

Prophecy in the New Testament

We cannot properly understand the role of prophecy in the NT without looking at 1 Corinthians 12-14, where the apostle Paul deals repeatedly and extensively with “spiritual gifts” and their role in the churches.

1 Corinthians 12:27-28 (ESV)

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second **prophets**, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”

1 Corinthians 13:2, 8-13 (LSB)

“And if I have *the gift of* **prophecy**, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing... Love never fails, but if *there are gifts of* **prophecy**, they will be done away; if *there are* tongues, they will cease; if *there is* knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we **prophecy** in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now abide faith, hope, love – these three; but the great of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 14:1-5 (RC)

“Keep pursuing this *kind of* love,¹ yet be earnestly desiring the spiritual *gifts*,² especially that you may **prophecy**. For the one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but rather to God; for no one understands, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.³ But the one who **prophesies** speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds himself

¹ Literally, the Greeks says, “Keep pursuing the love.” The definite article (“the”) refers to the kind of love Paul has just written about in chapter 13.

² Literally, “the spirituals.” EVV = “spiritual gifts”; NLT = “the special abilities the Spirit gives.”

³ Most English versions translate *pneumati* as “in/by the Spirit.” Paul almost always uses this word this way, and thus “in *his* spirit” (LSB, NASB) is unlikely. See especially Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). Reading the text this way in no way undermines a cessationist reading of the text, for the sign gifts – including speaking in tongues – have ceased with the close of the apostolic era.

up, but the one who **prophesies** builds up the church. Now I desire you all to speak in tongues, but even more that you would **prophesy**. The one who **prophesies** is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

1 Corinthians 14:21-33, 37-40 (LSB)

“In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but **prophecy is for a sign** not to unbelievers but to those who believe. Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and uninformed men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all **prophecy**, and an unbeliever or an uninformed man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that SURELY GOD IS AMONG YOU. What is *the outcome* then, brothers? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has a translation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, *it should be* by two or at the most three, and *each* in turn, and one must translate; but if there is no translator, he must keep silent in the church, and let him speak to himself and to God. And let two or three **prophets** speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all **prophecy** one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted. And the spirits of prophets are subject to **prophets**; for God is not *a God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints...If anyone thinks he is a **prophet** or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone remains ignorant about *this*, he is ignored *by God*. Therefore, my brothers, earnestly desire to **prophecy**, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.”

At first glance, it seems incredibly clear that prophecy should not only be allowed in our churches; it should be expected, and even earnestly sought after, since it was designed and employed by the triune God for the “building up” of the church.

However, when we read our Bibles first theologically and redemptive-historically, we see something entirely different, and much more glorious and Christ-centered, and thus much more in line with biblical Pneumatology.

- In familiar terms, we might say the events in 1 Corinthians 12-14 – like so many in the book of Acts – are not so much prescriptive as they are descriptive; they are more narrative (what happened in the church during the foundation laying era) than normative (what continues to happen in the church today during the building up era).

If we can prove that prophets have indeed ceased with the laying of the foundation of the church, then every single one of the passages dealing with prophets and prophecy is to be interpreted historically; that is, that though the office of prophet – and gift of prophecy – was operating in the early church, it is no longer in operation today, and we should not be expecting this to be normative in the church today.

In the words of Richard Gaffin,

The cessation of these revelatory gifts...turns on the salvation-historical understanding of the church and its apostolicity expressed in Ephesians 2:11-21. There the church is pictured as the construction project of God, the master architect-builder, underway in the period between the ascension and return of Christ (cf. 1:20-22; 4:8-10, 13). In this church-house the apostles and prophets are the foundation, with Christ as the “cornerstone” (v.20).⁴

Gaffin rightly argues that the laying of the apostolic witness – the “foundation” – is just as “once-for-all” for the church as was the Christ-event – the “cornerstone”.

- That is, just as we do not need Christ to re-lay Himself as cornerstone – “it is finished!” in every generation, we no longer need apostles and prophets to re-lay themselves as foundation, for we have it canonized in the New Testament – “it [too] is finished”.⁵

⁴ Richard B. Gaffin, “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 42-43.

⁵ That is, closed and completed, and therefore sufficient.

- In the words of Gaffin, “to maintain the continuation of the prophetic gifts today stands in tension with the canonicity⁶ of the New Testament.”⁷

Why Equating “Prophesying” with Preaching Undermines Cessationism

This was the view held by many of the Puritans⁸ and is still maintained by many popular Reformed evangelicals today, such as John MacArthur.⁹

Making “prophesy” mean “preaching” is eisogesis – reading a preconceived notion into the text – as both the Old and New Testaments have explicit signs and qualifications for prophets and their prophesies.

In fact, by saying the preachers are the modern-day manifestation of the first-century prophets opens the door for the erroneous idea of fallible New Testament prophets and prophesies – the very thing continuationists (i.e., “non-cessationists”) champion.

Schreiner is helpful here:

The feature that separates prophecy from teaching is that those who prophesy communicate revelations from God (1 Cor. 14:6).¹⁰ The “revelation” given here is spontaneous in that it isn’t derived through studying the biblical text. God communicates His word directly to the mind of the prophets... Those who prophesy don’t proclaim God’s word from a written text but convey what God has revealed to them. Prophecy, then,

⁶ That is, in the words of Ephesians 2:20, “the foundation” of the apostolic witness of the apostles and prophets.

⁷ Gaffin, 44.

⁸ For example, see William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, rev. ed., Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996).

⁹ For example, see John MacArthur, *Strange Fire* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 121, where he says, “Prophecy [in Romans 12:6] does not necessarily refer to future predictions or new revelation. The word simply means “to speak forth,” and it applies to any authoritative proclamation of God’s Word where the person gifted to declare God’s truth “speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men” (1 Cor. 14:3). So a fitting paraphrase would be: “If your gift is proclaiming God’s Word, do it according to the faith.” As we will see, sentiments such as this sounds good and preaches well, but it is simply not what Paul is teaching here, nor teaches elsewhere concerning the “Spiritual gift” of prophesy.

¹⁰ Ridderbos writes, “Prophecy is a special form of the Spirit given to and working in the church. For this reason the speaking of the prophets can also be call revelation (1 Cor. 14:30; cf. v.26; v.6; cf. Eph. 3:15), and they are mentioned together with the apostles (Eph. 3:5; Cf. Eph. 2:20). The prophet receives an insight into the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 13:2); he explains the meaning and progress of the divine redemptive activity (Eph. 3:5)...Prophets are the Spirit-impelled proclaimers of the Word of God to the church, who unfold God’s plan of redemption...in Christ.” In Hermon Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 451.

isn't the same thing as preaching, though it can overlap in some respects with the function of preaching.¹¹

Like OT Prophets, NT Prophets are Infallible

To make passages like 1 Cor. 12-14 applicable to our day and age, many argue that there are two kinds of prophets in the Bible: one that was infallible and authoritative, and a second kind that was not.

As MacArthur notes,

The first category includes Old Testament prophets, New Testament apostles, and the authors of Scripture. Their prophecies consisted of perfect transmission of God's words to people. As a result, their prophetic proclamations were both error-free and immediately binding on the lives of others.

In addition to this is a second tier of prophets in the New Testament church: congregational prophets who spoke a form of prophecy that was *fallible* and *nonauthoritative*, and that came into existence in New Testament times. [These] prophets...sometimes made mistakes in their report of divine revelation; thus, they were not required to meet the same perfect standard of the Old Testament prophets and biblical authors.¹² [That is, such] modern prophecies don't have to be held to a standard of 100 percent accuracy.

The notion of fallible New Testament prophets...may fit [our] contemporary scene. But it has a fatal flaw: it is not biblical. In fact, the Bible only and always condemns erroneous prophets as dangerous and deceptive.¹³

This is seen clearly in perhaps the most important OT passage regarding true, versus false, prophets:

- Deuteronomy 18:20-22 (LSB) – “But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. Now you

¹¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2018), 96-97. (emphasis mine)

¹² Most popular among Reformed evangelicals who hold to this view is Wayne Grudem, who argues exhaustingly [and seemingly exhaustively] in his 400 page book, *The Gift of Prophecy*.

¹³ MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, 118-119. (emphasis mine)

may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which Yahweh has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which Yahweh has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

- See also Jeremiah 20:6; 23:16, 25-26, 32; 27:10, 15

On the contrary, genuine prophets – whether in the OT or NT – always speak the truth, and what they say, comes to pass.

- Jeremiah 28:9 (LSB) – “The prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet comes to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom Yahweh has truly sent.”¹⁴

- See also 1 Kings 22:13-28 (Micaiah)

But aren't there 'Prophecies' in the NT that were Fallible?

Continuationists agree with the OT texts noted above; however, they list many NT Scriptures that seem to teach that there is some 'wobble room' for error for prophets in the NT:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 (LSB) – “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophecies, but examine all things; hold fast to that which is good.”
- Agabus in Acts 21:11
 - This is perhaps the most-appealed to proof-text for fallible NT prophets, where Agabus prophesies that the Jews would bind Paul and deliver him over to the Romans.
 - What many miss is that in 28:17, we see in Paul's own words that the prophecy of Agabus was indeed just as accurate and true as was his prophecy in 11:28.

¹⁴ Emphasis mine