

Prophecy

The gift, found in First Corinthians 12:10, is literally just the one word, prophecy (προφητεία). Nevertheless, a wide difference of opinion exists over the understanding of this word, in the context of spiritual gifts. Therefore, a more detailed study of the word is warranted.

According to Strong's, the word derives from prophet, προφήτης, literally a foreteller, a combination of the Greek verb, φημί, and the preposition, πρό.¹ The definition of the verb is to state something orally or in writing,² and is translated fifty-seven times as "say" and once as "affirm."³ The preposition means "before," used in three different ways; as a marker of position in front of an object, as a marker of a point of time to another point of time, and as a marker of precedence in importance or rank.⁴ A close examination of each of the forty-eight uses in Scripture shows the temporal usage clearly in thirty-four cases, with an additional seven more that would likely be classified temporally, as opposed to spatially (cf. Mark 1:2).⁵ Noted Greek scholar, Dr. A.T. Robertson, finds only four instances of the spatial use.⁶

This examination should not be surprising to the average Christian who thinks of prophecy as something predictive of the future. A Biblical prophet was always someone who included future predictions in his declarations. The Mosaic Law sentenced a false prophet to death, and when God anticipated the people's question as to how to recognize such a false prophet, He referred to the predictive nature of prophecy by saying:

¹ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Greek Dictionary of the New Testament* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 62.

² BDAG, 1053.

³ George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 785.

⁴ BDAG, 864.

⁵ Wigram, 653.

⁶ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 621.

When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously (Deut. 18:22).

Peter exalts prophecy above his own eyewitness testimony when exhorting his readers to follow the Word, explaining that man could not have spoken by himself, but God must have spoken through the man for prophecy to be accurate (cf. II Pet. 1:19-21). Indeed, apologetics typically focuses on fulfilled prophecy, predictions that came to pass, in proving both Jesus as Savior, and the Bible as God's Word.⁷

However, comments like MacArthur's are common today when seeking to define prophecy.

Prophecy simply means "to speak forth, to proclaim." It assumes the speaker is before an audience, and could mean "to speak publicly." The connotation of prediction was added sometime in the Middle Ages. Although many of the prophets made predictions, that was not their basic ministry and the idea is not involved in the original terms used to describe them and their work.⁸

The significance of Deuteronomy chapter eighteen involves a prediction of the coming Messiah, and the need to listen to Him, as the Jews had listened to Moses. The test would be fulfilled predictions of the future, and this test applied to all the prophets, since the false ones were to be killed. The prophets' mission in the Old Testament was typically to call the nation to repentance, or to announce judgment. Not all messages from the prophets were predictive in nature, but every one of them did make predictive comments. Such predictions were necessary to authenticate their proper role as spokesmen for God, given the demands of Deuteronomy 18:22. Jesus, of course, predicted both his death and resurrection, authenticating the words He had

⁷ Henry M. Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs: Evidences for the Christian Faith* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 1996), 189-90, 196-98.

⁸ MacArthur, 303.

spoken to the people (cf. Matt. 16:21). Ryrie states, “technically a prophet was not only able to proclaim God’s message but he also was able to predict the future.”⁹

MacArthur defines prophecy as only “the Spirit-given and Spirit-empowered ability to proclaim the Word effectively.”¹⁰ This interpretation, so similar to the gift of teaching, fits MacArthur’s decision not to include prophecy among the gifts that ceased in the first century. Other cessationists, like Unger,¹¹ and Walvoord,¹² include this as one of their temporary gifts. MacArthur explains why they would do so.

The primary argument for those who maintain it was a temporary sign gift – that it was a revelatory gift only, and therefore ceased when revelation ceased – is based on 1 Corinthians 13:8, where the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge all are referred to together as ceasing.¹³

Though MacArthur is a cessationist, he rejects the interpretation of the canon for the perfect in First Corinthians 13:10. Those like Unger and Walvoord who insist on using this text for cessationism, must then insist on this gift ceasing as well.

In defining prophecy differently than the common Biblical usage, which involves the predictive element, MacArthur can allow for its validity today in a non-charismatic sense. Romans twelve, and First Corinthians twelve, contain the two lists of spiritual gifts. Cessationists typically allow for the gifts found in Romans, such as teaching, leading, giving, while eliminating some or all of the ones from Corinthians. All of MacArthur’s temporary gifts come from Corinthians, none from Romans.¹⁴ The problem is that prophecy, the same Greek word, *προφητεία*, occurs in both lists. Therefore, it is a serious challenge to adequately explain to

⁹ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 429.

¹⁰ MacArthur, 303.

¹¹ Unger, 141.

¹² Walvoord, 177.

¹³ MacArthur, 303.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

another Christian why spiritual gifts like those found in Romans are important, but the ones in Corinthians are no longer needed, given that prophecy is in both lists.

The definition of prophecy as a spiritual gift is a message from God containing a predictive element. As with the two earlier gifts discussed, receiving a prophecy can be an isolated event. The Greek noun is singular. The predictive element is important to the definition for two reasons. The first is that it remains the most faithful to both the Greek word, and consistent Biblical usage. The second is that it differentiates this gift from the previous two mentioned, knowledge and wisdom, which also are messages from God. The Scriptures differentiate these gifts in Corinthians, so all definitions must have some distinction between them.

Two examples from Acts, both involving Agabus, demonstrate this gift within the current dispensation. The first reads:

And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30).

No less than six details are of note here. (1) The man is called a prophet, making his statement a prophecy. (2) This was a prediction of the future. (3) The prophecy came true. (4) The Holy Spirit is given the credit for making the prophecy through the human vessel, Agabus. (5) The prophecy moved the Christians to act in a way that was beneficial to some in the church. (6) The prophecy had nothing to do with any Biblical doctrine later included within the New Testament canon.

The second appearance of Agabus occurred in Caesarea, at the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey.

And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his *own* hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:10-14).

Once more, all six elements again appear. A man the Scripture calls a prophet gives a predictive message. He declares the prophecy is from the Holy Spirit, and the prophecy comes to pass, for Paul was literally bound in Jerusalem later in the chapter (cf. Acts 21:33). The prophecy moved the Christians hearing it to action, as they all, including Luke, tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Finally, this prophecy also had no relevance to New Testament doctrine. Those who insist on making prophecy only involve the teaching of Scripture are refuted by these two examples. As with the other gifts, the completed canon would be irrelevant in the above two situations, if it already existed. If God, in the first century, cared enough about a pending famine to warn of it ahead of time, so that provisions for survival might be made, it is logical to assume He has the same concern for His people during the following 1900 years. Acts mentions others who prophesied, such as the four daughters of Philip (cf. Acts 21:9). Like Agabus, there is no mention of these women being instrumental in the contribution towards New Testament revelation.

Chuck Smith illustrates how God uses the gift of prophecy for a church today, with the following example. After seventeen years of fruitless ministry, he had just resigned from his current pastorate to become pastor of the original Calvary Chapel. Before arriving he was told

they had decided to disband, rather than keep going, but since he had already resigned, he came anyway.

The day after I arrived we were in a prayer group, hands were laid on me, and a prophecy was given that seemed more dream than reality. The Lord said he was going to make me a shepherd of many flocks. At the time it seemed preposterous. Unknown to me, the church had also received a prophecy that God was going to bless the church so greatly that the little building it was meeting in would not be sufficient to hold all the people who were going to come. The church was to remodel its current building, then later move to a facility on the bluff overlooking the bay. Eventually the church would have a nationwide radio ministry, and would become known around the world. To a group of twelve people who were so discouraged they were ready to quit, the message sounded impossible.¹⁵

Since Smith did not know the details of the latter prophecy, the church became quite excited when he suggested how they should remodel the facility after his first Sunday service there.¹⁶

Only when they had outgrown their facility, another fulfillment, and Smith suggested they purchase elsewhere, was he then informed of the earlier prophecy. The members were certain the new building had to overlook the bay, and the property Smith wanted did not. Despite the protests of the members aware of the prophecy, he insisted they proceed anyway. Having sold the old building, their conditional use permit for the new spot was then denied by the city.

Smith continues:

When we dejectedly returned to the planning department to retrieve our plans, a lady who worked there said, “You know, maybe you could move to our church. We’re going to be building a new facility and you could probably get our old one. It’s the Newport Harbor Lutheran Church on the bluff overlooking the bay.”

Even I could sense the Lord’s leading on this one!¹⁷

Eventually, they began a radio ministry. Multiple new churches arose from the original Calvary Chapel, as Smith indeed became “a shepherd of many flocks.” Every detail of what were two different prophecies came to pass.

¹⁵ Smith, *Living Water*, 155.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 156.

This example is quite specific in detail. Bible prophecies are always specific, and thus a true prophecy from God should not be as vague as a horoscope reading. Its fulfillment was complete, in all detail. Smith and the church did not fulfill it deliberately, nor could one argue its fulfillment happened due to a subliminal suggestion. It was directed to a local church, for a specific situation. Finally, it fits the explanation from Paul in First Corinthians 14:3 as to the purpose of prophecy, which is “to speak edification and exhortation and comfort to men.”