the "general content" of the prophecies under the judgment of his exact words from the Lord. Rather, he simply appeals to the "commandment of the Lord" in order to lay down some minimal ground rules for the traffic flow, so to speak, of prophetic utterances: one at a time.

Furthermore, as in the case of Old Testament prophecy, the distinction of actual words/general content in no way helps the New Testament believer, whether in the first century or the twentieth, to determine the weight of prophetic utterance. Confronted with actual prophesying, one is faced with the decision of acknowledging or rejecting the implicit or explicit claim: these words are Spirit-driven, they are spoken on the Lord's behalf by his representative. In that situation the question of actual words or general content is rather academic.

But what then is the authority and rightful function of New Testament prophecy and how does one evaluate the weight of what is presented as prophecy? To answer this question we must consider prophecy as a phenomenon broader than the particular gift of prophecy that is uniquely exercised by some.

II. The Prophetic Church

A. Old Testament Anticipation

To understand the astounding generalizing of the prophetic office that takes place on the day of Pentecost, we need to examine a basic feature of Old Testament prophecy. A standard description of a prophet is "mouthpiece of God," or "divine messenger." Obviously this characterization has biblical warrant (Ex. 4:15-16; Num. 22:38, 23:5,12,16; Deut. 18:18; Jer. 1:9, 5:14, 15:19). To regard a prophet strictly as a messenger, however, as someone who simply relays a communication from God, is to miss something essential. A prophet is not merely God's mouthpiece. He is God's confidante; he is taken and placed, as it were, on God's side. In the words of Abraham Heschel,

The prophet claims to be far more than a messenger. He is a person who stands in the presence of God (Jer. 15:19), who stands "in the council of the Lord" (Jer. 23:18), who is a participant, as it were, in the council of God, not a bearer of dispatches whose function is limited to being sent on errands. He is a counselor as well as a messenger.²⁴

Heschel then quotes Amos 3:7: "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets." These words are reminiscent of the description of God's relation to Abraham. When God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord asks rhetorically, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves in him?" (Gen. 18). True, Abraham is not presented here as a prophet, although one of the reasons given for divulging the Lord's plans to Abraham is that he is to charge his descendants "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice." Apparently he can acquit himself of that task only by being taken up into the council of God. Furthermore, after being taken into God's confidence, Abraham's role is similar to that of the prophets in the council of the Lord. Abraham is not merely the passive recipient of God's plan, but becomes as it were a counsellor of God. He immediately attempts to avert the planned judgment. And although Abraham, conscious of his subordinate place, accompanies his plea with apologies for his boldness, God does not rebuke him for his intercession. Rather Abraham is taken utterly seriously. He is treated as truly a "friend of God" (II Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8), a partner in God's work.

This kind of partnership is clearly in evidence in the "archetype" of the true prophet,²⁵ Moses. Moses is said to be unique in that God speaks with him "mouth to mouth," clearly and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord (Num. 12:8). Elsewhere we read that the pillar of cloud would stand at the door of Moses' tent "and the Lord would speak with Moses." This encounter is

described as speaking "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:9-11, cf. Deut. 34:10). What is being described here is obviously the directness of communication, but there is more. Involved in a face-to-face meeting is the elevation of Moses far above that of a messenger of divine edicts or judgments. In that face-to-face, mouth-to-mouth communication Moses is drawn into a unique partnership with God; he is not merely a passive listener and recorder but an active participant in God's plans. A conversation takes place on the mountain or in a tent. As a result Moses, like Abraham, does not simply accept and relay God's messages and plans. He often objects and intercedes, and at times successfully "abrogates" a plan of God (Ex. 32:7-14, 30-35; Num 14:13-19).²⁶

The classic Old Testament prophets often act in a similar way. They are not only privy to the divine council (I Kings 12:19-23; Isa. 6:1-5), they are participants in God's plans. When God announces judgment, the prophet is not afraid to challenge God. Amos asks God to forgive Israel, because Jacob is so small (Amos 7:2). As Heschel aptly puts it, when confronted with God's intention to bring judgment, Amos does not say, "'Thy will be done,' but 'Thy will be changed.'"²⁷ And in the case of Amos the Lord concedes. He repents: "'It shall not be,' said the Lord" (Amos 7:3).

The pivotal role of the prophet as one who stands in the council of the Lord and who becomes a partner in the unfolding of God's covenant plans of judgment and salvation is crucial for understanding the way in which the New Testament people as a whole may be considered prophetic people.

B. New Testament Fulfillment

In the New Testament two key factors mark the ushering in of the new epoch of salvation history: 1) final and full salvation is embodied in a single person; and 2) all God's people participate in the destiny of this person through the outpouring of his Spirit.

1. A Prophetic People in Christ

a. Salvation in Person

The epochal significance of the appearance of Christ is expressed in comparison to the Old Testament prophets in the opening verses of the letter to the Hebrews: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our Fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 2:1-2). In the following verses it becomes clear that Christ is the prophet, not simply like unto, but greater than Moses both by virtue of the mode of God's communicating through him and because he embodies what he communicates. Like Moses, he reflects the glory of God, but does so not by being momentarily brought into his presence, as was Moses, but by being by his very nature as Son in God's presence. He is momentarily out of God's glorious presence in order to embody and reveal God's presence on earth. But not only does his knowledge of and converse

with God surpass that of Moses, he also embodies the apex of God's saving purposes. The Son, through whom God has created the world and who upholds it by the power of his word, is appointed heir of all things (Heb. 1:1-4). The rest of the book of Hebrews portrays this Son as the final and full mediator.

Elsewhere, too, Jesus is presented as the unique and exclusive revealer of God. Jesus gives thanks for the things that are being revealed to babes. In that context, he says that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 12:27). Here the privileged relation of the Son to the Father is accentuated as an exclusive one. Others are included only by revelation, apokalypsis, as determined by the Son. A similar stress on Christ's exclusive, inside knowledge of God is found in the prologue of the Gospel of John. "His glory is that of the only Son from the Father" (1:14). "No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:18). This statement is surprising because it seems to contradict the Old Testament statements that speak of one who at least spoke to God face to face, namely, Moses. One must assume that in John's view Jesus' relationship to the Father so far surpasses that of Moses that the latter pales in comparison. Here, too, Jesus is presented not merely as the supreme revealer, the ultimate messenger, but as the one who embodies the good news he announces: "the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). The grace and truth announced to Moses as he caught a glimpse of the back of God (Ex. 33:17-23) can now be seen in the face of his Son. In other words, the sum and substance of the covenant relationship is so fully embodied in the Son that in comparison even Moses appears as merely a legislator.

b. Disclosed Mystery

The astounding breakthrough of salvation in Christ in its relevance for New Testament prophecy can best be approached via Paul's use of the term "mystery." He means by this mystery the salvation accomplished and embodied in Christ. Accordingly, it is described simply as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4; Col. 2:2). It is the mystery of God's grace, the reconciliation which has been accomplished in the Messiah (Rom. 16:25-26). When the term is used in I Corinthians, the mystery clearly finds its focus in the foolishness of redemption through the cross of Christ (I Cor. 2:6,10; cf. 1:17-25).

This mystery of Christ also holds the secret of the universal office of prophecy. This is given first of all with the definitive, eschatological nature of the mystery of salvation in Christ. There is something climactic about the mystery that is now disclosed. When Paul makes mention of the mystery of salvation in Christ he usually uses the word "now." Compressed into this one word is deep sense of the finality of the Christ-event. God's end-time purposes are being realized in Jesus Christ in the fullness of time, and the fullness of time is now (Eph. 1:10).

Closely related to the eschatological nature of the mystery of salvation in Christ is its comprehensive scope, for God's final purpose is the redemption of all of creation. Accordingly Paul describes the mystery of God's will as his purpose set forth in Christ, a plan to sum up all things--things in heaven and things on earth--in Jesus Christ, the source of all things (Eph. 1:9-10; cf. Col. 1:20). The enactment of the all-embracing scope of redemption in Christ is manifest in the incorporation of the Gentiles into the body of Christ. Hence Paul can sum up the mystery of Christ simply in terms of their inclusion. Thus the mystery now revealed is "how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partners of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6). As Bornkamm puts it, "This joining of Jews and Gentiles in one body under the head Christ is a cosmic eschatological event. There takes place in it already the mystery of the comprehending of the whole created world in Christ, in whom the totality receives its head and sum."²⁸

A third characteristic of the mystery of Christ is, along with the previous two, crucial for understanding the New Testament people as a prophetic community. All the emphasis falls on the fact that this mystery is now disclosed, manifest, revealed. Paul speaks of it as a mystery that has been made known to him by revelation or, more broadly, revealed to his holy prophets and apostles by the Spirit (Eph. 3:3,5; I Cor. 2:7-10). Here we see the apostles in a similar position to the Old Testament prophets. They are made privy to the divine counsel. God discloses his end-time plan for bringing shalom to the entire cosmos to a specially commissioned group of emissaries, called apostles. The disclosure of God's plan of salvation to the apostles in and by itself places them on a par with the Old Testament prophets. The decisive difference between them is given with the other two dimensions of the mystery, namely, its definitive-eschatological nature and its all-embracing scope. The apostles are party to and participants in God's end-time plan for the redemption of all things.

The plan of redemption to which the Old Testament prophets were privy and of which they were agents was preliminary and limited in scope. To be sure, they caught glimpses of the inclusion of all nations and even the entire creation in God's redemptive plan, but their primary focus and their immediate action radius was the people of Israel. The apostles, by contrast, are party to and agents of God's final, end-time plan for the redemption of all things. The prophets groped towards, they "searched and inquired" about, a distant promise. The apostolic prophets proclaim that this promise has been fulfilled in the present reality of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit (I Peter 1:10-12). Suddenly the vision of a new heaven and earth and the presence of God with his people takes on the concrete shape of the new creation in Christ now present through the Spirit. Living in the vortex of this revealed mystery, all of reality lies open to total renewal in Christ. Of their message the apostles could say, as never before: This is it--and this is all of it! To stand at the centre of this unfolding plan and to be its agent and messenger is to be a prophet hitherto without peer.

The unique position of the apostles and their co-workers may place them at the summit of prophecy, but it appears to exclude the rest of God's people from prophetic office. And indeed, the apostles are prophets in an exclusive and unrepeatable way. As witnesses of the founding events of God's final acts of salvation in Christ the apostles and their prophetic co-workers constitute or lay the foundation of the new people of God, the community of Christ-believers (I Cor. 3:10; Eph. 2:20; Matt. 16:18). As the officially commissioned recipients and agents of the end-time revelation of the mystery of salvation in Christ, the apostolic prophets are mediators of revelation not unlike their Old Testament counterparts.

If that were all that needed to be said, the New Testament people of God could be called prophets only in a derived, secondary sense. The New Testament situation would be a replica of that in the Old Testament. A select group of people would constitute the authentic class of prophets. They would be the privileged mediators of revelation, while the rest of God's people would simply be the recipients of second-hand revelation. They would not themselves be prophets. Talk of the revelation of a mystery via these apostolic prophets would serve only to heighten the exclusiveness of an esoteric order of initiates with inside information on the arcane mysteries of God.

Paul's use of the notion of mystery, however, radically breaks with both the exclusivism of Old Testament prophetism and the sectarianism of incipient gnosticism. The breakthrough lies in the fact that the mystery is fully disclosed and that its content is the final and comprehensive salvation in the historic events enacted by and in Jesus Christ.

Paul not only speaks of the mystery being made known to the apostles and prophets. The very purpose of his ministry is "to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" (Eph. 3:9). In Romans he speaks about this mystery being made known to all nations (Rom. 16:26). And in Colossians the very purpose of his divine office of apostle is to disclose the mystery by making "the word of God fully known" (Col. 1:25-26). In other words, Paul is not acting as a mystagogue,²⁹ someone who leads enquirers into an esoteric mystery; rather, he points to what has now become a public secret: definitive and all-embracing wholeness in the historical figure now in charge of the universe, Jesus Christ. Confronted by the rulers of this world, Paul appeals forcefully to the public character of redemption. At a critical point he insists, "For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

2. Prophets Through the Spirit

Coupled with the public-historical nature of the definitive and comprehensive salvation in Christ, there is a second factor that precludes the permanent existence of a restricted class of prophets at the expense of the prophetic office of all God's people. It is the

outpouring of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The uniqueness of this event can hardly be overestimated. For the purposes of this paper it can best be demonstrated by looking at II Corinthians 3, where the new dispensation of the Spirit administered by Paul is explicitly contrasted with the old dispensation administered by Moses, the arche-typical prophet. This passage is especially instructive for the question of the role of the apostle as prophet vis-à-vis all God's people because one of the major bones of contention in the second letter to the Corinthians is apostolic authority.

The unique place of the apostle is described right at the outset. Paul describes the Corinthians as "our letters of recommendation." But while Paul speaks of the apostolic office as pivotal, he immediately indicates its strictly subordinate role. The Corinthians are letters of Christ and written by the Spirit. Paul and his co-workers merely deliver the letter (3:1-3). In contrast to Moses, the minister of the old covenant of death and condemnation, Paul is a minister, a servant of the new covenant, the new dispensation of the Spirit. In describing the surpassing splendour of the new covenant of which he is a minister, Paul has a golden opportunity to pull rank on the Corinthian believers. He creates the opening by pointing out that the splendour of the old covenant was such that the people of Israel could not even look at Moses' face. But instead of clinching the argument by concluding that his glory or authoritative weight, as administrator of the new covenant, is immeasurably greater than that of Moses, Paul draws back. He places himself alongside the Corinthians: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding (or reflecting) the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (v. 18). Instead of seizing the opportunity to leapfrog over the shoulders of Moses to soar far above the New Testament people of God, Paul in one fell swoop indirectly but decisively testifies to that fact that Moses' fondest wish has been fulfilled: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (Num. 11:29). Rather than elevating himself beyond Moses and beyond the believer--in a situation which seemed to cry out for a solid dose of Moses-like authority--Paul places himself among the believers, elevating them all to a position beyond that of Moses, the archetype of the prophet. The key to Paul's surprising switch from exclusive apostolic authority to inclusive prophetic witness is the Spirit. Because of the Spirit of the Lord--or the Lord who is the Spirit--every believer is placed in the position of prophet.

It is the vital bond between Jesus as living Lord and the Spirit that gives revelation-based prophecy a legitimate role among the community of Christ-believers. For revelation is not confined to occurrences in the past. Christian revelation does not refer to a deposit of truth encased in the story of a Messiah, who founded a religion and then disappeared. The Apostolic prophets speak not of the truth once revealed by a person who has now vanished from the scene of history. They proclaim the one who calls the tune of all history. If the foundational prophecy of the apostles is right in revealing Jesus as the living one who is present, his followers even today cannot but

deal with live revelation. It is inconceivable that the Christ who directs history day by day and who from moment to moment directs his community from within would not speak today. A dead Christ is the end of the good news, but what of an acting but silent Christ?

Without in any way detracting from the foundational and normative role of the apostolic prophecy deposited in the New Testament, we must speak of an ongoing manifestation of the living Lord and in that sense of an ongoing special revelation. Jesus assures his disciples that together with the Father he will make his home in anyone who loves the Son and keeps his word (John 14:21-24). In this way he manifests himself to his followers. From the context it is clear that this manifestation will take place through the other Counsellor (vs. 15-20). The role of the Counsellor is highly varied. It includes teaching, bringing to remembrance all that Jesus had spoken to the disciples, bearing witness to Christ, convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment, and guiding into all the truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15).

To be sure, the promise of the Counsellor is addressed in the first place to the disciples. But the manifestation of Jesus through the Spirit is an ongoing living communion and conversation. In the first letter of John the community of believers is assured that they have no need that anyone teach them because they have been anointed by the Holy One. His anointing, says John, teaches them about everything (I John 2:20,27). Traditionally this work of the Spirit has been described as illumination in distinction from revelation or inspiration. That distinction is legitimate insofar as it attempts to safeguard the foundational and normative significance of the New Testament canon. Yet it is too restricted a term insofar as it suggests that the Spirit's work today consists primarily in opening hearts and eyes to the truth of the gospel. But the gospel-truth is that the living Christ is present and manifest among his people through the Spirit. To characterize this disclosing activity of the Spirit as illumination is woefully inadequate. One cannot help but reach for terms such as manifestation and even revelation.³⁰ Jesus says that no one knows the Father except the Son "and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22). The use of the term "revelation" for the process of coming to know Christ is striking, but all the more so in combination with the term "to choose." Apparently, Christ is engaged day by day in revealing himself to his followers. The only conclusion one can draw is that revelation is an ongoing activity.³¹ There is no reason to strip oral communication from that ongoing revelation.

The material presented thus far is sufficient to demonstrate that all believers are in the position of prophets, for they are participants in and agents of the public secret of decisive and total salvation in the crucified but living Christ now manifest through the Spirit. They all know the basics of the end-time counsel of God. They exercise their office of prophets whenever they speak Spirit-led of the meaning and ramifications of the reality of restoration in the living Christ. To speak of the meaning of God's end-time plan of reconciliation as it bears on the day-to-day life of human

beings--on the weal and woe of human labour, art, justice, peace, politics, education--is to prophesy. To prophesy is to speak of life as it is to be shaped in the eschatological reign of the Lord who now rules us through his word and Spirit.³² The climactic act of salvation in Christ restores human beings to their place as covenant partners of God. But they know that the restoration of the new creation that they experience in Christ is the beginning of the reconciliation of all things, the beginning of the restoration of the entire creation as the theatre of God's glory. They are friends of God because they know what the Father is doing (John 15:14). They are called to be agents of that restoration. Whenever they speak as agents of restoration they are prophets of the most high. In Christ they know the beginning and the consummation, the radical depth and the breathtaking scope of salvation. Hence all Christians are called to a prophetic ministry that is the envy of Old Testament prophets (I Peter 1:10-12). God's chosen instrument for making all people--and even the principalities and powers in heavenly places--see the plan of the mystery hidden for ages is not a select group, a special class within God's people, but the church, the entire community of Christ-believers (Eph. 3:9-10).

In other words, the heavenly council of God in which the prophets stood and which was momentarily convened on earth in order to include Abraham in God's plans regarding a single city (see pages 9-10), has now come to earth and embraces the earth in the Son. He has made God and his plans known. Through the Spirit every believer is taken into God's confidence. God's basic plans regarding the world and his means of accomplishing those plans are disclosed in Christ through the Spirit. We are far more privileged "friends of God" than Abraham ever was, for we know what the Father is doing.

Having discussed first the gift of prophecy given to some and then the prophetic office of all believers, it is high time to consider the interrelation between them.

If one may speak in a very real sense of an ongoing special revelation by virtue of the continuing presence of Christ through the Spirit, the claim of a Christian to have a word of prophecy based on "a revelation" should come as no surprise. Rather, the absence of such occurrences should be reason for surprise, even dismay. If according to Paul the non-Christian entering a gathering of Christians is to conclude from the prophetic utterance of revelation that God is present among them, what is he or she to make of its absence? To conclude that therefore God is absent is unwarranted, for God may be present without this striking evidence of his presence. Nevertheless, the absence of this manifestation of God's presence in many Christian communities should give us pause.

If in the New Testament situation revelation-based prophecy is a normal occurrence, not something to be feared, let alone despised (I Thess. 5:20), how does one assess its absence today?

In the first place, to the extent that the particular gift of prophecy has expired, any attempt at artificial resuscitation is

futile. Although Paul admonishes the Corinthian Christians earnestly to seek the spiritual gifts, "especially that you may prophesy" (I Cor. 14:1),³³ his description of the gift of prophecy, as we have seen, indicates that it begins spontaneously. The most that one can do is to engender a greater openness and sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit.

This leads immediately to a second and more basic assessment of the absence of the special gift of prophecy. To the extent that it is absent, it is of little avail to focus on this particular gift. For one thing, where the awareness of and the exercise of the prophetic office of all believers has by and large disappeared, the sudden re-appearance of the special gift of prophecy can only create havoc. After all, the special gift of prophecy can function properly only where the entire community is fully conscious of being prophets by virtue of the presence of the living Lord through the Spirit. Moreover, although the absence of a gift like that described in I Corinthians 14 may point to the spiritual impoverishment of a community, the conclusion that the special gift of prophecy is ipso facto absent could be erroneous. That judgment itself could reflect the lack of another gift of the Spirit, namely, the gift of discernment. One may not straitjacket the special gift of prophecy in the form in which it is manifest in the Corinthian congregation. It is possible that the specific form that Paul describes is not determinative for the substance of this special gift. In other words, if we grant that any congregation has vitality only by virtue of the manifestation of the living Lord through his Spirit, then one may assume that he will manifest himself there through the gift of prophecy in whatever form is effective and considered appropriate within a specific community.

Although God's people have the awesome power to resist, grieve, and even quench the Spirit by their stubborn blindness and lack of love--or simply by despising prophecy--we must at the same time be careful not to underestimate the inventiveness of the Spirit. If he is refused entry by the front door of "Thus says the Lord," he may well find his way to the back door of "After thinking the matter through very carefully, and having duly consulted my close friends, and having prayed over the matter for some time, I think it may be wise to do such and such"! Or in a community that closes the skylight of dreams and visions, the Spirit may well sneak through the basement transom--some would say the sewer pipe--of "I have a gut feeling that this is the right thing to do." All the while the Spirit may smile knowingly because he originally sowed the seed for that gut feeling in a dream long forgotten or fastidiously suppressed. Even "kidneys" are instruments of the Lord's instruction (Ps. 16:7).

Acknowledging the innovative ways of the Spirit in getting through to us, however, is no reason for keeping the frontdoor locked or the skylight shuttered. Open front doors and clear skylights serve to make us aware that the Lord is among his people, manifesting himself continuously through the Spirit. Although the appeal to "a revelation," or "a dream," or "a vision," may seem unusual and even presumptuous, among a temple-community of the Holy Spirit such phenomena ought to be viewed simply as a somewhat more striking instance of the

manifestation of the Spirit that is given to each for the common good (I Cor. 12:7).

Finally, in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of the dangers of subjectivism and manipulation entailed in claims to front door and skylight manifestations of the Spirit, these serve to test and sharpen the mettle of the believing community. Every instance of "Thus says the Lord" or "I saw a vision" or "The Spirit tells me" must be weighed by the congregation. For even the special gift of prophecy does not usher in face-to-face knowledge nor full knowledge (I Cor. 13:12). To handle the gift of prophecy rightly the entire congregation is called to maturity in Christ. This involves at least three inextricable aspects.

First, as manifestation of the Spirit, the gift of prophecy does not drive people away from Scripture but to Scripture. Only a community totally at home in the warp and woof of Scripture can weigh something presented as prophecy.

Second, the congregation needs to be increasingly responsive to the revitalizing presence of the living Lord. Precisely the gift of prophecy heightens the awareness of the fact that through his Spirit Christ is continuously revealing himself to his bride. Third, since the ongoing work of the Lord is the restoration of creaturely life, the responsibility of weighing prophecy calls forth the earthy wisdom³⁴ of a people who are fully in touch with the weal and woe of creaturely reality as it groans in the birth-pangs of a new creation.

To sum up, the exercise of the particular gift of prophecy is a particular eruption, one might say, of the ongoing revelation of Christ through his Spirit. A statement introduced by "Thus says the Lord" may be just that, the precise words that the Lord would have spoken were he bodily among us, words that he now wants spoken by one of his representatives, his image bearer, his prophet. But to discern that this is in fact what the Lord is saying requires a community of prophets, a people immersed in the Scriptures, in bonded friendship with the Lord, in tune with the Spirit, and in touch with the new creation being born amidst the groans of our hurting world. The special gift of prophecy calls for a community of prophets. Conversely a community of prophets calls for the exercise of the special gift of prophecy.

Notes

1. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 89-122.

2. See, e.g., Arnold Bittlinger, ed., The Church is Charismatic (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), and Arnold Bittlinger, Charismatische Erneuerung--Eine Chance Für Die Gemeinde? (Metzinger: Heinzelmann, 1979).

3. Roland Herbert Bainton, The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 72.

4. "Prophecy, The Spirit and the Church," in J. Panagoupoulos, ed., Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp. 58-76.

5. David E. Aune, Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

6. Wayne A. Grudem, The Gift of Prophecy in I Corinthians (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

7. James 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 (London: SCM, 1975), p. 212. F.W. Grosheide, Eerste Brief Aan Kornithe: Commentaar op Het Nieuwe Testament, 2nd rev. ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1957), pp. 324-325.

8. Dunn, p. 228.

9. See Grosheide, pp. 377-378; Grudem, p. 128.

10. For other arguments for this interpretation see Grudem, pp. 122-123.

11. Grudem, pp. 126-129. Grosheide, p. 377, takes God to be the one who subjects the prophetic spirit to the prophets; the effect is the same, however.

12. Grudem, p. 183.

13. Grudem, p. 201; cf. Gaffin, pp. 58-72.

14. Grudem, p. 179.

15. Dautzenberg has argued that the discerning of spirits in 12:10 as well as the discerning or weighing (diakrinein) mentioned in 14:10 refers to the interpretation. Accordingly 12:10 would be translated as the gift of "interpreting the revelations of the Spirit: spoken through prophecy and 14:29 would read "let the other interpret" (see Grudem, p. 263). This would make the twin gift of prophecy and discernment analogous to that of tongues and interpretation. Cf. Aune, p. 411.

16. See Grudem, pp. 58-67; Dunn, pp. 233ff.; Aune, pp. 219-222.
17. E.g., I Thess. 4:15-17; for other possible instances see Aune, ch. 10.
18. See Aune, pp. 226-229.
19. Aune, p. 264.
20. Grudem, p. 9.
21. Ibid.
22. Grudem, pp. 43-54.
23. For this phenomenon see Von Rad's discussion of "The Prophet's Freedom," Old Testament Theology, Vol. II, translated by D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 70-79.
24. Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, Vol. I (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), p. 21.
25. Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. II, p. 294.
26. In fact in such situations the Lord seems to beg Moses to leave him alone so that he can proceed with his plan to judge his people, without having to reckon with his friend and partner (Ex. 34:10; Deut. 9:14).
27. Heschel, I, p. 22.
28. G. Bornkamm, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. IV, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 820.
29. Karl Rahner uses the term Mystagogie to describe the act of leading people into the transcendental mystery of God; see Rahner, Karl, Theological Investigations, Vol. XIII, translated by David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 40-42.
30. See Jan Veenhof, De Parakleet: Enige Beschouwingen Over de Parakleet-Belofte in het Evangelie Van Johannes en Haar Theologische Betekenis (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1974), p. 27.
31. Cf. Jan Veenhof, pp. 22-27.
32. See Grudem, pp. 129-131.
33. W.C. VanUnnik translates zeeloute as "to practice zealously"; see Reiling, p. 65.
34. Paul's appeal to "common sense" in I Cor. 10:15 speaks volumes: "I speak to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say."

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