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The Gift of Prophecy and Modern Revivals

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Claimants to modern revival blessings abound. Recent movements, often historical developments of earlier ones, indicate that new theologies of the Spirit continue to develop in modern evangelicalism. One such movement seeks to build upon recent exegetical studies regarding the gift of prophecy. These new revivalistic movements are increasingly building their practice upon the teaching of Dr. Wayne Grudem, a distinguished professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. In this article we shall consider Grudem's teaching with regard to the gift of prophecy, seeking to understand if his conclusions are faithful to the doctrine of the New Testament.

When Wayne Grudem published his doctoral thesis in 1982, he penned words that not only expressed a serious concern, but may well prove to be an accurate assessment of the future of the Third Wave prophetic movement,¹ especially that of John Wimber's Vineyard and the Kansas City Fellowship:

If we assume for a moment that this study is correct in seeing two types of NT prophecy, the one thought to have a divine authority of actual words, and the other only thought to have a [divine] authority of general content, it must still be admitted that such a distinction between types of authority is a fine one, and one which might easily be blurred or forgotten. It would eventually be very easy for more and more Christian prophets, whether for good or ill motives, to begin to claim not only that they had received "revelation" from God or Christ, but also that they spoke with a divine authority of actual words. This was in fact probably what happened, at least in Montanism, and probably in many other cases as well—a failure on the part of the church itself to distinguish between these two types of prophecy might have been the cause of a total loss of prophecy in the church.²

To many observers this distinction between the “two types of prophecy” not only is “a fine one,” but also one that indeed has become blurred. To be sure, Grudem has often cautioned contemporary prophets not to claim that they are speaking the very words of God but to preface their words with some sort of introduction that shows that they are not addressing people with the same authority as the Old Testament prophets did.³ But there is certainly validity to the criticism that those who claim to have a prophetic ministry do not appear to be making that clear disassociation.⁴ Further, those who are listening to their prophecies are not making that fine distinction but are tuning in to prophetic words with solemn attentiveness because they feel that God is sharing some fresh word with them. It is hard not to be sympathetic with those who fear that this is a very dangerous trend, because it is leading believers to become far more enamored with both the messengers and the messages of those who have a prophetically gifted ministry, than they are with the study and exposition of God’s written Word.⁵ Whether or not this will lead to another “Montanist” crisis in the church, remains to be seen. But as Grudem has pointed out, there is inherent in his “two types of NT prophecy” the possibility of that happening.⁶

Because this is a very real danger—and because Grudem’s position has enjoyed wide acceptance by many in the charismatic and third wave traditions, has been welcomed by John Wimber as the biblical undergirding of the prophetic aspect of the Vineyard movement,⁷ and has been convincing to some notable evangelical scholars, not the least of which is J.I. Packer—his reasoning and his exegesis of Scripture merit careful scrutiny.⁸ That is the purpose of this essay. As will be seen, there are a number of crucial points that seriously challenge the validity of Grudem’s conclusions. The object of this essay, however, is not to address one of the more popular aspects of his conclusions, that is, that there are genuine prophets today. That is another issue. It is, rather, to scruti-

nize the key thesis of Grudem’s position: Is there biblical warrant for making a substantial and notable distinction between Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets?

Grudem’s Argument

Briefly this is the essence of Grudem’s argument. The Old Testament prophets spoke God’s very words with absolute authority. But when a person asks, “Who are the individuals in the New Testament that correspond to these spokespersons for God?” he discovers that they are not the New Testament prophets, but the apostles. How so? The identification becomes apparent when consideration is made of the bottom line: the authority they exercised. When the apostles spoke, they spoke or wrote as those commissioned by Christ Himself, with absolute divine authority. However, a careful examination of the New Testament prophets reveals that their prophecies were of quite a different sort. Instead of that absolute-ness of authority, they exhibit marks of the “ordinary” and “usual” (p. 64). To be specific, the ordinariness of their prophecies can be seen in several ways. Their prophecies: (1) Had to be “sifted” to discern their “true elements” from their “false elements” (1 Cor. 14:29). (2) Could be intentionally neglected (1 Cor. 14:30). (3) Were distinguished from “words of God” (1 Cor. 14:36). (4) Were less authoritative than the apostles’ words (1 Cor. 14:37-39). (5) Contained mistakes (Acts 21:11,32-33), and (6) Were deliberately disobeyed (Acts 21:4-5,13-14).

In the light of these data, Grudem concluded that New Testament prophecy was “simply a very human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind” (p. 14). That is very different from what was the distinctive characteristic of the Old Testament prophet, who “did not speak his own words, or ‘words of his own heart,’ but words which God sent him to deliver” (p. 18).

Critique

It cannot be denied from this short summary that Grudem has marshaled some significant arguments for his conclusion about the ordinariness of New Testament prophecy. Each demands a thorough examination and evaluation. But first, one must ask if his definition of prophecy—as a “partially mistaken report,” and “an unreliable human act in response to a revelation from the Holy Spirit” (p. 95)—can even properly be called “prophecy.” The term “prophecy,” as it is used both in the Old Testament and New Testament, is a compound concept, consisting of two indispensable elements: (1) revelation, the divinely originated message, and (2) the communicating of that revelation.⁹ Though Grudem explicitly affirms the inseparability of these two elements,¹⁰ in practice he severs the two so that the meaning of “to prophesy” becomes merely the report.¹¹ Does this not foster a theological schizophrenia of the concept of prophecy, making it partly the Holy Spirit’s work and partly the human, and, therefore, fallible work of the instrument? Does what begins with the Holy Spirit giving revelation¹² then become interrupted somewhere through the process so that it ends with a flawed, human report? There is certainly no evidence in the Old Testament of the Holy Spirit moving a man to prophesy where that did not also insure that the prophet correctly related the revelation to his hearers or readers. Even Grudem admits this:

The possession of a revelation from God was what distinguished true from false prophecy in the Old Testament. A false prophet was one who spoke when the Lord had given him nothing to speak (Deut. 18:20), who spoke from his own mind (Ezek. 13:3; Jer. 23:16ff.), or who spoke by a lying spirit (1 Kings 22:23). But a true prophet was one to whom God had revealed His secret (Amos 3:7). The prophets ... claimed repeatedly that their very words were words which God had given them to deliver.¹³

Grudem would argue, then, that Old Testament prophetic utterances were so superintended by God’s Spirit—not unlike Scripture¹⁴—that the prophet was accurate in both his reception of God’s message (the revelation) and his subsequent delivery of it. In contrast, his definition of New Testament prophecy implies that the term “prophecy” has undergone such erosion by the time the Corinthian prophets speak that the Holy Spirit only reveals; He does not (or chooses not to) enable the prophet to either see and/or communicate it accurately.¹⁵ To use Grudem’s words, “the report of a ‘revelation’ can often be thought to have only *the authority of merely human words*.”¹⁶ Is this “prophecy”? Would the apostle Paul have made this distinction between his words and the words of New Testament prophets? Max Turner’s criticism of Grudem is right to the point:

We are inclined to question his distinction between apostolic prophecies, with divine authority extended to actual wording, and other prophecies for which divine authority is only one of general content. We feel this differentiation is artificial: all that Paul says is consistent with his believing he has very full “divine authority of general content” (i.e. what he says has a true propositional structure), but nowhere does he go beyond this to claim “divine authority of actual words”—which, anyway, is semantically barely significantly different from a claim to full authority of general content.¹⁷

Would Grudem be better to call his “report” an “exhortation” or “counsel” or “an inspiring message”? One can rightly wonder with many critics, such as Robert Thomas, “what good is a revelation, if it is distorted in transmission and has to be sifted by human judgment before it is useful?”¹⁸ The way Grudem defines the term, then, divests it of its Old Testament meaning, and, therefore, the burden of proof must rest on him to demonstrate that there is biblical warrant for abandoning the usual sense of the term.

It appears to this writer that Grudem, in coming to this conclusion, has also disregarded critical New Testament data which imply that there was no change in the meaning of the term, that is, that New Testament prophecy (like Old Testament prophecy) is not only revelation but also the divinely guided (protected) proclamation of that message. One key book in which this seems apparent is Acts. When the verb “prophecy” is used by the apostles in the early church for the first (recorded) time (Acts 2:17-18) and when it is used again later in the book (19:6) some twenty years later—and that after Paul had founded the church at Corinth and about the same time he wrote 1 Corinthians¹⁹ (the letter containing his instruction on spiritual gifts)—the meaning of the word had not changed. In both instances the term “does not have the sense ‘to report a revelation (word, vision, or dream) received’, but ‘to speak while under the influence of the Spirit.’”²⁰ Even the phrases “through the Spirit they urged” (v. 4)²¹ and “This is what the Holy Spirit says” (v. 11) in Acts 21—the text that Grudem relies so heavily on to show the fallibility of New Testament prophecy—imply a definition of prophesying that is speech directed by the Spirit of God and, therefore, fully authoritative.

Another textual support for this comprehensive view of New Testament prophecy is the use of the term in the book of Revelation, one of the last books to be written near the close of the apostolic age. Certainly it would bear accurate witness to how “prophecy” was used at the end of the first century. John’s Revelation begins with an affirmation of the authority of its prophecy: “Blessed is he who reads ... the words of this prophecy, and heeds the things which are written in it” (1:3; cf. 22:7).

It ends with claiming absolute authority: “If anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life”

(22:18-19).

Obviously, this claim of absolute authority is a problem for Grudem, because in this last book of the New Testament the writer asserts the same absoluteness of authority that the Old Testament prophets claimed, and, appearing as it does in Revelation, it shows how the term “prophecy” was still used in the New Testament some forty years after the writing of 1 Corinthians. But this does not persuade Grudem to modify his position. Instead, he both disputes Revelation’s applicability to the question and argues that “prophecy” in this last book of the New Testament is authoritative because it is apostolic prophecy, that is, it is prophecy which is absolutely authoritative only because it was written by one of the apostles (p. 43ff.). In this Grudem errs, because the claim for absolute authority in Revelation is not made by the writer because he was an apostle. Rather, even as the words quoted above show, the readers were urged to obey and warned to detract nothing from its message precisely because it was prophecy. Prophecy, because it is prophecy,²² commands authority.

Could it be that this continuity of meaning for the word “prophecy” is the reason that Grudem has had to soften his dichotomy of “two types” of prophecy to a dichotomy of “different levels” of authority (p. 63)? Perhaps criticism, such as Max Turner’s, had something to do with this change of terminology:

[Grudem’s] sharp distinction between apostolic and merely prophetic prophecy seems to be overdrawn. There was no sharp distinction between apostolic prophecy and prophets’ prophesyings—rather, a spectrum of authority of charisma extending from apostolic speech and prophecy (backed by apostolic commission) at the one extreme, to vague and barely profitable attempts at oracular speech such as brought ‘prophecy’ as a whole into question at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:19f.) at the other.²³

But Turner's proposal of a "spectrum of authority," illustrated by Figure 1,

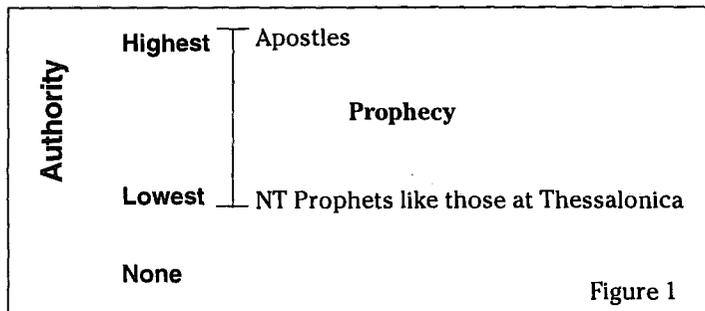


Figure 1

also seems contrary to the New Testament data. If in prophecy the Holy Spirit is speaking in and through his prophet(ess), then all prophecy has authority, because God is speaking. God does not speak with "less" or "more" authority. What He says demands both our attention and our obedience.

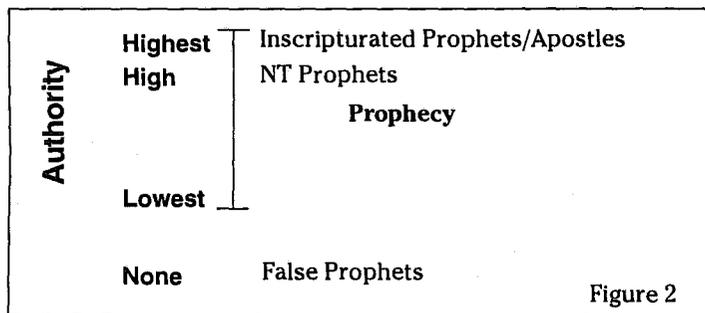


Figure 2

Figure 2 takes this into account. To the degree that a person claims to be a prophet or to be sharing a prophecy and is only sharing his own thoughts, he has ceased to be a prophet. He speaks either presumptuously or has been demonically prompted.²⁴ He is a false prophet. All true prophets command authority because the revelation they have received comes with the authority of its Author, God Himself. At first, placing inscripturated prophets and apostles in the chart slightly above New Testament prophets may appear to be a direct contradiction to what has just been said. But it reflects what

is the clear declaration and distinction of Scripture. In the Old Testament, God commissioned Moses as His authoritative spokesperson and then declared that what he taught (and wrote) would be the test of all true prophets: "If a prophet ... [says], 'Let us go after other gods ...' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet ... for the Lord your God is testing you. ... You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments" (Deut. 13:1-5).

The "commandments" that were to be "kept" were those given by God through Moses. Consequently, Moses' teaching was to be one indispensable criterion for testing all subsequent prophets. A prophecy that contradicted Moses demonstrated that the person giving it was a false prophet. But prophets, whose prophecies were in harmony with Moses and who also were authenticated by signs (Deut. 18:14-22), were to be obeyed and that with a fear of what might happen should they disregard God's message through them. Once tested and approved, then, all prophets commanded the same authority.²⁵

In a similar way, Christ commissioned the apostles²⁶ as His official representatives so that their teaching became the benchmark against which to measure all other New Testament prophecy. One sees this occurring not only throughout the New Testament era²⁷ but continuing on after that as well (p. 27). This also seems to be the meaning of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:37-38: "If any one thinks he is a prophet...let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized."

When Grudem concludes that Paul's asserting of his authority over the Corinthians here is "claiming for himself a divine authority of actual words ... [and] seems to be attributing to the Corinthian prophets something considerably less than that" (p. 86), he fails to take into account the role Jesus' apostles were given. Paul's words must not be construed as

suggesting that their prophecies were lower in authority. Instead, he was reminding them that he taught as Christ's designated spokesperson, and that, therefore, whoever deviated from what he said, was not recognized, despite his claim to be a "prophet."²⁸ Therefore, the one who deviated from Paul was not an inferior, error-prone prophet (as Grudem suggests); he was not a prophet at all. He was a false prophet. He had failed the test.

In light of this, would it not be better to speak of the differences between the apostles and the New Testament prophets in terms of "respect," not authority? Those who respected Christ, respected His spokespersons and submitted to them. Further, when a person claimed to be prophesying and his prophecies were repeatedly authenticated—by being accurate and by being in harmony with the teaching of the apostles—he continued to gain more respect among his fellow Christians and a reputation for being a mouthpiece for God. This is an important distinction: A growing reputation does not make one's words intrinsically more authoritative. But people do view such a person and his message with a greater seriousness and regard.

Further, if it is true, as seems apparent, that New Testament prophets were usually associated with local fellowships (p. 63f.) or a local geographical area (e.g., Corinth and Thessalonica),²⁹ then, it would only be expected that they would have more limited respect than an apostle who was known and respected by the whole church.

If the model in Figure 2 is correct, then it gives insight into and makes clear what Paul was seeking to communicate to the Corinthians when he listed the spiritual gifts in the order of their importance: "God has placed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers." Since both apostles and prophets were God's channels to communicate His truth authoritatively to man, they rank before teachers, who do not reveal additional new truth, but take the authoritative truth,

given by the apostles and prophets, and clarify and illustrate it.³⁰ In a similar vein in the Ephesian letter, Paul writes that Christians "are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:19-20). These two "foundation" gifts were those which furnished the first-century church with absolute truth, upon which the whole household of God has been built.³¹

Thus far in this essay the spotlight has been focused on demonstrating that there seems to be little New Testament warrant for Grudem's proposed change from the Old Testament definition of the term "prophecy." That, however, does not in itself definitively invalidate his conclusions. One must also evaluate his illustrations of flawed or "ordinary" New Testament prophecy to see if his interpretations of applicable Scripture are exegetically and logically sustained.

1) New Testament prophecy had to be "sifted" to discern its "true elements." The worship gatherings that Paul described at Corinth were ones where many participated, using the various gifts God had given them. Among those participating were prophets. Paul writes: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment" (1 Cor. 14:29). This judging, Grudem argues, was to be done by the whole congregation, and it involved their "evaluat[ing] each statement, distinguishing ... [the] good from the less good ... [the] helpful from the less helpful ... [the] true from the false" (p. 76 f.). Key to his understanding is that he sees this evaluation standing in contrast to the judging of Old Testament prophets. What Paul calls for, he says, is a "sifting" of their prophecies to discern what is true and good. In Old Testament times, however, the prophets' prophecies were not sifted; the prophets themselves were the objects of the judging, to determine if they were to be recognized as from God or rejected as imposters or presumptuous (p. 78).

Probably the critic cannot be dogmatic about whether the "others" in 1 Corinthians refer to other prophets or to the rest

of the worshippers.³² And it really is inconsequential to the meaning of the verse. But one will take exception to Grudem's artificial distinction between the judging of Old Testament prophets and the judging Paul urges to be practiced among the Corinthian prophets. Grudem's argument rests entirely on the meaning of the word *diakrino*, which he says means "weighing, sorting out" (p. 76). In contrast, he says, *krino* is used of judgments that usually have only two alternatives, "such as 'guilty' or 'not guilty', 'right' or 'wrong', or 'true' or 'false'" (p. 77). But directly across the page he contradicts himself, showing that *diakrino* is used in the same way: *diakrino* ... is used...of distinguishing clean from unclean animals ... , or separating persons who are guilty from the rest of the crowd.... It is used of distinguishing good from evil."

Grudem's inferences from this word, then, are an example of reading one's own conclusions into the data. Certainly the most dependable basis for understanding what Paul meant by *diakrino* is to see how he has used the word previously in the context of 1 Corinthians 12-14, his treatise on spiritual gifts. That being the case, the use in 1 Corinthians 12:10 is determinative. Like there, where the discerning is between the Spirit of God and "other sources of ecstatic phenomena,"³³ so here the discerning is between true and false prophets. Surely, no one would conclude that the discerning in 12:10 was a sifting of the words of a person speaking by the Spirit (or some other spirit) so that he could keep what was good or bad, helpful or unhelpful! Discernment there and here has to do with the source: is it of God, or is it not?³⁴ Robert Saucy is right to the point when he writes in his review of Grudem's book: "The question must be asked ... whether the instruction to judge what a prophet is saying is really different from judging between a true prophecy and one that is false, and finally from judging between true and false prophets."³⁵

A better sense of what Paul intended to communicate, then, is that either the prophets or the congregation had the

responsibility to listen to the words of the prophet and judge—as the people in the Old Testament also were instructed to do—whether what was being said was consistent with the teachings of the apostles. Because prophets truly prompted by the Holy Spirit would never contradict what was previously established as truth, the discerning listener could detect whether a true or false prophet was speaking.

2) New Testament prophecy could be intentionally neglected (1 Cor. 14:30). Grudem interprets Paul's words, "But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent," to mean that the prophet who had been speaking was to stop and did not get a chance to finish his prophecy, and, as a result, the church lost some of God's words (pp. 79-80). If New Testament prophecy was the very words of God, he argues, Paul would not have counseled the Corinthians to stop a prophecy in progress. To do so would be to "intentionally neglect" the remainder of the prophecy, and thereby show its relative unimportance. But one could also look at it another way. Since the Spirit is sovereign over all prophecy, He could not only prompt one prophet to stand up to speak, but also preempt another from speaking further, because He had nothing further for that prophet to say! Obviously, then, no prophecy would be lost.

Probably a better explanation is that the prophet that had been speaking was not to bring his prophecy to a close immediately, but as soon as he was finished, so that others could share what God was prompting them to say. Indeed, that is what the context is arguing: that prophets could control their utterances and thus share their prophecies in an orderly manner (vv. 31-33).³⁶

Turner offers another very plausible explanation: "This makes most sense if what the first stops is not the declaration of his revelation as such, but his exposition or elucidation thereof."³⁷

3) New Testament prophets uttered no "words of God" (1

Cor. 14:36). "Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?" In his exegesis of these words, Grudem sets out on an exegetical venture uniquely his own, and one cannot help wondering if his interpretation was not made to fit his thesis.³⁸ Very simply, it is his understanding that Paul, with one sentence, was reducing the prophets of Corinth to a lower level of authority by saying that they uttered no words of God, that is, none with "absolute divine authority" (p. 83f.).

A less biased reader—even if he accepted Grudem's understanding of the expression "Word of God"—might conclude not only that the prophets at Corinth did not speak with absolute authority, but go further and surmise that their prophetic utterances had no divine touch on them at all. Since "God's Word had not gone forth," their so-called "prophecies" were merely human declarations. Where Grudem goes wrong is in his understanding of the term "Word of God." Paul does not use that expression for words of revelation, that is, prophetic utterances, but for God's message, the Gospel which he and others preached.³⁹ What he is rhetorically asking the Corinthian church, then, is why they have such an independent spirit. Did the Christian message get its start with them? Obviously, it didn't. It was Paul who had founded the church there. Further, since they had not originated the Gospel, but had received it, did they think that they were the only ones who had received it? Again, no. That being the case, they should stop acting in their own individualistic way and conform to the rules followed by all the other churches (14:33).

4) New Testament prophecies contained mistakes (Acts 21). The charge of inaccuracies in Agabus' prophecy recorded in Acts 21 is the centerpiece of Grudem's argument. The mistakes that Grudem alludes to can be easily seen when the prediction and its fulfillment are placed side-by-side:

Acts 21:11

[Agabus] took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Acts 21:32-33

[When] they saw the commander and the soldiers, they [the Jews] stopped beating Paul.... The commander ... took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

The "discrepancies" now stand out: (1) The Jews didn't bind Paul; the Romans did. (2) Rather than the Jews delivering Paul into the Romans' hands, the Romans rescued Paul from the Jews. Grudem's conclusion (quoting Don Carson): "I can think of no reported Old Testament prophet whose prophecies are so wrong on the details" (p. 98). To him, then, this demonstrates that New Testament prophecy, unlike Old Testament prophecy, can be correct in its "general idea" (Agabus rightly saw that imprisonment awaited Paul) but err in its details (p. 99).

But are such conclusions justified? Maybe a more appropriate question should be asked: Would Paul have considered Agabus' prophecy to have been fulfilled? The answer is an emphatic "Yes!" Several years after the incident took place in Jerusalem and while he was a prisoner in Rome, Paul rehearsed what happened to some key Jewish leaders who came to visit him. His account corresponds, even in the details, to what Agabus predicted. This is Luke's record of the occasion: "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people... yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans" (Acts 28:17). This satisfies not only the details of Agabus' prophecy

Acts 21:11

"will bind the man"
"the Jews will bind the man"

Acts 28:17

"I was delivered prisoner"
"delivered"

[antecedent is "our people," the Jews]

but is an almost verbatim reproducing of the very terminology he used:⁴⁰

Acts 21:11: desousin en 'ierousalem 'oi ioudaioi kai paradoosousin eis cheiros ethnoon

Acts 28:17: desmios ex 'ierosolumoon paredoothern eis tas cheiras toon 'roomaioon

There seems to be no question in Luke's (or Paul's) mind that what Agabus predicted was fulfilled.

Far too often twentieth-century precision is demanded of prophecies and fulfillments, something that was not a concern of biblical writers. A good example of this, also in Luke's history (Acts 2:23), is Peter's declaration that Jesus was crucified by the Jews, though to be precise, He was crucified by the Romans. But Peter is not at all inaccurate. The Jews orchestrated the whole affair. The same was the case in Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. A careful reading of the context of Paul's arrest (Acts 21:27-31) clearly shows that it was the Jews' mob action that precipitated the commander's intervention, so that it is accurate to say that the Jews were the immediate cause of Paul's being delivered into the hands of the Gentiles.

A bit more difficult, however, is Grudem's next example of the "ordinariness" of New Testament prophecy:

5) New Testament prophecy was deliberately disobeyed (Acts 21:4-5, 13-14).

What follows shows the nature of the problem:

And they ... kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.... And we departed and started on our journey.... Paul answered, ... "I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem...." And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem, that despite the danger that assuredly awaited him there. Grudem's concern, however, grows out of the fact that the words "through the

Spirit" do appear to mark out this utterance as a prophecy (p. 93f.). The issue is further complicated because there are in previous chapters of Acts repeated references to Paul being led by the same Spirit to go to Jerusalem: "Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem" (19:21). "And now ... bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me" (20:22-23).

Because of this, Grudem asks: Does Paul's persistence in going to Jerusalem in direct disregard to these prophets not show that New Testament prophecy was less authoritative than Old Testament prophecy which did demand obedience?

Thomas' rebuttal to Grudem's conclusion by condemning him of accusing not only Agabus but also the Holy Spirit of error⁴¹ is not facing the issue. Grudem could rightly counter by saying that Thomas missed his point. It is not the Holy Spirit who makes contradictory statements, but the fallible New Testament prophets who misunderstood what He had to say. A far better explanation is to say with Bruce,⁴² Marshall,⁴³ and Stott that implicit in the words of Acts 21:4 is this distinction: The warning that the disciples gave to Paul not to go was a response on their part out of concern for Paul's well-being. The prophecy itself, however, contained only the element of Paul's being bound, as Agabus' prophecy explicitly stated. Stott catches the thought well:

The better solution is to draw a distinction between a prediction and a prohibition. Certainly Agabus only predicted that Paul would be bound... ; the pleadings with Paul which followed are not attributed to the Spirit and may have been fallible ... human deduction from the Spirit's prophecy.⁴⁴

Since Acts 21:4 does not reveal the precise content of the prophecy, Grudem should not put too much weight on this text to argue his case. Likewise, those who have not been

persuaded by him, should not dismiss the difficulty this text presents.

In light of the analysis above, this writer concurs with Robert Saucy in concluding that "at this point we have seen nothing sufficient to overturn the traditional understanding of all genuine prophecy as speech directly inspired by the Spirit of God and therefore fully authoritative."⁴⁵ Grudem, respectable scholar that he is, has not provided an exegetically convincing case.

If the conclusion reached by this essay is valid and convincing, it will give considerable insight into how one is to understand and evaluate present day prophecies which are contaminated with mistakes: Such prophecies must be governed by the same rules for the authentication of an Old Testament prophet, namely, that, if an error is made by the supposed prophet, by that very mistake he has shown himself to be a false prophet (pp. 21-22).

As Grudem brings his book to a close (pp. 266 f.), he speaks of the great value his sense of New Testament prophecy would bring to the church today:

It would add a rich new measure of vitality in worship, a sense of awe that comes from seeing God at work at this very moment and in this very place, the overwhelming senses of wonder that cause us to exclaim, "Truly God is in this place."

Grudem has quoted Paul who noted that the prophecy of his day had precisely that impact (1 Cor. 14:24-25). Unfortunately, few examples of such prophecy have been recorded in the Bible, Agabus' being one exception, so it is difficult to see just what sort of impact occurred. Perhaps the experiences of those unbelievers who happened to enter the assemblies of first-century Christians were similar to what the woman of Samaria felt when the Lord told her she had had five husbands and that the one she was presently cohabiting with was not

her husband: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (John 4:16-19). But one can only seriously wonder if the flawed, human reports that Grudem champions; if the prophecies that must be sifted to discern the good and true; if the sort of prophetic guidance that is only 10 percent effective (p. 246) would have that sort of effect, either in the church of the New Testament or in today's.⁴⁶ Unquestionably, if the prophecy that Paul was speaking of in 1 Corinthians 14 was of the Old Testament sort, it would have that effect.

This writer agrees with the sentiment of Harry Buis, who in his review of Grudem's book, wrote: "If the gift of prophecy is what Grudem claims it is, we should not be very interested in it, but should focus on encouraging expository preaching with careful application to modern life."⁴⁷

Endnotes

- 1 Those who claim to be part of the Third Wave movement speak of the other two great movings of the Holy Spirit as the Pentecostal Movement (the turn of the century) and the Charismatic Movement (the 1960s). The Third Wave is not only the most recent moving of the Holy Spirit (of the 1980s and 90s), but with new distinctives. While the charismatic movement emphasized the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which was usually associated with speaking in tongues, the Third Wave emphasizes the Spirit's mighty works of healings and prophecy.
- 2 Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in I Corinthians*, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 111f.
- 3 In his popular treatment of the subject, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Grudem urges gifted individuals not to preface their messages with "Thus says the Lord," words reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets, but with something like "I think the Lord is saying" (p. 260).
- 4 See Michael G. Maudlin, "Seers in the Heartland," *Christian-*

ity Today (January 14, 1991), 18ff. Is not the respect given to Paul Cain, for example, an illustration of this very thing? Not only does he make statements that command authority, but even John Wimber and Mike Bickle, "when they talk about what prophecy should look like, how it should operate, and what kind of integrity a prophet should possess ... point to Cain. 'He is a ten on a scale of ten,' Wimber tells me" (18).

- 5 At a meeting where John Wimber invited one of his prophets to speak and this writer was present, there was an obvious note of expectancy and seriousness. As the young man asked certain members of the class to stand and then proceeded to tell them about their futures, he was listened to with the respect of one who was speaking as God's representative.
- 6 This writer is aware that Grudem in his popular treatment of prophecy (63f.) no longer speaks of two types of New Testament prophecy. But the change in terminology is more technical than substantial. He still acknowledges that there are two kinds of prophets: (1) the Old Testament prophets (which would include Jesus' apostles) and (2) New Testament prophets, of which the prophets at Corinth would be the notable examples.
- 7 An article written by Grudem explaining his position, "What Should Be the Relationship Between Prophet and Pastor?" was published in Wimber's magazine *Equipping the Saints*, 3:4 (Fall 1989), 7ff. In that same issue Wimber shares how Grudem's book influenced him (p. 6).
- 8 This critique will concentrate on Grudem's second and more popular book on prophecy, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988). Unless indicated otherwise, all references will be to this book, and the specific pages referred to will appear in the text in parentheses.
- 9 Turner, "Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," *Vox Evangelica*, xv

(1985), 10.

- 10 See pp. 135-40, especially p.140: "The reception of a 'revelation' alone would not constitute a man a prophet. Only where the revelation is also proclaimed to others ... is a prophecy said to occur."
- 11 One can only wonder about this from his definition. But there are times that this comes out even in his written statements. For example, cf. p.100: "Agabus had a 'revelation' ... And gave a prophecy...." And p. 132: "The revelation received by the prophet and the resulting prophecy. ..." The rest of this essay seeks to support this charge.
- 12 Grudem's theory of revelation that permits a flawed product is peculiar, especially given his stand on the inspiration and absolute authority of Scripture. (Compare Robert L. Thomas, 86, note 30.) The approach taken in this essay is to assume that revelation is the "unveiling of something hidden, so that it may be seen and known for what it is.... The revelation vocabulary in both Testaments is a wide one, covering the ideas of making obscure things clear, bringing hidden things to light, showing signs, speaking words and causing the persons addressed to see, hear, perceive, understand and know" (J. I. Packer, "Revelation," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, III: 1234. Compare also E. De Witt Burton, *Galatians*, 433ff., especially the bottom of p. 434). Revelation not only results in man knowing, but understanding what God intended in these deeds or words. The whole issue of a revelation that is existential (e.g., Barth, Bultmann, Brunner) and not also able to be expressed correctly in words, which are then God's revelation to others, is far too extensive for this essay. For more on this see Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, II, and III. 248ff.; B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 71ff.; and Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 19ff.
- 13 Grudem, p. 138 and p. 18, respectively.

- 14 Like Scripture, the prophet's words were sometimes a verbatim repetition of God's words (e.g., the Decalogue). At other times what the prophet said was God's message, accurately conveyed (2 Peter 1:19-21), through the personality, vocabulary and style of His selected messenger.
- 15 Grudem emphasizes the imperfection of prophecy by appealing to 1 Corinthians 13:9, 12, where Paul says that prophecy is "in part" and, using the imagery of a mirror, it is what is "dimly" seen. He writes:

The expression "dimly, in a puzzling way" indicates that what the prophet sees or learns, or the implication of what is "revealed", are often difficult to understand.... It is the way in which a mirror limits one's vision which Paul emphasizes.... The phrase "in part" refers primarily to a quantitative imperfection in prophecy (p. 122).

While what Grudem says is correct, this text provides no support to his argument that New Testament prophets have less authority than the apostles. As Max Turner put it, "Paul does not say that all New Testament prophets see through a glass darkly while apostles see clearly; the apostle's prophecy, too, is *ek merous* and *en anigmati*" (Turner, 16). The whole flow of 1 Corinthians 13:9ff. is not that the prophecy that is shared is flawed—of a mixed sort—but that it is incomplete and that a full knowledge will be gained at a later time. There can be agreement with the words "partial" and "limited in perspective," but "prone to go wrong ..." is not a valid exegetical conclusion.

- 16 82, my emphasis in italics.
- 17 Max Turner, review of Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, by Wayne Grudem, in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 58 (1986), 368.
- 18 Thomas, 86, note 30.
- 19 Chronology based on William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul, the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 395.

- 20 Turner, *Vox Evangelica*, 11.
- 21 All Scripture is from the NASB.
- 22 Turner, *Vox Evangelica*, 16. See also Glenn N. Davies, review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, by Wayne Grudem, in *The Reformed Theological Review* (January-April 1990), 31.
- 23 Turner, *Vox Evangelica*, 16. See also Thomas, 90, note 51.
- 24 So Assembly of God scholar Donald Gee, *Spiritual Gifts in the Work of the Ministry Today*, 48f.
- 25 Even Moses had to be authenticated by God both to the Israelites and to Pharaoh. But once authenticated, he was recognized as God's mouthpiece.
- 26 E.g., Luke 11:49; John 14:26; 16:13-14; 20:21.
- 27 E.g., Galatians 1:8-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:8; 2 Peter 3:2.
- 28 So A. Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 327; David Prior, *The Message of Corinthians*, 253.
- 29 So Thomas, 94.
- 30 Of course, if Grudem is correct in identifying prophecy as a flawed human report, then one can understand how he can say teaching is more authoritative than prophecy (p. 144ff.). But if teaching is more authoritative, it is extremely difficult to see how he then can call prophecy more "beneficial."
- 31 Grudem does spend sometime arguing that this verse is an illustration of the Grandville Sharp rule and as such should be translated "the apostle-prophets," and he argues just the opposite of this author's position. But even he admits (in his published dissertation, p. 97) that the construction "does not imply that Eph 2:20 must mean 'the apostles who are also prophets.'" In a private conversation with him, he said he would probably not have emphasized this as much if he had it to do over again. That is wise, because the distinction is rather artificial, especially in light of Ephesians

- 4:11, where the gift of prophecy is obviously different from apostleship. Would Paul have used the word differently in the same book without some explanation in the context? Would he have used the word differently in 1 Corinthians? Grudem's argument is unconvincing.
- 32 One can line up competent scholars on both sides: Grosheide (338); Robertson and Plummer (322); H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (245); G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VI, 855; David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (133) all interpret *alloi* "other prophets." Gordon Fee (694); Don Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (120f); C. K. Barrett, *1 Corinthians* (328), line up on the other side. Far too often those who argue against the meaning of "other prophets" put too much weight on 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and 1 John 4:1 where the meaning does seem to be all Christians. The tendentious requirement that Paul should have used *loipoi* instead of *alloi*, if he intended the prophets, is pushing for a precision that Greek usage neither demands nor evidences. (One might argue similarly that instead of *alloi* Paul should have used *heteroi* "others not like the prophets"). Probably the best reason for concluding that the reference is to other prophets is that Paul uses the same word *allo* in the following verse, where it can refer to nothing other than a prophet.
- 33 Barrett, 286. Cf. Robertson and Plummer, 322.
- 34 So also Gordon Fee, 596 and note 77; 693 and note 26.
- 35 Robert Saucy, "Prophecy Today? An Initial Response," *Sundoulos* (Spring 1990), 2.
- 36 So Robertson and Plummer, 322.
- 37 Turner, *Vox Evangelica*, 48. Robert Saucy's suggestion (p. 3) that God may have decided that the rest of what the prophet who was speaking was going to say should be picked up by the next prophet, isn't really a very good one.
- 38 None of the major commentaries support Grudem's inter-

- pretation. This is certainly an illustration of what Gordon Fee said in his review of Grudem's book: "Grudem's problem is that his agenda . . . negates[s] some of his exegesis and at other times undermine[s] what is perfectly sane exegesis The exegesis of I Cor 12-14 leaves much to be desired, both as a whole and many of the particulars" (Gordon Fee, review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, by Wayne Grudem, in *Crux*, Vol. XXV, 3 [September 1989], 34).
- 39 Cf. 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2; Colossians 1:25; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 3:1.
- 40 Cf. Max Turner, review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, by Wayne Grudem, in *Themelios*, 16:2 (January/February 1991), 33.
- 41 Thomas, 91.
- 42 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (English text), 421.
- 43 I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, 338f.
- 44 John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 333.
- 45 Saucy, 5.
- 46 Among the many examples of what Grudem's teaching sanctions, one excellent illustration can be found in Michael G. Maudlin, "Seers in the Heartland," *Christianity Today*, (January 14, 1991) 19. My emphasis is underlined.
- 47 Harry Buis, review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, by Wayne Grudem, in *Reformed Review*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Autumn 1989), 81.

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