

The Biblical Basis for a Modern Prophet

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The prophetic gift rests upon the fundamental need for communication to take place between the Deity and the fallen family of humankind. The occult and the category of false prophets are two systems which have functioned throughout human history to deceive and to mislead the ignorant and the unwary away from genuine communications from God. On the other hand, God's communications systems—basically the prophetic gift—is delineated clearly in the Scriptures (Num 12:6; Amos 3:7; Luke 1:70).

Four words (three Hebrew, one Greek) are used in the Scriptures to refer to the human instrument in this form of communication. *Ro'eh* (1 Sam 9:9; Isa 30:10) and the more common *chozeh* (2 Sam 24:11; Amos 7:12; 2 Kgs 17:13, et cetera) both relate to the concept of "sight" and are commonly translated "seer." The idea seems to be that God opens to the "eyes"—that is, to the understanding of the prophet—whatever information or messages He may wish to have transmitted to His people. The terms therefore emphasize the reception of a divine message by the prophet.

The meaning of the later and more commonly used word, *nâbi'* (1 Sam 9:9) and its Greek equivalent, *prophetes*, is best seen in the following usage:

And the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made thee *a god to Pharaoh*: and Aaron thy brother shall be *thy prophet* [*nâbi'*]. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh. (Exod 7:1, 2)

And thou shalt speak unto him [Aaron], and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be thy *spokesman* unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of *a mouth*, and thou shalt be to him instead of God. (Exod 4:15, 16)

It is evident from these statements in which Moses and Aaron were to role-play as God and prophet respectively that the prophet (*nâbi'*) was viewed as a divinely appointed spokesman for God. The LXX (Septuagint) term for *nâbi'* in this instance is *prophetes*, the term which appears in the NT and from which our English word *prophet* is derived.

Prophetes is a compound word composed of the preposition *pro* which carries the nuance of "before"—or "for" in this instance—and the verb *phemi*, "to speak." Thus, in a general sense, the "prophet" is a spokesman for another. But in the biblical setting, a true prophet is a spokesman or interpreter of God, that is, he is a divinely inspired revealer, interpreter, or spokesman for the Deity. So the terms *nâbi'*

prophetes emphasize the transmission aspect of the prophet's role. The four words together depict a unique office or function: A prophet is one who receives communications from God and transmits their intent to His people.

As may be expected, *speaking for God* can shade off into *preaching for God*. Consequently, there are those who hold that in the NT the gift relates at times simply to expository preaching (Lenski, p. 760, on Rom 12:6). Some see it as a "gift of inspired preaching" (*International Critical Commentary* [ICC] on 1 Cor 13:2, p. 287), or "preaching the word with power" (ICC on 1 Cor 12:10, p. 266). However, from the context of 1 Corinthians 12—14 it is evident that although active "prophesying" may at times take the *form* of effective preaching (1 Cor 14:3), it was preaching based on divine revelation (1 Cor 14:30) and not upon the simple illumination of the Scriptures by the Spirit which may occur to any minister who speaks for God.

The NT maintains a difference between the simple ministry of the Word and the prophetic ministry, between the "teacher" and the "prophet" (Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28). The preaching of Barnabas and Paul on the themes of salvation doubtless sounded much alike. But whereas one spoke by the authority of the written Word, the other spoke with the added authority of divine revelation (Gal 1:11, 12).

While some authorities hold that "prophesying" (*propheteuo*) in the NT refers at times to preaching, it is conceded that a category of persons who received and communicated direct and special revelations from God did function in the New Testament as prophets (Luke 1:25-38; Acts 11:27, 28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:9). What was their function?

The Role of the Prophetic Gift in the NT

In the basic New Testament lists of spiritual gifts the "prophetic gift" is listed as second—between that of *apostles* (first) and that of *teachers* (third). See 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11. The gift did not usurp the role of the apostles, but its function affected the apostles at times as well as the church membership in general. Some of the apostles were themselves endowed with this gift. The activities of persons so endowed in NT times may be summarized as follows:

1. *They were commissioned at times to forewarn of coming difficulties* (Acts 11:27-30; 20:23; 21:10-14). In the first instance (Acts 11) the warning of coming famine resulted in a brotherly bonding of the Gentile Christians in Antioch with the Jewish Christians in Judea. The former, contrary to ethnic customs, willingly sent relief to their Jewish brothers in Christ.

2. *Through the gift the foreign mission outreach of the church was initiated* (Acts 13:1, 2). It also had a part in directing where the early missionaries were to labor (Acts 16:6-10). In Paul's second missionary tour it is noted that he was accompanied by Silas, a prophet (Acts 16:40).

3. *In a doctrinal crisis the gift functioned to encourage and to confirm the membership in the true doctrine.* The crisis pertained to the relationship of the Jewish ritual to the salvation of Gentile Christians. A large church council made a decision

in harmony with the Spirit's directive (Acts 15), although the decision was not inwardly accepted by all. The controversy had broken out in Antioch to which church the decision of the council was related by letter. Judas and Silas ministered for a time to this group: "And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, *exhorted* [*parakaleo*, appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage] the brethren with many words and *strengthened* [confirmed, KJV; *episterizo*, strengthen] them" (Acts 15:32, RSV).

4. *The prophets built up, encouraged, and consoled the church.* "He who prophesies speaks to men for their *upbuilding*, (*oikodome*, metaphorically, 'building up the spiritual life') and *encouragement* [*paraklesis*, encouragement, exhortation] and *consolation* [*paramuthia*, encouragement, comfort, consolation]" (1 Cor 14:3, RSV).

5. *The prophets tended (along with the other gifts) to unify the church in the true faith and to protect it from false doctrines.* "And his gifts were . . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith . . . so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Eph 4:11-15, RSV).

6. *The prophets along with the apostles assisted in founding the church.* "You are . . . built upon the foundation of the *apostles and prophets*, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20, RSV; cf. 3:5; 4:11).

"The couplet 'apostles and prophets' may bring together the Old Testament (prophets) and New Testament (apostles) as the basis of the Church's teaching. But the inverted order of the words (not 'prophets and apostles' but 'apostles and prophets') suggests that probably New Testament prophets are meant. If so, their bracketing with the apostles as the Church's foundation is significant. The reference must again be to a small group of inspired teachers, associated with the apostles, who together bore witness to Christ and whose teaching was derived from revelation (Eph 3:5) and was foundational" (John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979], 107. For a similar viewpoint, see *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. R. Nicoll, ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint 1961], 3:299, 300).

The Continuance of the Prophetic Gift

As we have already noted, the NT does set forth a doctrine of "spiritual gifts," or *charismata*, "gifts of grace" (1 Cor 12; Eph 4). These endowments by the Holy Spirit upon individual members of the church are to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12, RSV). "As each has received a gift," he is to employ it in the service of the church and thus assist in forwarding its work in the earth (1 Pet 4:10, 11, RSV; cf. Rom 12:6, 7).

Since the gifts are to be continuously bestowed as the Spirit sees fit "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . ." (Eph 4:13, RSV), it is obvious that the gifts are intended to function until the church has completed its ministry and human probation has closed.

There is no evidence in Scripture that God ever intends to withdraw the prophetic gift or any of the other gifts this side of the Second Coming (cf. 1 Cor 13:8-12). There is, instead, the OT prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 which is repeated by Peter (Acts 2:16-21) foretelling an end-time outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a resultant activity of spiritual gifts. In that connection it is appropriate to note that false prophets will be active in the end-time as well (Mat 24:24).

The Bible Canon and Spiritual Gifts

The Holy Scriptures, composed of the Old and New Testaments, are themselves the product of the operation of the prophetic gift. Indirectly the Scriptures themselves indicate a closed canon of sacred writings. The limits and sections of the OT were already known and understood in Jesus' time. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus indirectly indicates its outer limits: Genesis to 2 Chronicles (the last book in the Hebrew Bible), and its three-part division in Luke 24:27, 44—the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the writings, the first of which was the Psalms.

Hebrews describes the unfolding revelation thus: "In many and various ways [literally, 'In many portions and in many 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 1:1, 2, RSV). Starting with Moses (fifteenth century B.C.) the revelations from God begin to be recorded; over the centuries other prophets record the messages entrusted to them as God saw fit to further the understanding of His people. Finally, God chose to make His ultimate revelation through His Son. Jesus Christ has given the human family the greatest revelation of God possible for man to receive (John 1:18). The *New Testament* is the inspired *apostolic* witness and interpretation of Jesus Christ and His teaching. His is an unrepeatable life and disclosure; theirs is an unrepeatable attestation to Him. See sketch:

Postcanonical prophetic gift

Jesus—Final revelation
NT = apostolic witness and
interpretation of Jesus

OT

Heb 1:1,2
U n f o l d i n g
revelation

Moses
Initial revelation

Since Christ's life on earth and the apostolic interpretation of it provide the ultimate revelation of God, no function of the prophetic gift (as one of the spiritual

gifts) subsequent to the NT can equal, supersede, or be an addition to its unique witness. But rather, all claims to the prophetic gift must be tested by the Scriptures (1 Thess 5:19-21; 1 John 4:1-3; Matt 7:15-20).

The postcanonical function of the prophetic gift whenever it shall appear will be similar to its function in the time of the apostles and will carry with it the authority of the Spirit who speaks to the church through it. The function may be summarized as follows:

A postcanonical manifestation of the prophetic gift—

1. Will point back to Holy Scripture as the basis of faith and practice.
2. Will illumine and clarify teachings already present in Scripture.
3. Will apply the principles of Scripture to the daily life.
4. May be a catalyst to direct the church to carry out its commission as charged in the Scriptures.
5. May assist in establishing the church.
6. May reprove, warn, instruct, encourage, build up, and unify the church in the truths of Scripture.
7. May function to protect the church from false doctrine and to establish believers in the true.

End-Time Manifestation of the Gift

Joel 2:28-32. Living in the “last times” (from the OT perspective, 1 Pet 1:20; Heb 1:2) the apostle Peter saw a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit with the endowment of tongues (Acts 2). However, Pentecost seems to have been only a partial fulfillment, for Jesus places the signs in the sun and moon mentioned by Joel as coming after the Dark Ages of persecution and nearer the advent of “the great and the terrible day of the Lord” (Joel 2:31). Furthermore, Joel specifically refers to a manifestation of the gift of prophecy. Thus a complete fulfillment of Joel’s ancient prediction would require an end-time manifestation of the prophetic gift.

Matthew 7:15-20; 24:24. Inasmuch as Jesus foretold the appearance of “false prophets” in the end-time, such a prediction is presumptive evidence of a true manifestation of the gift.

1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; et cetera. The New Testament doctrine of “spiritual gifts” (which includes the prophetic gift) has never been rescinded. If the past may give any indication of the future, we may note that the prophetic gift commonly functioned at periods of crisis or significance: Noah before the Flood; the major and minor prophets cluster around the critical periods of Israel’s history when Assyria, Babylon, and Persia threaten or affect Israel’s existence; John the Baptist before Christ’s advent, et cetera. It would be reasonable to expect therefore, some kind of prophetic manifestation prior to the close of human probation and the Second Advent, the consummation of the Plan of Salvation.

Revelation 12:17; 19:10. While our pioneers emphasized the prediction of Joel 2 in defense of a legitimate manifestation of the prophetic gift, they were not

unmindful of the implications of Revelation 12:17; 19:10. Writing in the *Review and Herald* of October 16, 1855, James White stated:

But let us look at Joel 2:32, and see where he locates the prophecy. “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord hath said, and in the remnant whom the Lord shall call.” It is the REMNANT that is to witness these things. It is the remnant (or last portion of the church) that keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (which is the spirit of prophecy, Revelation 19:10) most certainly, that is to share this deliverance. “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord” in the time of trouble such as never was, will share that deliverance. “Shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him . . . ?” Luke xvii, 1-8. This calling on the name of the Lord is also symbolized by the angel [Revelation 14:15] crying with a loud voice to Him that sat on the cloud, “Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

God has ever manifested His power to His children according to their necessities and their work. And can we for a moment suppose that God’s people will pass through the perils of the last days, and face the time of trouble such as never was, and He not manifest Himself to them through those gifts which He Himself has set in the Church? Nay, verily. God has by the prophet Joel promised to do great things for the REMNANT `before the great and the dreadful day of the Lord come.

1. The book of Revelation depicts two women: a pure woman clothed in light (Rev 12), and a fallen woman, designated “Babylon the great” (Rev 17). In a sense, both women symbolize the same entity: Christianity. Both have descendants (12:17; 17:5). Revelation 12 appears to be sketching the loyal followers of God and the course of their history; Revelation 17 symbolizes the development and course of Christian apostasy.

The pure woman hiding in the wilderness to escape persecution both by the dragon (12:17), and by the fallen woman (17:6), in essence, represents multiple loyal groups. These groups (while not necessarily doctrinally pure in every respect: compare the symbolized history of the church, Rev 2:3), maintained faith in God and loyalty to the Scriptures during the period of the Dark Ages. How then is the “remnant of her seed” (“the rest of her offspring,” RSV) to be identified: Is it to be understood as an end-time remainder of Christianity in general? Or, is it to be delimited to a specific group of Christians?

2. The book of Revelation appears to describe the truehearted followers of God in the end-time under two different classifications: (a) “the remnant of her seed which keep the commandments of God” (12:17), and (b) “my [God’s] people” who are in

Babylon (18:4). This would imply—in a technical sense—that the group designated in Revelation 12 as “the remnant” do not constitute all genuine Christians in general, but is being delimited here to a specific group by certain characterizations: they keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the remnant or last phase of God’s people spoken of in Revelation 12:17 will also preach God’s last message. That last message is described in Revelation 14:9-12 as the “third angel.” It is a specific message with definite points and involves the contents of the first two angels as well (see Rev 14:6-14). If those who compose the “remnant” of Revelation 12 are the propounders of the message of the third angel (Rev 14), then they would of necessity have to be a specific group of Christians, distinguished by the characteristics of that special message. Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have believed they were fulfilling the role of the third angel; hence, we have naturally seen our movement as also symbolized in 12:17.

3. “The testimony of Jesus” (12:17). The question here is whether this phrase denotes an end-time manifestation of the prophetic gift in the group delimited as “the remnant of her seed.”

The expression “testimony of Jesus” occurs six times in the book of Revelation (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4). The first problem which relates to the expression concerns translation. Two translations are grammatically possible:

a. The testimony (witness) *about/concerning* Jesus (objective genitive) = what Christians witness about Jesus; “who bear testimony to Jesus” (RSV).

b. The testimony (witness) *from/by* Jesus (subjective genitive) = messages from Jesus to the church.

The evidence from the use of this expression in the book of Revelation suggests that it should be understood as a subjective genitive (a testimony from or by Jesus), and that this testimony is given through prophetic revelation. A few exhibits:

a. Revelation 1:1, 2. “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants . . . and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.*”

In this context it is evident that “the Revelation of Jesus” designates a revelation *from* or *by* Jesus to John. John then bears record of this testimony/witness *from* Jesus. Both genitive expressions make the best sense in context as subjective genitives and agree with Christ’s closing words in the book: “*He which testifieth [witnesses] these things saith, Surely I come quickly*” (Rev 22:20).

Commenting on the same phrase in Revelation 19:10, James Moffat writes:

The testimony of Jesus is practically equivalent to Jesus testifying (xxii, 20). It is the self-revelation of Jesus (according to i, 1, due ultimately to God) which moves the Christian prophets. He forms at once the impulse and subject of their utterances. (*The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961 reprint], 5:465)

b. A comparison of Revelation 19:10 and 22:9 links the testimony from Jesus with the prophetic function:

19:10—“You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you” (RSV)
and

22:9—“You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you” (RSV)
and

19:10—“*your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus*” (RSV)

22:9—“*your brethren the prophets . . .*” (RSV)

c. Revelation 19:10 defines the testimony from Jesus as “the spirit of prophecy.” “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

Although James Moffat regards the sentence as a gloss, he analyzes its meaning from the implications of a subjective genitive.

“For the testimony or witness of (*i.e.*, borne by) Jesus is (*i.e.*, constitutes) the spirit of prophecy.” This . . . specifically defines the brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus as possessors of prophetic inspiration. (Ibid.)

4. The phrase “spirit of prophecy” may be understood in either of two senses:

a. It can refer to the *Holy Spirit* who indites or conveys the prophetic revelation. “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet 1:21). Such expressions as the “Spirit of grace,” the “Spirit of truth,” et cetera, designate the Spirit who conveys grace or who conveys truth. So the testimony from Jesus may be equated or linked with the Spirit’s function to inspire the prophet with a revelation from God (cf. 1:10). Such a revelation is, in effect, a testimony or witness from Jesus. This interpretation of the phrase is in keeping with 1 Peter 1:11 which notes that the OT prophets were inspired by “the Spirit of Christ” and thus bore a testimony from Him.

b. The phrase, “spirit of prophecy,” may also be understood as the *genius* or distinctive *essence* of prophecy. Jesus bearing witness is the very genius or soul of prophecy. James White phrased it this way: “The spirit, soul, and substance of prophecy, is the testimony of Jesus Christ. Or, the voice of the prophets relative to the plan and work of human redemption, is the voice of the Redeemer” (*Life Sketches* [1880 ed.], 335-36, cited in *SDA Encyclopedia*, art., “Spirit of Prophecy”).

5. In either case, the passage of 12:17 stresses that the remnant have (*are having*, present participle of *echo*) the prophetic testimony from Jesus. It is a *possession* which the remnant is described as having or holding onto as the dragon makes his final offensive against God’s end-time people. (See Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon* on the use of *marturia* [witness/testimony in Revelation].)

6. If the “testimony of Jesus” is indeed the witness of Jesus to His church through the prophetic channel, then the question is whether the characterization of 12:17 is stressing the remnant’s possession of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments or the possession of a postcanonical manifestation of spiritual gifts in the form of the prophetic gift. The former assertion seems too obvious a point for the prophetic writer to underscore; but a manifestation of the prophetic gift in an end-time setting would be significant.

This prophecy regarding the remnant’s possession of the prophetic testimony from Jesus may be compared with the many references to the Messiah in the Davidic Psalms. A reader in OT times would have related many—if not all—of the statements in these psalms to David. Later—after Christ’s life, atoning death, and resurrection—these statements are seen to have a greater and more perfect application to the Messiah, the Son of David. Just so, in the fulfillment of Revelation 12:17, together with the development of the movement of the third angel, we may now see what was not evident before that development: that the remnant’s possession of the “testimony of Jesus” involves the heartwarming truth that Christ has chosen to speak once more through the prophetic gift to His people as they face the myriad challenges of the end-time and the close of human probation.

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