

# Charismatic prophecy and New Testament prophecy

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## Introduction

In recent times, through the impact of the charismatic movement, the 'spiritual gifts' of 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 have been brought to the attention of the Christian church.<sup>1</sup> Certain particular gifts have, from time to time, been stressed by charismatic participants and currently there is a fashionable interest in prophecy.<sup>2</sup> In the charismatic movement the term 'prophecy' is used in a technical sense to refer to a message from God to someone (an individual, group, local community, nation or society) by means of a spokesperson. This usually occurs through the medium of a revelatory experience — that is, an experience such as a vision, dream, mental picture, words coming to mind, or other such experiences, through which the person believes that God is communicating directly. This interest in prophecy has been most recently evident with the discussion and debate concerning the Kansas City prophets.<sup>3</sup> The prophetic experiences and theological interpretations expounded by this 'school' (if it may be called that), and indeed the rest of the charismatic movement, raise some interesting and important questions concerning the nature of prophetic inspiration and revelation.

Evangelicals have rightly voiced concern about these issues as they relate to contemporary prophecy. However the basic question which I wish to raise is this: *Does contemporary prophetic experience correspond to, or cohere with, NT prophecy?* In other words, is NT prophecy similar to, or the same as, or different in kind to, contemporary prophecy? This, of course, also depends upon how the NT is interpreted, since definitions of the NT phenomenon vary. And so, while it should be admitted that this question is not an easy one to answer, it must remain basic to any serious theological enquiry. Charismatic literature does not really deal with it, and charismatics often assume that there is a direct relationship between both sets of experience. Is this really the case?

A number of scholars have expressed themselves in this area and they are able to assist, to some extent, our consideration of this particular question. Therefore five contributions will be described, their relationship to each other noted, and some specific comments made.

## 1. J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step With The Spirit*

Packer has posed the question directly by asking: 'Can charismatic prophecy be convincingly viewed as the restoring of a New Testament sign gift? Surely not' (p. 214). He notes that according to Joel's prediction, recorded in Acts 2:17-21, universal prophecy is a mark of the age of the Spirit. He contends that prophecy should not therefore be absent from any age; and he is suspicious of any theory which assumes that prophecy has been absent for most of church history, as some charismatics insist.

He maintains that the essence of prophecy is not 'foretelling' (prediction) but forthtelling (proclamation), 'and this regularly meant application of revealed truth rather than augmentation of it' (p. 215). He explains his position more fully when he says:

So it is natural to suppose that ordinarily, and certainly sometimes if not every time, a prophetic 'revelation' (1 Cor. 14:26, 30) was a God-prompted application of truth that in general terms had been revealed already, rather than a disclosure of divine thoughts and intentions not previously known and not otherwise knowable. By parity of reasoning, therefore, any verbal enforcement of biblical teaching as it applies to one's present hearers may properly be called prophecy today, for that in truth is what it is. (p. 215)

The use of direct speech within charismatic circles (e.g. when a person uses a preface to a prophecy such as 'Thus says the Lord . . .') Packer considers to be misleading because it confuses canonical prophecy with a non-canonical derivative kind of prophecy (previously described). The fact that he can explain prophecy in terms of applied, heart-searching preaching, which has always existed in the church's history (according to Packer — and which he appears to assume), in contrast to the charismatic claims of sudden restoration, is for him convincing. Likewise he believes that any prophecy which is accepted as authentic because of its verbal form or mere existence is wrong (p. 216). Again, he argues that the verbal form used by many charismatics is not to be found in the NT, and this also negates their claim to have experienced a restoration of the NT sign gift. The tests, for Packer, of any alleged prophecy remain the doctrinal content (Dt. 13:1-3) and the fulfilment of any prediction (Dt. 18:22).

In summary, it could be said that Packer regards prophecy both in the NT and today as the preaching of Bible truth with application, whether it is given in a formal or informal setting (p. 217). He is not 'convinced' by contemporary claims of direct revelation; he contends that no argument is cogent enough and that in his opinion none will ever be.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*

As can be seen from the title of this book, Hill is dealing with the NT, but he does then consider its application to the present day. Hill describes a Christian prophet in the NT as someone, divinely called and inspired, who occasionally or regularly receives intelligible and authoritative revelations which he/she is 'impelled to deliver publicly'. The form of these prophecies may be oral or written and may be given to Christian individuals or to a Christian community (p. 8). In his section dealing with the Pauline evidence, Hill states that:

As pastoral preachers the New Testament prophets teach and give instruction on what the Christian way requires of individual believers and of the community as a whole. As an objection to this view it may be argued that a teacher or instructor works with materials already known and makes them relevant to his hearers' needs, whereas a prophet's utterances cannot and should not be dissociated from the impartation of knowledge not already available and which does not come to him by the application of rational thought, but only by 'revelation'. (p. 129)

It is with respect to the content of revelation that Hill and Packer would appear to part company; although the pastoral preaching of prophets, to which Hill refers, may come close to Packer's applied preaching.

Hill believes that there is indeed common ground between the NT period and today, but equally he feels that there are real differences. For example, he does not believe that 'the interpretation of tongues' corresponds to prophecy in the NT. Neither does he think that in the NT there is a distinction between natural and inspired prophecy, as some have suggested; nor does he believe that prophecy in the NT includes the allegorical interpretation of Scripture (pp. 203-206).<sup>5</sup>

Hill neatly summarizes his position by saying:

Those Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostal writers who describe the 'gift of prophecy' in terms of edificatory exhortation (*paraklisis*) seem closer to what in our view Paul, Acts and the book of Revelation consider to be the chief function of prophets. (p. 206, cf. p. 210)

Thus Hill is more open to the possibility of a correlation between NT and current charismatic experience in terms of the chief function of prophecy.

### 3. W.A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*

A breakthrough came in the subject of NT studies with the publication in 1982 of Grudem's doctoral thesis entitled *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*.<sup>6</sup> This has been followed at the popular level with publication in 1988 of Grudem's work, supplemented with application to the contemporary situation (page numbers below refer to the 1988 book).

Grudem's method is characteristic of most NT scholars approaching this subject: he first seeks to define the NT phenomenon and then makes application from that definition to today. He defines NT prophecy primarily in relation to the words relayed and their authority: thus the OT prophets spoke with divine authority of actual words, while NT prophets spoke with divine authority of general content. OT prophets correspond to NT apostles, who also had authority of actual words. For Grudem the distinction is a sharp one. So NT prophets would merely speak 'human words to report something God brings to mind' (p. 67, chs. 3-5). However, for Grudem that message is called by Paul a 'revelation' which is spontaneously given to an individual. The basis for Grudem's definition is thus 1 Corinthians 14:29-31: '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. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged' (NIV).

This distinction of Grudem's is helpful in seeking to understand the relative nature of such prophetic authority and at the same time the possibility of a divine source. He believes that confusion arises when charismatics fail to make this distinction and so refer to prophecies as 'the word of the Lord', thus taking on the form of OT canonical prophecy. This, according to Grudem, is unjustified and betrays a misunderstanding of the differences between OT and NT (non-apostolic) prophecy.

Grudem understands the content of NT prophecy to be related to the specific needs of the moment (p. 152). The content is derived from the 'revelation' which is received in a direct fashion from God rather than being mediated through Scripture. In a summary statement he says: 'The essential elements would be that it is based on a "revelation", that it be spoken publicly, and that it bring about an edifying result' (p. 162). This statement, in itself, appears similar to other definitions (especially Hill's), but behind it stands Grudem's concept of authority, outlined above, which gives it a unique perspective.

In criticism of Grudem from a NT perspective, Max Turner has made two notable points. Firstly, Grudem appears to have overdrawn the distinction between apostolic and prophetic prophecy. Were the apostles really regarded as prophetic messengers giving actual words from God? Turner sees no evidence for this outside the Apocalypse, and that there the claim to authority is in the name of *prophecy* not *apostolicity* (Turner, p. 16).

Secondly, this is also where Turner feels that Grudem's distinction is unfounded semantically. He notes that the primary significance of a statement lies with the 'structure of the propositions of a communication', rather than the 'surface structure of the wording'. So that a definition which is closely allied with the surface structure of language in general rests upon a misunderstanding linguistically. Turner suggests that in fact there was probably a spectrum of authority extending from apostolic speech and prophecy at one extreme to 'vague and barely profitable attempts at oracular speech' at the other (hence 1 Thes. 5:19f.).

In summary, Grudem does appear to regard contemporary prophecy as corresponding to some degree with what he understands to be the NT experience, although he regards certain aspects of contemporary practice as unbiblical. For example, he resists calling contemporary prophecy 'the word of the Lord', because he feels that gives the impression of prophecy having an authority of actual words, which in his view does not occur today.

### 4. M.M.B. Turner, 'Spiritual Gifts Then and Now'

Turner builds on the work of D. Aune and Grudem to define NT prophecy in terms of oracular speech which was based upon a revelatory impulse (p. 46). This 'revelation' contained 'particularis-

tic knowledge — not merely general principles that could be deduced, for example, by illuminated reading of the Torah, or from Gospel Tradition, or from apostolic *didache*' (p. 12). Also, Turner believes that NT prophecy had a privileged position because the prophetic *apokalypsis* went further than 'particular knowledge' and involved, on occasions, the impartation of doctrinal 'mysteries' (cf. 1 Cor. 13:2).

Turner also describes the purpose of prophecy in terms of 1 Corinthians 14:3: edification, exhortation and consolation. But he does not accept that 1 Corinthians 14:3 is itself a sufficient condition or basis for speech to be classified as prophecy. Indeed, Turner sees other forms of speech as being highly charismatic but not constituting prophecy as such. So he can say that preaching, exegesis or teaching, however inspired, is not what the NT writers refer to as prophecy. Thus for Turner there is a clear distinction between teaching and prophecy. The distinguishing characteristic is the 'revelation' which is directly mediated to the person rather than being mediated through Scripture (p. 14). According to Turner the paraenetic function of OT prophecy leads some to conclude that NT paraenetic is therefore prophetic. (The term 'paraenetic' refers to exhortation; thus passages in the Bible which have a strong exhortatory content are often classified as 'paraenetic'.) But, to quote Turner again, 'this overlooks the fact that paraenetic is not a distinctive feature of OT prophecy as such, but common to a variety of genres (p. 14).

With the NT considered, Turner does address himself to Packer's question directly (pp. 43, 46f.). He is cautious in his comparison, acknowledging that his knowledge is based upon his 'impression' of the contemporary phenomenon from tapes, direct experience and popular literature. He argues that the NT and the modern phenomenon 'roughly cohere' at the following points: (1) Both are oracular speech based upon a perceptible revelatory impulse or event and usually marked by a standard formula of introduction, or a description of a visionary phenomenon; (2) The state of the prophet varies from mild dissociation to (controlled) trance state; (3) The 'content' of prophetic pronouncements is rarely if ever primarily doctrinal, but operates in the area of specific knowledge and guidance; (4) Prophetic oracles have 'the same mixed enigmatic quality of authority evinced in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Thessalonians'; (5) Modern prophecy is especially seen to fulfil the role expressed in 1 Corinthians 14:3.

On points of difference, Turner observes that: (1) Except for stereotyped openings, modern prophecy is 'relatively lacking in distinctive forms'; (2) *Some* modern prophecy 'does not rest on "previous reception" of the word of the Lord by the individual; but is regarded as a simultaneous reception and transmission of the oracle or vision'. This, Turner feels, eliminates the possibility of a prior evaluation. But, on the whole, he believes that these differences are not material, and that there is a resemblance. However he does not expect to see prophecy playing the same 'foundational' role as it did in the NT (cf. Eph. 2:20).

It must be admitted that Turner does appear to do justice to the evidence from *both* NT and contemporary experience (as he perceives it).

### 5. D.A. Carson, *Showing The Spirit*

Carson's position is in agreement with Grudem modified by the comments of Turner (noted above), but he adds two of his own. Both points, it is contended, have the impact of refining Grudem's thesis slightly.

Firstly, Carson believes that Grudem has over-simplified the contrast between OT and NT prophets. This reflects Turner's criticism that Grudem has overdrawn the difference between apostolic and prophetic prophecy in the NT (since, for Grudem, OT prophets correspond to the apostles in type). Carson observes that the OT records the existence of prophetic 'schools', and that not all those involved had the status of Isaiah or Amos. He notes that there is 'no single, stereotypical OT prophecy and a different stereotypical NT prophecy' (p. 98). Rather, he suggests that Numbers 12:6-8 and 11:29 give evidence of two kinds of prophecy. One type could be classified as charismatic and enigmatic, the other type could be classified as Mosaic. This, in Carson's view, indirectly supports Grudem's distinction, although it must be said that *both* types are contained within the OT.

Secondly, Carson adds the important comment that psychologically the OT prophets did not necessarily believe their words to be the very words of God. The difference in self-

awareness between OT and NT prophets from a 'psychological' perspective is thus questioned by Carson. Grudem's distinction is only possible if the distinction refers to prophecy *qua* result, and not prophecy *qua* revelatory experience (p. 99). That is, Grudem's distinction applies to the result of prophecy rather than the mode. These points obviously build upon those previously outlined above.

With respect to the contemporary scene, Carson voices similar criticisms to Grudem himself. These include the fact that prophecies are given as 'direct quotations from the Lord' (p. 121); and this he believes is compounded by too little attention to Paul's injunction to weigh and test what is said. Therefore, in his opinion modern prophecies can be manipulative, arrogant and sometimes dishonest. Carson nevertheless indicates that there appears to be a degree of correspondence between the NT evidence and the contemporary phenomenon, although much of the charismatic packaging is unacceptable to him.

## Comments

There are a number of comments which can be made in relation to the present discussion.

1. There is, as already noted, a debate concerning the NT itself on the matter, although Grudem's thesis clarifies the area to a great extent, especially when modified by the work of Turner and Carson. There are, however, evangelicals who disagree with his proposal, mainly from a 'reformed' position.<sup>9</sup> So while there is growing consensus, there is not complete agreement as to what constituted prophecy in the NT era. This needs to be taken into consideration when thinking about this important question.

2. Usually the interpreter's understanding of what the NT has to say influences how the contemporary phenomenon is perceived. With the NT as a starting point, it is possible to beg the question with respect to *contemporary* experience. This is the danger that all interpreters face, and could succumb to. The lack of academic material inevitably contributes to this problem. The material which scholars present as relating to modern experience is often the better quality of popular literature, but nevertheless the selection is often small and possibly unrepresentative. If there is a central weakness in the scholarship considering this question, it lies on the contemporary side, in contrast to their NT discussion.

3. Packer allows for the continuance of prophecy today, but defines it in terms of preaching, or the application of Bible truth to one's present hearers. It would, however, appear that Packer is hardly open to persuasion from the charismatic camp. Is it possible that Packer may not be convinced by anyone, on *a priori* grounds? He adds to his conviction evidence of the abeyance of prophecy of canonical type in church history. But here other writers cite evidence that (non-canonical) prophecy, perhaps differently defined, has continued to exist, albeit on the margins of church life.<sup>10</sup> Is it therefore possible that this type of prophecy is now once again resurging, and is appearing under the guise of OT phraseology? To deny the possibility of contemporary prophecy, as experienced within the charismatic movement, because of its *misuse* of OT canonical prophetic form seems to me to be a case of throwing the baby out with the prophetic bathwater!

4. Hill, as we have noted, essentially proposes a *functional* definition of NT prophecy based upon the proclamation of a received 'revelation', namely edificatory exhortation (*paraklesis*). While this element is clearly a part of the NT scriptures (1 Cor. 14:3), and is one which contemporary proponents stress, the question remains whether *paraklesis* was the defining characteristic of prophecy in the NT definition. This must be doubted; alternatively, it is more probable that it was an important and expected corollary. Significant for our discussion is the fact that the same could be said today for modern prophecy.

5. Turner observes that *some* prophecy is regarded as a simultaneous reception and transmission of an oracle or vision. This is true as far as it goes. From charismatic literature it could be suggested that a fuller picture would include three possible ways of viewing this aspect of the prophetic experience. (1) Some prophetic experiences are such that the message is received sometime before the actual proclamation. This may be a matter of seconds, minutes, hours or days. The recipient knows the message in total in advance. (2) In another instance only part of the message is received and the person realizes that he or she must begin to speak before the rest of the message will come to them. (3) With most proclamation of prophecy in public there is an accompanying impulse to speak. In some cases the person does not have a message of which he or she is aware, but senses that speaking should commence. As the prophet begins to speak the message

comes to them. This means that any attempt to define contemporary prophecy must not rest solely upon the action of speaking or proclamation, since the prophetic experience has often an earlier starting point.<sup>11</sup>

In response to the comment of Turner, it could be argued that the spontaneity of the reception and deliverance of a message within *some* charismatic practice does inevitably limit prior evaluation, but that this is only one feature of the whole charismatic practice in general. In any case, it could be added that there does appear to be more of a foundation for the spontaneity of the reception and relay of prophecy than Turner would be willing to admit (*cf.* Grudem, p. 116). If this is true, then it strengthens the case for a closer relationship between the NT and present-day practice than even Turner proposes.

## Conclusion

From evidence considered here (and from research which I have completed)<sup>12</sup> it could be suggested, at least, that there are a number of 'contact points' between the NT and today. (1) As noted by Turner, revelatory impulses of some description (words, pictures, dreams, visions) form the basis of prophecy. These impulses are, of course, broad in the sense that they contain a variety of experiences. (2) The congregational setting is the appropriate and expected context for the exercise of this gift in proclamation. (3) Theoretically anyone can prophesy. (4) As a result of prophecy being exercised the expectations expressed in 1 Corinthians 14:3 should be fulfilled. (5) True Christian prophecy is nevertheless a mixed phenomenon and has only an authority of general content, thus requiring discernment and judgment to be exercised by the congregation and its leadership before being accepted.

Following on from these comments, it perhaps should be stated clearly that contemporary charismatic prophecy is not, by its nature, infallible and in any sense absolute, but rather has only a relative authority. Therefore all modern prophecy should be evaluated in light of existing orthodox doctrinal norms, the test of which is Scripture itself.<sup>13</sup>

### Books discussed in the article

- J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, IVP, 1984.  
D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979.  
W.A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, Kingsway, 1988.  
M.M.B. Turner, 'Spiritual Gifts Then and Now', *Vox Evangelica* XV (1985).  
D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, Baker, 1987.

<sup>9</sup>For example see: M. Harper, *As at the beginning* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1965); F. Sullivan, *Pentecostalism and The Charismatic Renewal* (Veritas, Dublin, 1986); P. Hocken, *Streams of Renewal* (Paternoster, 1986); also A.R. Mather, *The Theology of the Charismatic Movement in Britain from 1964 to the Present Day* (Ph.D. thesis, University College of N. Wales, 1982); and J. Bax, *The Good Wine* (Church House Publishing, 1986).

<sup>10</sup>For example see: C. Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present* (Highland, 1989); and G. Houston, *Prophecy Now* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup>Interest in the UK came initially through D. Pytches, *Some Said It Thundered* (Hodder, 1990); reviewed by C. Hill, 'Kansas City Prophets', *Prophecy Today* 6,4 (1990), pp. 5-7; *cf.* J. Martin, 'Prophets and prophecies', *Church of England Newspaper*, 27 July 1990, pp. 1-2; P. Morris, 'Kansas City Prophets', *Anglicans for Renewal* 43 (Winter 1990/1991), pp. 6-8.

<sup>12</sup>The possibility that he may have changed his mind on the point is indicated by a quotation on the cover of Grudem's most recent book, *The Gift of Prophecy* (Kingsway, 1988): 'Careful, thorough, wise and to my mind convincing' (J.I. Packer).

<sup>13</sup>Contra Every, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>(American University Press, Washington, 1982.)

<sup>7</sup>*Cf.* Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (SPCK, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>*Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>For critical assessment of the Grudem position see: V. Budgen, 'Prophecy in the New Testament - The Need for a Clear Test Case', *Reformation Today* Part I, 101 (1988), pp. 13-20; Part II, 102 (1988), pp. 19-28; and K.L. Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy - A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Footstool Publications, Memphis, 1986 and 1989).

<sup>10</sup>*Cf.* R. Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), ch. 6; G. Every, 'Prophecy in the Christian Era' in *New Heaven? New Earth?*, ed. S. Tugwell et al (DLT, 1976), pp. 161-206; Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, pp. 241-243.

<sup>11</sup>M.J. Cartledge, *Prophecy in the Contemporary Church: A Theological Examination* (M.Phil. dissertation, CNA, 1989), pp. 31, 38, 62, 133.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*: for contemporary examples within charismatic literature see ch. 2, and for examples from empirical research see ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup>*Cf. ibid.*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 156-161.