

Thus Saith the Lord: On the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy and its Use in the Church Today

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## I. Introduction

Prophecy is a prominent genre in the Bible; 18 books in the Old Testament fall in the category of prophecy, and references to many of these Old Testament prophecies appear in the New Testament. Not only that, but various prophecies are also found within other genres of books in the Bible, including the Psalms and wisdom literature.<sup>1</sup> Though prophecy appears in both testaments, the application of this gift is unique within the testaments' different contexts.

To understand the gift of prophecy both within Scripture and in the church today, believers must view it as “Progressive Revelation” as defined by Bandy and Merkle. Their explanation provides room for prophecy to continue within the church today within certain parameters. However, at the same time, their definition also highlights the importance of consistency with the inerrant Word of God. This paper will explain and expand upon Progressive Revelation, specifically upon the two central points of prophecy found in this viewpoint: (1) prophecy must be consistent with God’s already revealed Word because God cannot contradict Himself, and (2) all believers could potentially have the gift of prophecy.

This paper will also address certain opposing arguments within the church today concerning the gift of prophecy. The opposing arguments addressed within this paper are the following: (1) Cessationism (2) though prophecy is still in use today, not all believers have access to it, and (3) prophecy can be completely new revelation that is inconsistent with Scripture. Using Bandy and Merkle’s definition as well as Scripture itself, this paper will refute these arguments and support the “Progressive Revelation” perspective concerning prophecy in the church today.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L Merkle, *Understanding Prophecy: A Biblical Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2015), 17.

## II. Prophecy as “Progressive Revelation” and Opposing Arguments

Bandy and Merkle define Progressive Revelation to mean that God gives prophetic revelation to specific people in various points in history, and this revelation can only be modified or expanded upon by subsequent revelation from God that is consistent with God’s already revealed Word.<sup>2</sup> This means that God has indeed given special revelation to various prophets throughout history, which the Bible reveals as well. Various books within the canon are named after the prophet who wrote them, and within the New Testament references state that as people received the Holy Spirit they began to prophesy.<sup>3</sup> Prophecy is not a new concept for the church, but the question many ask is whether or not believers today can possess the gift the prophecy. Is this a Spiritual gift of the past or should the church continue to prophesy? If the church views prophecy in the way which Bandy and Merkle define it, the two qualifiers, consistency with the already revealed Word and potential availability for all believers, will help the church sift through the prophecies of today to discern which are true and false. For Bandy and Merkle, the church should continue to prophesy because the gift continues.

Thesis Point One: Prophecy Must be Consistent with God’s Already Revealed Word

Wayne Grudem agrees with Bandy and Merkle, and in his book *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, he challenges the church to cease their cessationist views of prophecy.<sup>4</sup> He qualifies true prophecy in the same way as Bandy and Merkle, stating that one way to distinguish false and true prophecies, one must look at the Word of God and find

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<sup>2</sup> Bandy and Merkle, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Example: Acts 19:6, ESV.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy: In the New Testament and Today* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1988), 15.

consistency.<sup>5</sup> In order to demonstrate this idea that the prophecy must be consistent, Grudem compares the New Testament and Old Testament prophecies, proving that they are consistent with one another and demonstrating that the same criteria must be used today.<sup>6</sup>

One Scripture which Grudem uses to defend this idea is 1 John 4:2-3. In this passage, John implores his audience to have discernment when listening to prophets and teachers because many are false. He also tells them how they can test whether a prophet is teaching truth. In order for the hearer to know which teaching is correct, they must evaluate it against the Word Himself, Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> If all prophecy must be interpreted through the lens of redemption, and the One who brings ultimate redemption is the Word Himself, Jesus Christ. John goes so far as to say that anyone who teaches against the truth concerning Jesus Christ, that person is an antichrist. This is an austere accusation and should be taken seriously by all believers. All prophesy is fulfilled in Jesus, and He is the One who brings about redemption, which is the primary theme of all Biblical prophecy.<sup>8</sup>

Another passage which speaks about false prophecy is 2 Peter 1:16-21. In these verses, Peter writes that because he and others were eyewitnesses to Christ, their prophetic teachings can be more fully confirmed. They have seen and had direct impact from Christ, so their teachings are consistent with Him.<sup>9</sup> Peter is proving himself trustworthy because his prophecies are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>6</sup> Grudem, 32.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *1-3 John*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 154. Google Books.

<sup>8</sup> Bandy and Merkle, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, the NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). Google Books.

consistent with already-known truths about Christ, and this same method of judging prophets must be employed today. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 that if prophecy ever causes someone to curse Jesus, this is false because the Holy Spirit would never cause someone to prophesy against Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Any sort of prophecy, if it comes from the Holy Spirit, cannot contradict God's already revealed Word.

#### Opposing Argument One: Cessationism

This calls attention to the first opposing argument to my thesis. This argument is called "Cessationism," and it states that the gift of prophecy is no longer in use in today's church. This view does not only refer to the gift of prophecy, but rather to any supernatural gift such as speaking in tongues or performing miracles.<sup>11</sup> Cessationists argue that Christians no longer need prophecy because they are not anticipating a Messiah. Rather, the church today looks backwards to Christ's work, not toward a coming, mysterious Messiah.<sup>12</sup> The primary concern for Cessationists is the authority of Scripture if prophecy continues in the church today.

One prominent Cessationist theologian, Gaffin notes that many accuse Cessationists of "putting the Spirit in a box."<sup>13</sup> However, he argues that the Spirit put Himself into a box because the Spirit's descension at Pentecost sealed Christ's redeeming work. This means that the events of Pentecost were unique to show the outpouring of the Spirit, but no such supernatural work

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<sup>10</sup> Grudem, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Mueller, 254.

<sup>12</sup> Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 222.

<sup>13</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "A Cessationist View," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 25. Google Books.

continues today because it was a one-time event.<sup>14</sup> Gaffin calls prophecy a “word gift,” and states that he believes the Spirit no longer gives these types of gifts to the church because if these gifts continue today, they negate the authority and canonicity of Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

However, just because Christians are looking at Christ from a new perspective does not mean that new revelations about Christ cannot happen. In fact, as Hvidt argues, prophecy is one way in which God grows the church because He uses it to reveal Himself more fully to His people.<sup>16</sup> In Gaffin’s case, his primary concern is maintaining the authority of Scripture, which is a valid and important concern. As stated in this paper’s thesis, for prophecy to be considered valid, it must be consistent with Scripture.

Bandy and Merkle explain well how prophecy today can stay true to Scripture while still being new divine revelation. One can glean new revelations concerning Jesus because he is the “hermeneutical key” through which all prophecy must be interpreted.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that the Bible is not authoritative or incomplete, but rather that God gives people subsequent revelation concerning Scripture to help with interpretation. Nathan J. Page writes that the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that God solely communicates to the church through Scripture, but rather that the church must gain doctrine from Scripture alone.<sup>18</sup> God communicates outside of Scripture, but the church should not base any of its doctrine on

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Hvidt, 237.

<sup>17</sup> Bandy and Merkle, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan J. Page, *Why Cessationism Can't Be True* (Bloomington: Westbow Press, 2021), Chapter 7. Google Books.

anything outside of Scripture. In the Progressive Revelation definition of prophecy, Scripture remains a core tenant of prophecy, so the Cessationist should not say that those in this viewpoint lack respect for The Word.

#### Opposing Argument Two: Prophecy Need Not Be Consistent with Scripture

While Cessationists place the authority of Scripture so high that they do not believe any new prophecy occurs, some more charismatic Christians believe that prophecy does not necessarily have to be consistent with Scripture at all. This is precisely what the second opposing argument to Progressive Revelation states. These groups believe that the Holy Spirit is delivering new messages from God because more post-canonical revelation is required.<sup>19</sup>

However, Erickson would argue that while the Holy Spirit is vital to proper interpretation of Scripture, the written Word itself is the “objective basis of authority.”<sup>20</sup> In order for a Christian to mature, they must have both the Bible and the Spirit. The Bible contains an objective meaning, which indicates that the central point of a passage is the same for all people. However, Scripture also has deeper meanings which are revealed by the Holy Spirit’s illumination.<sup>21</sup>

Although deeper meanings of Scripture can be revealed by the Holy Spirit, this still maintains the authority of Scripture as the basis for all prophecy. No message from God can come which is not aligned and consistent with Scripture. God does not need to reveal brand new messages because Scripture provides all that one needs to find salvation in Jesus Christ. However, he does reveal new truths from His Word which He calls people to proclaim as prophets.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 221.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 222.

## Thesis Point Two: All Believers Potentially Have Access to the Gift of Prophecy

Not only must all prophecy be consistent with Scripture, but all believers, no matter their position within the church or their gender or any other category, can potentially have access to the gift of prophecy. The only criteria for a prophet is that they must be a believer because only Christians can receive gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that all believers do prophesy, but rather that all believers have the potential to be prophets.

One of the primary doctrines of the Southern Baptist church and evangelical Christianity is the Priesthood of the Believer. This doctrine comes from 1 Peter 2:4-10, and it means that the institution of the Priesthood as it was used in the Old Testament has been transferred now onto each individual believer because of the work of Christ.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Catholic theology, which states that the Pope has special access to God, Protestants believe that because of Christ, all Christians have equal access to God and can approach the throne boldly.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the only criteria for being a prophet is that someone is a follower of Jesus Christ because they must have the Holy Spirit within them to guide them.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, this does not mean that all believers possess the gift of prophecy. If this were true, then Christians would have no need for one another because each person possesses unique gifts to contribute to the Kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Paul writes that different people within the church use their various

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Steven P. Mueller, *Called to Believe, Teach and Confess: An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 171.

<sup>24</sup> George H. Tooze, *Baptist Principles* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2013), 131.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Mueller, 171.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 254.

gifts to serve the Lord, but the same Spirit gives them these gifts.<sup>28</sup> The Holy Spirit distributes gifts universally to all believers, and each believer has something to contribute to the church, including some believers who have the gift of prophecy.<sup>29</sup> As long as the prophet is a believer in Jesus and what they teach is consistent with The Word, the church should heed their teaching no matter their gender, office within the church, or any other characteristic they might possess.

#### Opposing Argument Three: Only Select Believers have Access to the Gift of Prophecy

This brings about the third opposing argument to the Progressive Revelation view of prophecy. While Southern Baptists hold fast to the doctrine of Priesthood of the Believer, other denominations such as Catholicism believe that only a select few people, specifically the Pope and other church Bishops, can truly interpret the Word of God rightly.<sup>30</sup> Rather than seeing the priesthood of all believers, they hold to a more Old Testament viewpoint of needing a priest as their mediator to God.

One Scripture passage which they use to defend this view is Matthew 16:18-19. They believe that Jesus gave Peter special authority as the “first pope” to mediate between heaven and earth.<sup>31</sup> They argue that the New Covenant priesthood of all believers does not negate the Old Testament priesthood of a few select men.<sup>32</sup> Because of this, it is logical for them to say that not

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<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, ESV.

<sup>29</sup> Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 70.

<sup>30</sup> Tooze, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Tim Staples, “The Priesthood is both Ministerial and Universal,” Catholic Answers, last modified March 1, 2010, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/the-priesthood-is-both-ministerial-and-universal>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

all believers can have access to a Spiritual gift such as prophecy because not all believers have equal access to understanding of God.

However, as demonstrated through the Southern Baptists' doctrine of Priesthood of the Believer as well as in Scriptures such as 1 Peter 2:4-10, the Bible clearly teaches that all believers are priests in God's Kingdom. The Priesthood is no longer an institution because each individual Christian is a priest.<sup>33</sup> All Believers through the Holy Spirit have access to right interpretation of Scripture and whatever gifts, including prophecy, which the Holy Spirit bestows on the church.<sup>34</sup> Not everyone has the gift of prophecy because if all people had the same gift, people in the church would have no need for one another. However, anyone can potentially have this gift, so no one should be dismissed unless their prophecies contradict Scripture.<sup>35</sup>

### **III. Conclusion**

The gift of prophecy, which Bandy and Merkle define as Progressive Revelation, is still in use in the church today. However, this does not mean everyone has the gift of prophecy or that all people who claim to be prophets are true. In order to measure the validity of a prophet or prophecy, one must judge its consistency with Scripture because if a prophecy declares something contrary to God's already revealed Word, the church can automatically determine its falsehood. However, besides the limitation of consistency with Scripture, Progressive Revelation can occur through any person within the church. One does not have to be a pastor or church leader to prophecy because all Christians, through the Holy Spirit, can potentially have this gift.

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<sup>33</sup> Tooze, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Mueller, 254.

At the same time, false prophets do exist, and Scripture does warn thoroughly about them.<sup>36</sup> This is why understanding the limitations of prophecy is so important. The church must filter prophecies through Scripture and use discernment and prayer as they determine which prophets to listen to. The spiritual gift of prophecy has great potential to edify and encourage the church in many ways, but the church must practice this gift with caution and prayer. It cannot be dismissed as Cessationists do, but it also cannot be taken too far. As Peter writes,

“...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God <sup>as</sup> they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Deuteronomy 18:20-22; Matthew 7:15; 1 John 4; etc.

<sup>37</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21, ESV.

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