

PROPHETS ON TRIAL: JUDGING 'WORDS FROM GOD' TODAY
WITH THE MODEL FOUND IN 1 CORINTHIANS 14:29-33

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Systematic Theology
Dallas Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the degree

Master of Theology

by

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July 2006

Accepted by the Faculty of the Dallas Theological Seminary in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Theology

Examining Committee

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“God told me that our church needs to be more authentic during our worship services.” Such a statement coming from a passionate new believer could be well-motivated and challenging, yet, perhaps unintentionally, it also carries a weighty implication: God has spoken. Believers across numerous traditions frequently assert that God has “told,” “showed,” or even “revealed” something to them. Although this type of terminology is often used by those who simply mean to express a deep conviction or impression they believe to be God-given, many others fully intend to claim to have had experiences of direct verbal communication from the Lord. One such person states:

“...the light rested upon me I saw two Personages...One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join... I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt;... and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time...”¹

Lest one think that the days of so-called prophets such as Joseph Smith have ended, one need only turn on the television for a more modern example. Benny Hinn, a world-famous “prophet,” has used his many appearances on Trinity Broadcasting

¹ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 2nd rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: The Desert Book Company, 1980), 1:17-20.

Network to declare that Christians are little gods,² that financial prosperity is guaranteed to obedient believers,³ and that the orthodox understanding of God is incorrect.⁴

Though most people today do not make the claims of Joseph Smith or Benny Hinn, many claim to have received explicit communication from the Lord as to what belief or course of action He desires a person, group, or church to take. They then proceed to communicate the “word from the Lord” to the specified recipients, asserting that they must follow the Lord's leading. How do friends, family, and pastors deal with situations like this? Is there a way to evaluate the genuineness of messages that people proclaim, whether they be from an impassioned new believer or from a bold, false prophet? What is the church to do when someone claims that God has spoken?

Purpose

This thesis proposes that all claims to have received a “word from the Lord” are tantamount to a claim of prophecy and that, therefore, the message in question must be judged according to the model provided in 1 Corinthians 14. If God still speaks words of revelation through people today, there must be a way to determine which messengers represent Him accurately and which do not. Paul provides such a method of evaluation in his exhortation to the Corinthian church.

² “When you say, 'I am a Christian, you are saying... I am a little messiah walking on earth... that is a shocking revelation.... You are a little god on earth running around.’” “Benny Hinn: Quotes, False Teachings, False Prophet,” online: http://www.afcministry.com/Benny_Hinn.htm, accessed 13 February 2006.

³ “You want to prosper? Money will be falling on you from left, right and center. God will begin to prosper you, for money always follows righteousness...” “Benny Hinn: Quotes, False Teachings, False Prophet,” online: http://www.afcministry.com/Benny_Hinn.htm, accessed 13 February 2006.

⁴ “See, God the Father is a person, God the Son is a person, God the Holy Spirit is a person. But each one of them is a triune being by himself. If I can shock you, and maybe I should, there's nine of them.” “Benny Hinn,” online: <http://www.ondocctrine.com/10hinn.htm>, accessed 13 February 2006.

The need for a Biblical method to evaluate New Testament (NT) prophecy is clear from the repeated warnings in Scripture regarding the reality of false prophets. By providing a method for the church to examine all who claim to speak as a prophet, the hope of this thesis is to protect the church from debilitating and deadly error.

Method

This thesis seeks to provide a pastoral model of evaluation of prophetic claims through an exegetical and theological investigation of the judging of NT prophets as seen in 1 Corinthians 14:29-33. Chapter two will survey several key issues in recent discussion of prophecy including the relationship between Old Testament (OT) and NT prophecy, the nature of prophecy, the identity and role of prophets, and the reality of false prophets.

Chapter three will be dedicated to an exegetical and theological examination of 1 Corinthians 14:29-32. This study will seek to explore several issues arising from these verses such as the goal of the judgment, the standard by which they were judged, and the identity of those who should judge.

Chapter Four will provide the model for judging claims to modern-day prophecy including a discussion of the necessity of employing precise language when dealing with such matters. Chapter Five will briefly re-address the purpose of this study, re-present its conclusions, and give a final challenge for application.

Limitations and Presuppositions

The nature of this thesis implies a non-cessationist view-point. However, the purpose of this thesis rests not in arguing for or against cessationism, but rather in addressing a real dilemma in the church today. At a pastoral level, it is not helpful in

discussions with a person who holds to the continuance of miraculous gifts or who has the conviction that God has spoken to them, to simply assert that they are wrong and thus end the conversation. Instead, this study suggests the need to meet such a person with a biblical paradigm that directly deals with their claims.

This study will not directly address issues of tongues, healings, or other miraculous gifts. Though these topics are often examined in congruence with prophecy, they will not be touched upon because this thesis focuses specifically on judging revelation. Interpreted tongues would fall into the category of “revelation” and will be discussed further in chapter two.

This thesis limits its investigation to the model of judging NT prophets found implicitly in 1 Corinthians 14. The reason for this is because of the deafening silence from the rest of Scripture on this difficult topic. 1 Corinthians 14:29-32 and 37-38 explore the process Paul called the Corinthians to engage in when their prophets had “words from God” for the congregation.

This thesis presupposes that the classical distinction of general and special revelation are in the broadest sense an adequate framework for discussion. It also presupposes the authority of Scripture as our final rule for all life and practice. The Scriptures are viewed as inspired, inerrant, and fully reliable.

CHAPTER 2

SURVEY OF PROPHETIC ISSUES

To say the issues regarding prophecy have been exhausted would certainly be incorrect, but the level of discussion is adequate to draw conclusions suitable for this thesis. This brief survey¹ of issues relating to prophecy serves to set the stage for why those who today claim to get "words from God" must submit their messages to be judged according to the model seen in 1 Corinthians 14:29-32.

Relationship of OT and NT Prophecy

One of the central issues for any who attempt to tackle the NT teaching on prophecy is to determine to what extent prophecy in the NT parallels prophecy in the OT.² Dr. Wayne Grudem, representing a common position today, asserts that God spoke authoritatively through His prophets in the OT but that after Christ the apostles exclusively filled this role.³ He explains that

“...we might expect that NT prophets would be like the OT prophets. But...there is little if any evidence for a group of prophets in the NT churches who could speak God’s very words (with ‘absolute divine authority’ that could

¹ The arrangement below seeks to explore the relevant issues in an orderly and discrete manner, yet because of the interplay of the topics at hand, each section significantly affects the others. However, it seems best to begin by setting forth the author's views on the relationship between OT and NT prophecy and then discuss the nature of prophecy and of prophets themselves.

² Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 21-94.; Jack Deere, *The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2001), 123-26; Graham Cooke, *Developing Your Prophetic Gifting* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2003), 164-173.

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 409; Cooke seems to agree, “Old covenant prophets were some of the main historians and were used to write infallible Scripture. This aspect of their ministry was given to the apostles in the early church...”

not be questioned) ... On the other hand, there is a very prominent group of people in the NT [who speak] with absolute divine authority... these men are called not 'prophets,' however, but 'apostles.'⁴

In light of this he makes a strong distinction between NT prophecy and OT prophecy which results in a different level of authority and excuses them from the same standard of judgment.⁵

While it is certainly true that the apostles had a unique office and were used by God to communicate new revelation to His people and to write the inspired Scriptures, this does not necessitate that NT prophets never spoke new and authoritative revelation to God's people. Ephesians 3:5 states clearly that God imparted new revelation to apostles *and* prophets when it states that "[this mystery] was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to the saints through His apostles and prophets through the Spirit." Thomas supports this conclusion when he states that "the prophets along with the apostles were recipients of special divine revelation, according to the apostle."⁶ Further, in his paper "Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena and NT Prophecy," Dr. John W. Hilber argues convincingly that "the discussions have been too simplistic in dealing with OT prophecy [and that] a survey of some of the complexities of OT prophecy shows that the NT phenomena are in continuity with OT prophetic expectations."⁷

The position taken in this thesis posits that prophecy in the OT stands in continuity with that in the NT. The following section summarizes some specific parallels between the ministry of OT and NT prophets. The purpose of this exploration is to

⁴ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 27.

⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, Chapters 3-4; *Bible Doctrine*, 408-409.

⁶ Robert L. Thomas, "Correlation of Revelatory Spiritual Gifts and NT Canonicity," *Master's Seminary Journal* 8, no. 2 (1997): 8.

⁷ John W. Hilber, "Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena and NT Prophecy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 2 (1994): 258.

emphasize that NT prophets are indeed seen in the NT as givers of new and binding revelation, just as OT prophets were.

First, the purpose of prophecy is nearly identical in the Old and NT. God gave OT prophecy for many purposes including warning, prediction, guidance, instruction, and edification. One of the over-arching purposes of prophecy in the OT was to call people to repent and walk in obedience to the Law and covenants.⁸ Similarly, NT prophecy appears to likely call believers back to or encourage them on into obedience corresponding with previously given revelation from Jesus and the Apostles (1 Cor 14:37-38; Eph 3:5, 2:20). As Jack Deere explains, NT prophets tell the body things “to encourage, comfort, and strengthen us so that we can see and marvel at the beauty, splendor, power, goodness, and wisdom of Jesus.”⁹

As in the OT, the purpose of NT prophetic forth-telling centers around issues of exhortation, encouragement, consolation, warning, and evangelism (1 Corinthians 12-14).¹⁰ A common theme stressed among charismatic scholars is that NT Prophets primarily are called to edify the body through encouragement rather than call down judgment.¹¹ This encouragement is often said to be found in the form of specific revelation about a believer’s life and needs. Cooke proposes that “no NT prophet was ever used to give or to bring prophecies that guided, steered or governed people in the

⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 22. See also J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 215.

⁹ Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 36.

¹⁰ C. M. Robeck Jr, “Gift of Prophecy,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev. and Ex. ed: 1004, 1010; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1987), 652-698.

¹¹ Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 37-38; Cooke, *Developing*, 30.

will of God.”¹² This statement does not seem to take into account the two examples of Agabus’ prophetic foretelling (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11). The warning concerning a famine certainly could have guided and steered God’s people into preparing for it. It also does not seem to take into account the reaction of the person in 1 Cor 14:24 who “is convicted... called to account... [whose] secrets of his heart are disclosed...” This person appears to have had something specific spoken to him through a Corinthian prophet.

Second, there were prophets in the OT whose words were not inscripturated (1 Sam 3:19-21; 9:6; 1 Kgs 14:18; 21:19 [with 22:38]; 2 Kings 14:25), just as in the NT.¹³ Grudem argues that “it is the apostles, not the prophets, who have authority to write the words of NT Scripture.”¹⁴ As seen above however, just because the words of a prophet were not recorded in Scripture does not mean they were not inspired and authoritative words from God. It is not necessary for us to have in our Bibles every inspired word ever written or every infallible word ever spoken.

In the NT there are several parallel examples to the above-mentioned OT instances of prophets speaking but not being inscripturated. The account of Philip’s four daughters who prophesied in Acts 21:8-9, Judas and Silas in Acts 15:32, and the prophetic word referred to in 1 Tim. 4:14 all rest in the same line as the OT occurrences. Just because their words of prophecy are not included in the NT canon does not mean that they were any less authoritative. There are, of course, some prophets in the book of Acts whose words are recorded, including the prophecies of Agabus (11:28, 21:10-11) and the prophets at Antioch (13:1-2) through which “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me

¹² Cooke, *Developing*, 165.

¹³ Cooke, *Developing*, 244.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 409.

Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” God has chosen to preserve the words of some of His prophets and to allow the others to serve the need of the moment in which He prescribed. The process of inscripturation must be left to God’s sovereignty, but the authority of His Word must not be denied.

Third, prophets in both the OT (Deut. 13:1-5, 18:21-22; Jer. 23:13, 25-28; Ezek. 33:33; Is) and NT were to be judged (1 Cor. 14:29-32; 1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 Jn 4:1).¹⁵ The reason for examination of a supposed messenger from God is due to the repeated warnings in both the OT and NT concerning the danger of false prophets (Jer. 23:25, Matt. 7:15; Mk. 13:22; 2 Cor. 11:4, 13; 1 Thess. 5:20; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pt. 2:2-13; 1 Jn. 4:1-3; Jude; Rev. 2:20). When a prophet stands between God and His people, there must be an accountability for what is said. To suggest that someone who speaks “words from God” should not be held to a standard of judgment is certainly in contradiction to the strong emphasis of accountability displayed in the Scriptures.

Fourth, the way God communicates through His prophet and to His people is parallel in both the Old and NTs. Many times God gives dreams and visions (Gen. 37; Num. 12:6; Jud. 7; 1 Ki. 3:5; Dan. 2, 4, 7; Matt. 1-2, 27:19; Acts 2:17, 10:3f), speaks audibly to the prophet (1 Sam. 3; Acts 9; Rev. 2-3), or possibly leads a prophet through a non-verbal impression.¹⁶ The prophet in turn speaks to the audience through either oral (Jonah 3:4; Acts 11:27-28, 21:10; 1 Cor. 14:29; Heb. 1:1), written (Hab. 2:2, Rev. 1:19) or dramatic means (1 Ki. 11:29-39, Is. 20:2-4; Ezek. 4-6).

¹⁵ Ibid, 250-254.

¹⁶ Strictly speaking this is an argument from silence, yet often non-descriptive Scriptural accounts and experience suggest this is as potential method of communication. Daniel B. Wallace (“The Witness of the Spirit in Romans 8:16: Interpretation and Implications,” in *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit?* eds. M. James Sawyer and Daniel B. Wallace, [Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005], 50) speaking about how the Spirit bears witness to our spirits says, “His inner witness is both immediate and intuitive. It involves a non-discursive presence that is recognized in the soul.” In light of this allowance, it seems reasonable to allow for non-verbal impressions as a means of receiving revelation.

Fifth, both OT and NT prophets give revelation to specific people, distinct communities, entire nations, and at times to the whole world. Deere asserts that because “OT examples of prophetic ministry do not include many instances of prophets giving ‘personal’ words ... [and] ... almost all the examples deal with prophets giving corporate words” that the role of the prophets is different.¹⁷ He also goes on to say that “even the prophet’s personal words to the king were actually corporate words because their purpose was to help the king guide the nation ... it would be an error to use corporate examples as a model for personal words.”¹⁸ Deere’s argument seeks to minimize the seemingly widespread testimony of Scripture concerning revelation to individuals. Even if the message impacted a whole nation, it still was a revelation to an individual. There are many instances of prophets speaking to individuals in the OT whose response greatly affected them personally and the people they influenced (Ex. 7:1-2; 1 Sam. 22:5; 2 Sam. 12:7; 1 Ki. 1:11, 20:22; 2 Ki. 3:13-19, Is. 39:3; Jer 28:15). The ministry of a NT prophet is strikingly similar. Their messages always edify the church (1 Cor 14:3-4, 19, 24-25, 31) which is not simply an individual message, but one that guides a pastor, teacher, or believer to grow in their community. The messages of both Old and NT prophets often overlap in regards to individual and community; however this should not be viewed as discontinuity in their ministry, but rather as a parallel aspect.

In summary we have seen that Old and NT prophecy are similar in many ways. The purpose of prophecy is nearly identical in the Old and NT, there were prophets in the OT whose words were not inscripturated just as in the NT, prophets in both the Old and NT were judged based upon their revelations, God’s method of communicating through His prophet and to His people is parallel in the Old and NTs, and

¹⁷ Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

finally both Old and NT prophets give revelation to specific people, distinct communities, entire nations, and at times to the whole world. The continuity between the Old and NT prophets is clear. This establishes that NT prophecy, like OT prophecy, is indeed infallible revelation from God, and thus is authoritative by its nature. More explicit discussion of the nature of prophecy and the prophet himself is necessary.

The Nature of Prophecy

Although scholars have by no means reached a universal consensus, it seems that most define *prophecy* along a spectrum between the extremes of simply “forth telling existing revelation” and “fore-telling new revelation.” Most theological positions situate along this spectrum in terms of emphasis rather than of mutually exclusive definitions. For simplicity’s sake, the two poles will be sketched below.

The *first* position follows the teaching of John Calvin who defined prophecy since the completion of the NT as “...simply the right understanding of Scripture and the particular gift of expounding it.”¹⁹ John MacArthur agrees with this definition as he explains, “the NT gift primarily has to do with declaration, not revelation.... [the prophet] is preacher, not a source of ongoing revelation. His task is one of forth-telling, not foretelling... he proclaims already revealed truth; he is not generally a conduit for new revelation.”²⁰ This definition of prophecy seems to liken the post-NT gift of prophecy to that of teaching.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 12:5. It should be noted however that Calvin appears to have some conflicting views on the nature of prophecy. In his Institutes he says, “Paul applies the name ‘prophets’ not to all those who were interpreters of God’s will, but to those who excelled in a particular revelation (Eph. 4:11).” Institutes, 4:3:4, 2:1057. These changes in Calvin’s views are further explored in Kenneth L. Gentry’s work *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 2nd, ex. ed. (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publishers, 1989), 110-111.

²⁰ John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, Rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 81.

The need for authoritative revelation before the NT is understandable since most congregations in the early church did not have a complete copy of the NT. Many churches had none or only a few of the writings of the Apostles. The earliest NT church had only verbal proclamation to accompany the OT. If a prophet were present, however, and they received revelation from God, they could give the congregation much needed guidance (1 Thess 5:20-21). MacArthur affirms this when he states that “in the early church, before the NT was complete, certain prophets were used by God on occasion to exhort the church with messages inspired as the prophet spoke.”²¹ In summary, the first pole of the prophecy definition is that NT prophecy *before* the close of the NT canon was inspired authoritative revelation, but that *today* it parallels the NT gift of teaching previously given revelation.

The *second* position views the gift as a continuing supernatural capacity that provides new revelation to the individuals or local congregations for immediate needs. Many charismatic theologians²² find common ground in this view of NT prophecy.²³ Gordon Fee defines prophecy as “spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, intelligible messages, orally delivered in the gathered assembly, intended for the edification or encouragement of the people.”²⁴ Robeck defines prophecy as “a means for the Holy Spirit to convey a message from God to his people through an inspired intermediary.”²⁵ Along the same lines Robert Longman Jr. states that, “prophecy is the proclamation of a message

²¹ Ibid.

²² For a thorough survey of Reformed and Evangelical opinion see Gentry, *Gift of Prophecy*, 75-107.

²³ This common ground ends abruptly however. These scholars differ markedly on how the gifts function today. This issue will not be addressed as stated in the Limitations section of Chapter 1.

²⁴ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 595.

²⁵ Robeck, “Gift of Prophecy,” 1004.

revealed by the Holy Spirit, suited to the specific needs of the moment, in the language of those who hear it.”²⁶

Grudem explains the difference between the NT gifts of prophecy and teaching by saying “a prophecy must be the report of a spontaneous revelation from the Holy Spirit...if a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life then it is... a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.”²⁷ Though this distinction seems helpful in supporting this view, the NT does not give any such explanation. The NT is silent on the specifics of how the gift of teaching works. It is safer to summarize this pole of the prophecy spectrum by saying that NT prophecy is a normative and active gift given to the Body of Christ to speak to needs of the moment.

I define both Old and NT prophecy as inspired authoritative revelation given from God through a person (the prophet) by the Holy Spirit to an individual or community for the purpose of edification. This definition most closely aligns with the second position above, in that it does acknowledge the distinction between modern-day prophecy and teaching, but I also affirm the first position’s stance that prophetic revelations are infallible and authoritative.

This understanding contradicts the position that prophecy today may be “fallible.” Some, like Grudem, who hold to a difference between OT and NT prophecy would allow for NT prophecies to contain “inaccuracies.” He states that prophecy “should be defined not as ‘predicting the future,’ nor as ‘proclaiming a word from the Lord,’ nor as ‘powerful preaching’ – but rather as ‘telling something that God has

²⁶ Robert Longman Jr. “What is Prophecy?” online <http://www.spirithome.com/prophecy.html#whatis>, accessed 10 February 2005.

²⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 120.

spontaneously brought to mind.”²⁸ He would support this claim by citing examples such as 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, the prophecies in Acts 21:4, 21:10-11, and the discussion in 1 Corinthians 14:29-33.²⁹ The first three Scriptures will be examined briefly at this point and the 1 Corinthians passage will be examined in detail in chapter three.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 Paul says, “do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophetic utterances, but examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.” Grudem suggest that “if the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equaled God’s Word in authority, he never would have had to tell the Thessalonians not to despise it (because) they ‘received’ and ‘accepted’ God’s Word ‘with joy from the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:6, 2:13, cf.4:15).”³⁰ It goes too far to suggest that this passage is telling the Thessalonians to find “some things that are good and some things that are not good”³¹ in the messages delivered by the prophets in Thessalonica. Rather it appears that the Thessalonians were tentative about using the gift of prophecy, either because of encounters with false prophets or misuse among the members of the congregation. Therefore, Paul is encouraging them not to hinder the ministry of the Spirit, but rather to examine each prophetic message to either authenticate or dismiss it. This passage does not support Grudem’s view that prophecy should be seen as anything less than inspired authoritative revelation, but rather is exhorting the group not to neglect the gift and thus hinder the work of the Spirit in their midst.

The prophecy referred to in Acts 21:4 by the disciples from Tyre should not be viewed as a prophetic statement. As Hilber rightly states, “the adjuration of the

²⁸ Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 408.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 410-412.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 410.

³¹ *Ibid.*

churches was an *application* of what the Holy Spirit predicted through the prophets.”³² The Holy Spirit apparently authoritatively showed the disciples that if Paul did go to Jerusalem that an arrest awaited him. This led the disciples, who loved Paul, to warn him “not to set foot in Jerusalem.” Grudem’s statement that Paul “would have (never disobeyed) if this prophecy contained God’s very words and had authority equal to Scripture” is true. The reality however is that the Holy Spirit did not tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, the disciples did. *If* the disciples had indeed claimed that the Holy Spirit *had said* that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, they would have to be held in contempt for falsely speaking in the Name of God. This passage should not be viewed as a proof that NT prophets spoke with anything less than inspired authoritative revelation. The prophetic revelation concerning Paul’s arrest was authoritative, but the advice was not. Paul would need to discern how to apply what God had said, not whether it was true.

The prophecy of Agabus in Acts 21:10-11 is an often discussed passage that draws into question whether or not NT prophecy is indeed inspired authoritative revelation given from God or not. In order to address this issue we must briefly examine the prophecy. In his account of Paul’s encounter with Agabus, Luke writes, “...a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he 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.’”

As Hilber points out “Agabus’ use of dramatic symbol and quotation formula would have signaled to his audience that this prophecy was the same in kind as oracles delivered by OT prophets.”³³ The dramatic symbols used by Agabus “is reminiscent of

³² Hilber, “Diversity,” 256.

³³ *Ibid.*, 255.

much OT prophecy: it is conveyed in action as well as in word.”³⁴ This is coupled with the quotation formulas spoken of by Hilber in which Agabus substitutes “this is what the Holy Spirit says” for the standard OT reference of “thus says the LORD.” This quotation formula indicates that he intended to deliver the authoritative words of God.

If Agabus truly intended to speak on behalf of God in the same way an OT prophet would, then what about the claim that “the Jews at Jerusalem” did not “bind” Paul or “deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles?” Grudem argues that “this kind of minor inaccuracy is exactly compatible with the type of prophecy we found earlier in 1 Corinthians, in which the prophet receives some kind of revelation and then reports it in his own words.”³⁵ According to Grudem, this example demonstrates that a prophet in the NT does not speak with the same authority as an OT prophet because the prophecy was not fulfilled accurately.

To say that Agabus spoke inaccurately however is not the only interpretive option. Larkin states that “we do not need to conclude, as many do, that based on Luke’s report of the arrest, Agabus is mistaken.”³⁶ The scenario that plays out with Paul in Acts 21:27-36 does indeed appear to be a fulfillment of Agabus’ prophetic message. The “Jews from Asia” stirred up the crowd and incited a riot against Paul. Their rejection of Paul and the ensuing riot (21:27-30) led directly to Paul being bound in two chains by the Romans (21:31-33). As the NET Bible explains “the Jews in Jerusalem did not personally tie Paul up and hand him over to the Gentiles...their reaction to him was the

³⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 401.

³⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 80.

³⁶ William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 304.

cause of his arrest.”³⁷ In contrast to Grudem’s stance that “Agabus had a ‘revelation’ from the Holy Spirit...which included his own interpretation of this revelation (and therefore some mistakes in the exact details),”³⁸ Hilber convincingly contends that “Agabus’ prophecy in Acts 21 is consistent with the standard of the OT and with his earlier ministry in Acts 11.”³⁹ Hilber argues that even with OT prophets, flexibility is allowed and a “wooden, literal” interpretation need not always be applied to judge a prophet’s accuracy.⁴⁰ The fulfillment of Agabus’ prophecy is in line with the OT prophetic fulfillment of Ahijah’s prophecy to Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 11:32, 36).⁴¹ This example serves as a caution against rejecting Agabus’s prophecy in Acts 21 as anything other than authoritative predictive prophecy.

Grudem’s definition of NT prophecy as “telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind,” allows too much latitude. This latitude allows him to treat NT prophecy as God’s infallible word mixed in with fallible human words. By defining prophecy as what God “brings to mind” rather than something that God explicitly communicates to the prophet, the sanctity of inerrancy is jeopardized. Given the above conclusions concerning the parallel nature of OT and NT prophecy and the stated definition of prophecy, Grudem’s position must be rejected because ultimately it

³⁷ *New English Translation : NET Bible*. 1998 (electronic edition.). Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press.

³⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 81.

³⁹ Hilber, “Diversity,” 255.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 250-51, n. 31.

⁴¹ Hilber states: “Ahijah prophesied that Rehoboam would be left with only one tribe...however, in the outworking of history, the Davidic dynasty ruled over three tribes, Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, with Levites dispersed throughout the territories. The prediction purposely did not take into account the complexities of political geography. That Ahijah was aware of the complexities is indicated by the dramatic symbol. Only ten of the twelve pieces of garment were given to Jeroboam. What happened to the twelfth tribe? It probably was Benjamin which came under the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 12:21; 2 Chr. 11:1, 10).” (“Diversity,” 250-51, n. 31.)

legitimizes errant prophecy. Though his intent is certainly not to open the door for people to speak errantly in the name of God, his definition does this very thing. MacArthur rightly questions such a position by asking “how could a message genuinely inspired by God be tainted with error or lies?”⁴² To suggest as Grudem does that “prophecies contain some things that are good and some things that are not good”⁴³ handicaps the church greatly and does not lead to peace, but rather to confusion (1 Cor 14:33).

An important clarification needs to be made at this point. The gift of prophecy is not the only revelatory gift discussed in the NT. Along with it should be coupled the word of wisdom (1 Cor 12:8), word of knowledge (1 Cor 12:8), and the interpreted tongue (1 Cor 14:5). As Thomas states, “the replacement of wisdom and knowledge by apostleship and prophecy at the head of the lists of 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 furnishes strong implications regarding close relationships between the two pairs of gifts (wisdom and knowledge).”⁴⁴ An attempt at distinguishing between wisdom, knowledge, revelation, and prophecy (1 Cor 12) is as Fee proclaims “perhaps forever lost to us.”⁴⁵ The inability to distinguish between these gifts in function or value leads us to label all as gifts through which God gives revelation in congruence with prophecy. Thus, any “word from God,” whether it be wisdom, knowledge, interpreted tongue, revelation, or prophecy must be viewed as inspired authoritative revelation given from God.

⁴² MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 82.

⁴³ Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 411.

⁴⁴ Robert L. Thomas, “Correlation of Revelatory Spiritual Gifts and NT Canonicity,” *Masters Seminary Journal* 8, no 2 (1997): 7-8.

⁴⁵ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 593.

The Definition of a Prophet

As a consequence of the above conclusions, a prophet, whether during OT or NT times, should be defined as one who receives an inspired authoritative message from God through His Spirit and then delivers that message to others. Though Fee would differ on the conclusions presented, he affirms that “Paul’s understanding ... was thoroughly conditioned by his own history in Judaism. The prophet was a person who spoke to God’s people under the inspiration of the Spirit.”⁴⁶

Given the above definition of prophecy, it should be concluded that anyone who speaks revelatory words from God is considered to be speaking as a prophet. Jack Deere suggests that, “any Christian can prophecy occasionally without being a prophet, just as one can lead someone to Christ without being an evangelist. A prophet or prophetess is one who prophesies consistently and accurately.”⁴⁷ Though his statement seems reasonable, it subtly undermines the importance of speaking as a prophet. It is not that God cannot occasionally move through whichever Christian He chooses, but the issue rests in Deere’s implication that the ‘occasional prophet’ would not need to be as accurate as the ‘consistent prophet.’ That is, he implies that when God leads someone to say something, if it is their first time speaking revelation, they should not be called a prophet. Whether one speaks as a prophet frequently or infrequently should not determine whether the person is filling the role of a prophet. A prophet has a responsibility to accurately speak what God has said, regardless of how many times he ministers in this capacity. To allow latitude in defining the role of a prophet is dangerous because the individual or community who receives the revelation from a prophet is expected to obey the revealed truths (Dan. 9:10, Hag. 1:12, 1 Thess 5:20-21) regardless of whether the person speaking is experienced in this role or not.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 595.

⁴⁷ Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 36.

It should be noted that the purpose of defining the role of a prophet is not to permanently classify people as “prophets.” The purpose is to help provide a better system of accountability for those who claim to speak on behalf of God.

Prophet Eligibility

With this in mind, we must ask who then serves as a prophet? In the OT, God is the one who sovereignly calls and gifts his messengers to fulfill the roles He has for them. The prophet did not usually seek to serve in that role, but was selected by God (Ex. 3:4, 1 Sam 3:4, Is. 6, Jer 1:5, Ezek 1-3; Amos 7:14-15). The group called the “sons of prophets” who often served along side an established prophet may have been prophets in training or disciples of the prophet they followed (1 Sam 19:20, 1 Kgs. 20:35, 2 Kgs. 2:3-15, 4:38, 9:1). Though the details about their calling and fulfillment of ministry are speculative, it is certain that if and when they did speak as a prophet, they would be held to the same standard as any other recognized prophet.

The NT appears to present the gifting of a prophet in much of the same light (1 Cor 12:7, 11, 18, 24, 28; Eph. 4:11). As all would agree, God bestows spiritual gifts to each one as He desires through the Holy Spirit (12:11, 18). All would also agree that “all are not prophets”⁴⁸ (1 Cor 12:29) in the sense that not all believers prophecy. A place of contention however rests in the view of Grudem, and many others,⁴⁹ that the exhortations to “earnestly desire the greater gifts” (1 Cor 12:31) and “desire earnestly... that you may

⁴⁸ Paul couches this statement in a question to the Corinthians, but the “mh.” in the construction “mh. pa, nte j profh/ta i” signals that Paul expects a negative answer, thus effectively asserting that ‘all are not prophets.’

⁴⁹ There is much discussion even among charismatics as to whether or not this is true. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 596, 654, and Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 34-35 certainly affirm it is possible. Robeck, “Gift of Prophecy,” 1003, appears to disagree and emphasizes that though it could potentially be available to all because all have the spirit, not all would because not all believers are gifted the same.

prophecy” (1 Cor 14:1) are directed to individual believers who can receive the gifts they desire and in turn edify the body.

Wayne Grudem explains that “Joel had predicted the outpouring of God’s Spirit on *all* flesh, resulting in prophecy not just for a few people (such as those who had the authority to write the very words of Scripture), but for all God’s people...”⁵⁰ While it is possible that any believer could prophecy because God has the right to equip anyone for any area of ministry He so desires, it should not be viewed that believers can ask for specific gifts, including prophecy. As Thomas explains, “the command to be zealous for the greater gifts [in 1 Cor 14:39] was a command for the *corporate local body* to seek the greater gifts for itself, not for each individual Christian to do so for himself or herself.”⁵¹ This view seems to be supported by the community focused context of 1 Corinthians 12-14 and the second person plural form of the imperative to “earnestly desire”⁵² the greater gifts.

It should therefore be understood that while all believers could potentially prophecy, not all believers will because only those who are specifically gifted by God have that ability. Believers should not seek specific gifts, but rather the community as a whole should seek gifts that edify the entire assembly (1 Cor 12:7, 10). Because God selects someone to speak on His behalf, there is a great responsibility for this person to be faithful with what God leads them to say.

⁵⁰ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 33.

⁵¹ Thomas, “Correlation,” 7.

⁵² *zh1lou/te* – 2nd person *plural*, present, active, imperative

Levels of Prophetic Gifting

There has been an attempt made by some to designate different levels of prophetic gifting and ministry.⁵³ Graham Cooke explains that, “there are various levels and stages of prophetic anointing, beginning with the shallow end of basic prophecy, encouragement, edification, and comfort. However, moving through levels of prophetic ministry to the office of a prophet requires considerable training, experience and development over a great many years. On average, it takes approximately fifteen to twenty years to make a prophet, depending upon the training...”⁵⁴ This argument does not have any Scriptural basis⁵⁵ and opens the door for dangerous misuse of authority by “prophets in training.” If we allow for a prophet in training category, we would also need to allow room for error in the revelations they speak. As we have already seen, anyone who speaks on behalf of God should be viewed as speaking authoritatively.

The Reason for Defining Prophecy and Prophet

The OT and NT repeatedly warn about the danger of false prophets and their deceptive messages (Jer 23:25, Matt 7:15; Mark 13:22; 2 Cor 11:4, 13; 1 Thess 5:20; 1

⁵³ Deere, *The Beginner’s Guide to The Gift of Prophecy*, 40-42

⁵⁴ Cooke, *Developing*, 17.

⁵⁵ Hilber, “Diversity,” 247, discusses the aforementioned “sons of the prophets” as those who “were subordinate to a master prophet of greater authority.” It should be noted however that none of those prophets were disregarded, but rather assumed to be speaking the words of God.

Tim 4:1; 2 Peter 2:2-13; 1 John 4:1-3; Jude; Rev 2:20). The reality of false prophets and fallible messages grounds the need for judging those who claim to have “words from God.” (1 Thess 5:20-21 and 1 Cor 14:29). If God has not truly spoken to a person, then we must be able to discern this and take steps to defend the truth and correct the error. Chapter three explores the model provided in 1 Cor 14:29-32 which will better equip the church to judge the messages which prophets speak.

CHAPTER 3
AN EXEGETICAL EXPLORATION OF THE MODEL OF JUDGMENT IN 1
CORINTHIANS 14:29-32

A brief discussion of the situation in the Corinthian church will be followed by an exegetical investigation of 1 Corinthians 14:29-32 and other relevant verses to determine the model by which the prophets were to be judged. Though the intent of Paul's instruction was not primarily to detail the criteria of judgment, it can be reconstructed from a study of the text.

The Corinthian Situation

Purpose of 1 Corinthians

This letter was written by the Apostle Paul to encourage the Corinthian church to grow in spiritual maturity. The congregation had mistakenly allowed prevailing philosophical and social trends to corrupt their thinking. This resulted in divisions between the members and unrighteous behavior. Paul wrote to rebuke them for their ungodly behavior (1:1-6:20) and to reply to several questions they had raised (7:1-16:24).

Problem addressed in 1 Corinthians 12-14

One of the problems bringing division in the church was the inappropriate use of spiritual gifts. Apparently some people were misusing their gifts to gain personal recognition and/or edification at the expense of the others in their fellowship. Paul attempted to refocus their hearts upon the need to edify each other in the exercise of their gifts. In order to do this, he exalts prophecy above other gifts because it edifies everyone

who is present, even if it is directed to a select few (14:3, 5, 24-26). In 14:29-33 Paul primarily sought to instruct the Corinthians as to how to properly exercise the gift of prophecy within the congregation. Judging the prophets constitutes a subpoint of how to exercise the gift properly.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:29-33

The following is a verse-by-verse study of 1 Corinthians 14:29-33 that examines Paul's instructions concerning the judgment of prophetic revelation. To a large extent Paul leaves the particulars of this process unstated. As a consequence, this section of the thesis will attempt to discern as much as possible from the text at hand and then fill in the gaps from a wider biblical perspective in the next chapter. The following translation is my own.

The Oratory of the Prophet

14:29 In the case of prophets however¹, two or three should speak and the others should judge “profh/tai de. du,o h' trei/j lalei,twsan kai. oi` a;lloi diakrine,twsan”

Paul begins his guidance for prophetic ministry in Corinth by explaining the process by which the prophets should administer their gift. His instructions call for two or three prophets to speak and then be evaluated. As noted in Chapter Two, a prophet has been defined as one who receives an inspired authoritative message from God through His Spirit and then delivers that message to others.

¹ Hans Conzelmann (*1 Corinthians : A commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975]) translates “de” as a contrastive conjunction thus showing the strong change in tone between the discussion of using tongues in the service and the transition to discussing the use of prophecy. See also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 1140.

Paul does not appear to limit the number of prophets who were allowed to speak during a given meeting,² rather he limits the number of prophets who could speak at a particular time. Fee explains “vv. 29-31...is intended to limit the number of speakers in sequence, not the number of prophecies at any given service.”³ Paul is concerned here with orderliness (v33) and the ability to control the service to ensure that all who are present are being edified through the ministry of the prophets.

Paul commands the congregation to allow the prophets to “speak” (lalei, twsan).⁴ This word simply means “to utter words, talk, speak, express oneself.”⁵ The prophet’s speech should not necessarily be viewed as delivering a revelation. The validity of the message will be determined during the process of judgment.

Four pivotal issues arise from this verse. *First*, what does it mean to “judge.” *Second*, what is being judged (the prophets or their prophecies)? *Third*, what is the standard of judgment (by what are they judged)? And *finally*, who are the “others” who are to pass judgment?

The Nature of Judgment

The word “judge” (diakrine, twsan) in the present active voice means “to sift, differentiate, or, distinguish between” or more specifically “to evaluate by paying

² The phrase “at most” is present in 14:27 with regards to tongues but absent here. If Paul’s intent was to limit the number of speakers, he most likely would have included this phrase in this context as well.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 691.

⁴ Third person plural, active verb in the imperative mood. This does not command the prophets to speak, but rather commands the congregation to let the prophets speak.

⁵ BDAG, lale, w, 582.

careful attention to, judge.”⁶ Various other suggested translations include “test” (Barrett), “weigh” (NRSV, NIV, Goodspeed), “exercise judgment” (REB), “think over” (Phillips), and “judge” (NASB, KJV). The word “judge” seems best to capture the issue in context because the distinguishing and evaluating that takes place is done to make a critical decision about what has been said.

The Object of Judgment

Two possibilities exist. The primary object of the judgment could be the prophets themselves. This view places the emphasis upon whether or not the person speaking is a true or false prophet. This would closely parallel the OT practice (Dt 18:21-22).⁷

Alternatively, the prophecies, rather than the prophet, could be the object of the judgment.⁸ Those who take this position tend to view NT prophecy as less authoritative than OT prophecy. They generally do not see the prophecy as being infallible, so there is no need to judge the prophet, only sift the truth out of his messages. Thiselton explains that in the evaluation process “the authentic is to be sifted from the inauthentic or spurious, in light of the OT scriptures, the gospel of Christ, the traditions of all the churches, and critical reflections...it is never infallible.”⁹ Witherington makes a similar assertion by explaining that “the judging here should not be confused with OT rules about judging false prophets. Here it is the prophecies, not the prophets, that are

⁶ BDAG, *diakri*, nw, 231; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1140

⁷ John W. Hilber, “Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena and NT Prophecy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 2 (1994): 252-3, 256.

⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 326.

⁹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1140.

being weighed.”¹⁰ Summarily, the judgment “was an assessment of *what was spoken* (content) more than it was an assessment of the *person who spoke* (medium).”¹¹ Grudem and Fee make similar claims.¹²

Lockwood also believes the prophecies are being judged, yet he holds the outcome of the judgment to have more serious ramifications for the supposed prophet. He claims “the judging is of whether the prophecies are in accord with Scripture and scriptural doctrine – the apostolic Gospel Paul has passed on to the Corinthians...”¹³ and “...if anyone utters false prophecy or a false 'gospel,' he is to be anathema (Gal 1:8-9)...”¹⁴

This position helps us to understand that while in both views the prophecies themselves are evaluated, the difference rests in what happens to the prophet based upon the judgment of their prophecies.

The Standard of Judgment

One of the central difficulties of this text rests in the fact that Paul does not explicate the standard of judgment by which the prophets should be judged. It seems that he expects the Corinthians to either already know the standard they should use or be able to glean it from his epistles. Since we cannot reconstruct the former, we must content

¹⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 286.

¹¹ C. M. Robeck Jr, “Gift of Prophecy,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev. and Ex. ed: 1004.

¹² Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 24.

¹³ Gregory Lockwood, *First Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St Louis: Concordia, 2000), 498.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 500.

ourselves with the latter. Thus the wider counsel of 1 Corinthians and then the NT and the Scriptures as a whole must provide it. This synthesis, however, will be pieced together in the next chapter.

Those Who Pass Judgment

Several scholars suggest that the “others” (αἱ ἄλλοι) called to perform the evaluation should be understood as *the other prophets*.¹⁵ MacArthur considers this view the best and states that “the judging prophets may have had the gift of discernment or they may simply have measured what was said against their own knowledge of the Word and will of God.”¹⁶

To the contrary, Blomberg proposes that it is “unlikely that the prophets were the best persons to evaluate each others’ messages.”¹⁷ He considers the prophets would be too consumed with judging oratory technique or style rather than focusing on the message. Although his reasoning would seem to be an argument from silence and an unnecessary undermining of the prophets’ character, the position that the “others” should not be restricted to other prophets is accurate. As Grudem states “If Paul had meant to say, ‘Let the rest of the prophets weight what is said,’ he would probably have used words other than ‘the others.’”¹⁸ Grudem then cites Godet’s argument that had Paul meant “the rest of the prophets” the phrase *hoi loipoi* would have been much clearer.

The *next* option identifies the ‘others’ as *those gifted to “distinguish spirits”* as mentioned in 12:10. Keener supports this position by arguing that the gift of

¹⁵ Grosheide, 338; Lenski, 611; Friedrich, TDNT VI, 855-56; Hill, Prophecy, 133.

¹⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, The MacArthur NT Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 390.

¹⁷ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 278-79.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 56.

distinguishing spirits immediately follows the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and that the word translated “distinguishing,” (*diakri, seij*) is a cognate of the word for “judging” (*diakrine, twsan*) here in 14:29.¹⁹ Fee, Barrett, and Dunn suggest that the gift of distinguishing spirits is used particularly, but not exclusively, to judge the prophets mentioned in 14:29.²⁰ Grudem claims that applying the gift of “distinguishing spirits” *only* in this way would limit the broader use of the gift.²¹ The wider use of this gift should be affirmed, but should not exclude the gift from being used in this way.²²

The *third*, position assigns the responsibility of judgment to *the whole congregation*. This view finds support from those who highlight Paul's emphasis on communal involvement in 1 Corinthians 12-14.²³ Blomberg states that, “the ‘others’ of verse 29 are more naturally taken to refer to the rest of the congregation, not merely the other prophets.”²⁴ Soards suggests that since “prophecy was for the good of the whole church, so it seems most likely that Paul is telling the entire church to practice active listening when the prophets speak...it appears that the whole church is to be involved in

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117.

²⁰ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 596; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 286; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 1997), 233.

²¹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 55.

²² Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 54, disagrees and cites Paul's wide variety of usage of “*diakri, nw*” in 1 Corinthians and his other writings. Grudem's rebuttal seems warranted, but possibly to the extreme.

²³ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1140; Bob Deffinbaugh, “Spiritual Gifts, Part 5: Spiritual Gifts and Self-Control,” online: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=809, accessed 10 April 2006; Raymond Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeview, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 519; Alan Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Leicester, England; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 267.

²⁴ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 278.

discerning the message(s) of the prophets.”²⁵ Grudem articulates this position well, “each member of the congregation would listen carefully, evaluating the prophecy in the light of the Scripture and the authoritative teaching that he or she already knew to be true. Soon there would be an opportunity to speak in response...no member of the body should have needed to feel useless...”²⁶ While this view fits well with Paul's emphasis on the community, including both leaders and laymen, it seems too thoroughly democratic.

The conclusion here should be seen as a modification of the previous position in that each member of the community should listen carefully and participate in the process of judging, yet it recognizes that the leaders of the community would be the ones to make the final decision. Thiselton supports this position when he states that “in general this task is a corporate one undertaken by the congregation,” and then goes on to note Paul’s apparent attribution of a special role to apostles and teachers alongside prophets and those who are equipped to discern spirits.²⁷ Deere rightly asserts that if a prophecy is made during a congregational gathering that it is “the elders who must weigh this word and decide if and how it is to be implemented.”²⁸

In summary, this all-important first verse instructs us that two or three prophets were to speak at a time followed by a period of judgment. The judgment consisted of an evaluation of the statements made based upon previous apostolic revelation and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The judgment was to focus more on the prophecies, though their evaluation would reflect heavily on the prophet and his future opportunities to speak revelation in the community. The judgment was to be a

²⁵ Marion L. Soards, *I Corinthians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999).

²⁶ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 57.

²⁷ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1140-41.

²⁸ Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 197.

community wide project, but most likely led by the elders, other prophets, or apostles if they were present.

The Interruption of the Prophet

14:30 But if a revelation comes to another who is seated, the first must keep silent “**eva.n de. a;llw| avpokalufqh/| kaqhme,nw| (o` prw/toj siga,twA**”

As this verse explains, interruptions were always allowed during the time of prophetic revelation. At first glance this seems to be an odd invitation given the definitions of Chapter Two; it amounts to an interruption of or by God. Why would one divine revelation be stopped for the sake of another? There are several explanations as to why this was allowed.

First, some hold the prophecy could be interrupted because of its inherent lack of authority. Witherington states, “Christian prophecy, which involved words of comfort, exhortation, challenge, and edification, was not of such a crucial nature that one would not dare interrupt or judge it.”²⁹ This view depends upon a strong distinction between OT and NT prophetic authority. As stated in Chapter Two, this distinction is unwarranted and NT prophecy must be viewed as inspired authoritative revelation.

Alternatively, the command might be given for pragmatic reasons. Garland suggests that “the directive prevents any prophet from filibustering or hogging the spotlight by claiming to be compelled by the Spirit to continue speaking.”³⁰ Johnson also argues in this vein and suggests that prophecy was being abused in a manner similar to

²⁹ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth : A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1995), 286.

³⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 662.

their misuse of tongues.³¹ This is very possible and could help the congregation keep an orderly reign on the service in the event of a domineering prophet attempting to take over. Fee allows that "the requirement seems to be aimed at those who might tend to dominate the meeting, although that is not certain."³² Though this view helps with the pragmatic administration of the prophetic gift, it seems to bypass the heart of the issue: which is how can God be interrupted if He is speaking.

Finally, the most convincing option is what Johnson describes as "ordered spontaneity."³³ Hilber states "that the first prophet had received his revelation at home, bringing it to worship as the gifted teacher or psalm reader had brought their contribution. The second prophet, who received his revelation spontaneously in worship, would be given precedence, spontaneity perhaps implying urgency."³⁴ John MacArthur further explains "it was not that the truths in the new revelation were more important than those being proclaimed, but that, at the moment, the new should be heard while it was fresh from the Lord."³⁵

The first prophet may be stopped by another not for discussion, but rather because God has spoken. The prophet who "receives a revelation" (αποκαλυφθη / |) gets precedence in the service. To "reveal" means "to cause something to be fully known, reveal, disclose, bring to light, or for the Holy Spirit to reveal something to someone"³⁶ Fee notes that αποκαλυπτω "sometimes refers to visible disclosures

³¹ Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, 267.

³² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 695.

³³ Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, 266.

³⁴ Hilber, "Diversity," 258, n. 59.

³⁵ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 391.

³⁶ BDAG, αποκαλυπτω, 112.

associated with the return of Christ... ‘revelation’ of the Gospel...or of God’s will...the latter may well be associated with the kind of charismatic utterance referred to in (1 Cor 14)³⁷ If this is true, the revelation received is of utmost importance because it is what God desires to say to that specific congregation at that very instant. For this reason interruptions are allowed.

The Purpose of the Prophet

14:31 For you can all prophecy one at a time in order that all may learn and all may be encouraged **“du,nasqe ga.r kaqV e[na pa,ntej profhteu,ein i[na pa,ntej manqa,nwsin kai. pa,ntej parakalw/ntaiA”**

Blomberg suggests that “verse 31 parallels verse 5 in illustrating Paul’s desire that all might exercise these gifts, without implying that all can or will. Paul merely leaves the door open for the Spirit to empower whomever He chooses...”³⁸ Keener agrees and explains that this statement “...emphasizes order, but also may point beyond the two or three prophecies before evaluation to the ideal possibility of an entire prophetic community (14:5).”³⁹ As discussed briefly in chapter two, the “all” does not mean that all believers will or can prophesy, but rather that all who are gifted to prophesy will have an opportunity to speak if the Spirit so leads them.

Forbes suggests an interpretation which understands Paul’s command to serve an administrative function. He says, “there may have been too many prophets wishing to

³⁷ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 662.

³⁸ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 279.

³⁹ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 119.

speak, or there may have been a few individuals ‘holding the floor’ for long periods”⁴⁰ If this is the case Paul may be attempting to keep peace by informing all the prophets that each will be able to participate in the service.

The second phrase of this verse details the twofold purpose of prophecy in the assembly: learning and encouragement. Fee hits the heart of Paul's purpose for the congregation when he says, “...the concern is that all, including those who speak prophetically, should learn from and be encouraged or exhorted by what the Spirit has given to others.”⁴¹ The results of prophecy, learning (*manqa, nwsin*)⁴² and encouragement “*parakalw/ntai*”⁴³ fit perfectly in Paul's argument for building up of the Body in this chapter.

The Self-Control of the Prophet

14:32 And the spirit of the prophets are submissive to the prophets “**kai . pneu, mata profhtw/n profh, taij u`pota, ssetai**”

The word “submissive” (*u`pota, ssetai*) means “to cause to be in a submissive relationship, to subject to subordinate.”⁴⁴ Soards states that this phrase highlights that “each prophet controls the spiritual gift he or she possesses [and] is to assume responsibility for the legitimate use of the gift of prophecy.”⁴⁵ This control

⁴⁰ C. Forbes, “Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and Its Hellenistic Environment,” *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 1/75* (1995): 260.

⁴¹ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 696.

⁴² BDAG, *manqa, nw*, 615. “To gain knowledge or skill by instruction, to learn.”

⁴³ BDAG, *parakale, w*, 765. “To urge strongly, appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage.”

⁴⁴ BDAG, *u`pota, ssw*, 1042.

⁴⁵ Soards, *1 Corinthians*, 299. See also R. P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12-15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 82; F. L. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, Vol. 2: Chapters 9-16, translated by A. Cusin (Edinburgh: Clark, 1887), 307; A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the*

should be demonstrated both during the reception of revelation and the communication of it. Johnson explains that “the prophetic Spirit’s manifestation is subject to the prophet’s own will and can, unlike pagan prophetic speech, be controlled by the prophet. Prophets...can speak, keep quiet, or stop speaking at will.”⁴⁶ The distinction between Christian prophecy and pagan prophecy is important, especially in Corinth where the church was filled with former worshipers of pagan deities. It is sometimes said that there is an element of urgency to speak, it is not an uncontrollable urgency. This is in harmony with Paul’s previous instructions about one prophet remaining silent while another receives new revelation and his statement in v. 33 that “God is not a God of confusion.”⁴⁷

Control of the Prophet

14:33a For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. **“ouv ga.r evstin avkatastasi,aj o` qeo.j avlla. eivrh,nhjÅ”⁴⁸**

This verse provides the ultimate rationale for Paul’s instruction regarding prophecy. Paul introduces this phrase with an explanatory “for” (ga,r) which signals that it provides the foundation for the previous verse and section. Paul’s motivation for his commands concerning spiritual gifts in general, and prophecy in particular, arise from his concern that God is properly honored and, just as importantly, properly reflected in the fellowship of the church. Fee insightfully states that “The theological point is crucial:

Corinthians, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), 323; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 242.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, 268. See also Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 279

⁴⁷ It should be noted that eccentric prophetic behavior is present in among both OT prophets (1Kings 11:30; 22:10-11; Is 20:1-6; Jer 13:1-11; Ezek 12:1-2; Hos 1-3) and NT prophets (Acts 2, 10:46, 19:1-6), but it does not mean that all prophets exhibit this behavior or that it is uncontrollable.

⁴⁸ Scholars disagree over whether 14:33b should be taken with the preceding section or with vv. 34-35. Though the evidence is hardly overwhelming, this thesis will only examine v. 33a.

the character of one's deity is reflected in the character of one's worship...God is neither characterized by disorder nor the cause of it in the assembly."⁴⁹

The word "peace" (**eivrh, nhj**)⁵⁰ and "disorder" (**avkatastasi, aj**)⁵¹ provide the two opposite poles of the contrast signaled by the strong contrastive conjunction "but" (**avlla.**). One pole represents the opposition to authority and rebellious attitude of those who seek to divide the community, while the other provides the calm and synergistic stability the community needs to thrive.

Thus Paul's concern to provide guidelines for the evaluation of prophecy rests not merely in a concern for orthodoxy for orthodoxy's sake, but rather in a concern for orthodoxy with a view toward orthopraxy for the sake of the Lord's work and reputation.

⁴⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 697.

⁵⁰ BDAG, **eivrh, nh**, 287: "state of concord, peace, harmony."

⁵¹ BDAG, **avkatastasi, a**, 35: "disturbance, tumult; disorder, unruliness."

CHAPTER 4

A MODEL FOR JUDGING MODERN-DAY CLAIMS OF REVELATION

The preceding chapters have evaluated the background to the concept of prophecy in the Bible and then Paul's commands to the Corinthians as to how they should proceed in judging prophecy in the congregation. While Paul provided a relatively clear outline of the process of this judgment, he did not provide explicit information as to the criteria by which the prophetic messages could be measured. This chapter will seek to define such criteria through a wider study of the biblical data in order to bring the process of prophetic evaluation to bear upon modern-day situations.¹ The process will consist of several steps beginning with the preliminary screening, followed by several scriptural standards, and concluding with a discussion on what to do with a person who has been evaluated.

¹ There are many other proposed models of judgment, some of which are insightful. **C. M. Robeck Jr.** ("Gift of Prophecy," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev. and Ex. ed: 1010) suggests 1) assessment of the person who prophesies, 2) reflection on the process by which the prophecy is transmitted, and 3) an evaluation of its content – will not contradict Scripture and if personal word, must pass the test of time. **Graham Cooke** (*Developing Your Prophetic Gifting* [Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2003], 119-158.) 1) Does it edify, exhort, and console?, 2) Test the spirit, 3) What is the spirit of the prophecy?, 4) Does it conform to Scripture?, 5) Does the prophecy glorify the Lord Jesus? 6) Focus on the outcomes, 7) Is it manipulative or controlling? **Craig Blomberg** (*1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], 285.) 1) Does it glorify God rather than the speaker, church, or denomination? 2) Does it accord with Scripture? 3) Does it build up the church? 4) Is it spoken in love? 5) Does the speaker submit him-or herself to the judgment and consensus of others in spiritual humility? 6) Is the speaker in control of him-or herself? 7) Is there a reasonable amount of instruction, or does the message seem excessive in detail? **Jack Deere** (*Surprised by the Voice of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 181) 1) Are they honoring Christ and bringing glory to him, or are they bringing attention to themselves? 2) Are they waling in humility, and does their ministry produce humility? 3) Does their ministry produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit? 4) Are their words accurate and do their predictions come true? 5) Does their teaching fall in line with the Scripture?

Preliminary Screening: Precise Language in Claims Regarding Revelation

Whenever someone alleges to have a “word from the Lord,” it is necessary, before applying the below criteria, to attempt to clarify their meaning. A person who states that “the Lord has told them something” may simply mean that they have a strong feeling or conviction about a specific matter. This type of feeling or conviction would not classify as a prophetic revelation. Prophecy is inspired authoritative revelation given from God by the Holy Spirit to an individual or community for the purpose of edification. However, if someone believes that they have received an inspired authoritative message from the Lord, that message must be judged.

As a component of the initial investigation of whether someone claims to have an authoritative revelation from God, the severity of such a claim must be explained to them. It is critical to make clear that professing to have a “word from God” places one on the same level of authority as a biblical author. Though he differs with the conclusions of this thesis, Jack Deere challenges those who speak prophetic words to exercise caution in using phrases like “thus says the Lord.” He suggests that “we should be quick to copy their passion for God, and slower to use their vocabulary.”² This statement cannot be overemphasized in our day. Far too many people, though genuinely zealous for the Lord, do not use humble discernment in the way they communicate their personal convictions. Quoting David Atkinson, J.I. Packer explains that those who employ such language do not intend to bring contention but rather have simply become caught up in “a behavioral habit [that] developed within the subculture.”³

Although he views NT prophecy as less than inspired authoritative revelation, Jack Deere has poignant advice, “...avoid phrases like ‘thus says the Lord...’ and ‘the Lord

² Jack Deere, *The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2001), 122.

³ J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 216.

showed me that you are supposed to...’ These kinds of phrases imply a very high level of clarity and authority, a clarity and authority that God is not giving to very many people today. Most of us would do much better introducing our prophetic messages with, ‘ I think the Lord might be indicating...’ or ‘I feel impressed to...’⁴ If more believers today were to heed this advice, many of the problems surrounding NT prophecy would be minimized dramatically. Engaging in this preliminary step of clarifying claims and using precise language can help to weed out many of the potential problems and misunderstandings that arise in speaking what is on one’s heart.

It is important to qualify that if someone concedes that their message should be classed as a strong conviction rather than as a ‘word from the Lord,’ that the message may still be valuable and edifying. It would then fall into the same non-inspired category as wise counsel or exhortation from a teacher or preacher. Such exhortations must also be weighed before blindly accepting them, yet they do not carry the same threat against disobedience as an inspired and authoritative revelation. If a person persists in claiming that they have indeed received an inspired and authoritative message, vision, or impression, such things must be examined by the criteria of step two.

Step 1 – Primary Standard: The Nature of God

The primary purpose of this test would be to determine if the message in any way degrades the person of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of his discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul briefly exhorted the Corinthians to recognize that no one speaking by the Spirit of God could say that “Jesus is accursed” and conversely only by the Holy Spirit could someone truly confess that “Jesus is Lord.” (1 Cor 12:1-3). This emphasis upon the centrality of the church’s Christological

⁴ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 193.

confession occurs earlier in the Epistle to the Corinthians where it includes an explicitly theological component as well. In 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 Paul states “For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.” This confession illuminates the non-negotiable center of true Christian theology and provides a pattern for the church to follow in judging claims of prophetic communication. A revelation that leads one to a non-biblical conception of God would automatically be rejected (Dt. 13:1-6, Gal. 1:8).

Assessing prophets for a correct view of God has always been a primary test for the people of God. In the OT false prophets were to be recognized by speaking things against the God of Israel (Dt. 13:1-6, 1 King 18:20-46). The same test holds true for the NT people of God. In the early church, the faithful were able to recognize Gnostics, Montanists, and other false prophets who visited their congregations by identifying their view of God (Rom 16:17, Gal 1:8, 2 Jn 9-11, Rev. 2:14-16, 20-23).⁵

Today the Mormon Church and Jehovah’s Witnesses both have prophets who speak ‘revelation’ to their followers. This revelation many times contradicts Scripture and blasphemes the God of the Bible. For example, the founding prophet of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity by stating that “many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God anyhow – three in one, and one in three... All are to be crammed into one God... It would make the biggest God in all the world. He would be a wonderfully big God – he

⁵ Robeck Jr, “Gift of Prophecy,” 1007-1008.

would be a giant or a monster.”⁶ In our own day, the current prophet of the Mormon Church has specifically stated that he does not believe in the “traditional” Jesus.⁷

In much the same way, the Jehovah’s Witnesses supposed prophet,⁸ the Watchtower, said “the Bible plainly states that in his prehuman existence, Jesus was a created spirit being, just as angels were spirit beings created by God. Neither the angels nor Jesus had existed before their creation.”⁹ In this same publication the Watchtower boldly states that “to worship God on his terms means to reject the Trinity doctrine. It contradicts what the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christians believed and taught. It contradicts what God says about himself in his own inspired Word.”¹⁰ When supposed prophets make utterly blasphemous statements such as these, they must immediately be recognized as false prophets and called upon to repent.

A small step from these groups are some of the prophets who are promoted on Christian television stations such as the Trinity Broadcasting Network. The quotations from Benny Hinn in the opening pages of this thesis serve as excellent examples of how unchecked prophets are spreading cancerous ideas into the minds of many who listen.

⁶ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book Company, 1980), 6:476.

⁷ “I do not believe in the traditional Christ. No, I don't. The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times. He together with His Father, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith in the year 1820, and when Joseph left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of the ages.” President and apostle Gordon B. Hinkley (LDS Church News Week ending June 20, 1998, p.7)

⁸ The Watchtower clearly called itself a prophet when it said, “So, does Jehovah have a prophet to help them, to warn them of...things to come? These questions can be answered in the affirmative. Who is this prophet?...This ‘prophet’ was not one man, but was a body of men and women...today they are known as Jehovah’s Christian witnesses...” (Watchtower Magazine 4/1/72, 197)

⁹ *Should You Believe in the Trinity? Is Jesus Christ the Almighty God?* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1989), 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

Examples of this type of teaching abound but will not be explored further at this point, but are well worth the study.¹¹

Roman Catholicism also claims to communicate new¹² infallible revelation when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states

The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brethren in the faith—he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals...the infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops...when the church...proposes a doctrine ‘for belief as being divinely revealed,’ and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions ‘must be adhered to with the obedience of faith.’ This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself.¹³

In recent years, the Catholic Church has instituted doctrines that seem to be dangerously close to universalism.¹⁴ Other supposed revelations concerning the exaltation of Mary stand dangerously close to drawing focus and adoration away from the only Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. If Pope and the Roman Catholic Church claim to have infallible authority, they must be subject to the same standard of judgment as other prophets.

In summary, if a person or group who claims to be speaking as a prophet makes statements that in any way degrades the person of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit; they are speaking as a false prophet.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. Hanegraaff, Hank. *Christianity in Crisis*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993.

¹² The Roman Catholic Church would insist that any declaration they make would have been contained in the divine deposit.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: An Image Book, Doubleday, 1994), 891, 251.

¹⁴ *Idid*. 839-848, 242-244.

¹⁵ In a following section the focus will shift from examples concerning established prophets such as these to young, well-meaning, or simply mistaken believers.

Step 2 – Scriptural Accuracy

The second and equally important criteria would be to determine if the message in any way contradicts teachings given in the Scriptures. Once again, if the message contradicts a biblical truth or principle, it should be rejected. “Scripture becomes the key by which contemporary ‘prophets’ and prophecies may be assessed.”¹⁶ Johnson agrees and states “the criterion for evaluating messages is whether they are in harmony with the Scriptures and the apostolic Gospel.”¹⁷

The test of Scripture is seen as an honorable method used by the Bereans when the Apostle Paul came to teach them about the risen Lord Jesus in Acts 17: 10-11.¹⁸ In a similar way 1 Corinthians 14:37-38 provides apostolic revelation as standard for anyone claiming to speak as a prophet of God. Anyone who does not “recognize” (evpiginwske, tw) Paul’s authority is from the Lord, should not be “recognized” (avgnoei/tai). Anyone who claims to have a prophetic message must agree with Paul’s authority and accordingly not contradict anything he has taught. As MacArthur explains, “the mark of a false prophet... was his rejection of what Paul taught. Because such persons rejected the apostle’s teaching, they were rejected as legitimate servants of God”¹⁹ The text does not prescribe what a congregation is to do with one who rejects an apostle’s teaching, but MacArthur certainly is correct in saying that rejection of Paul is a mark of a false prophet.²⁰

¹⁶ Robeck, “Gift of Prophecy,” 1010; Deere, *Beginner’s Guide*, 123.

¹⁷ Gregory Lockwood, *First Corinthians* (Concordia Commentary. St Louis: Concordia, 2000), 500.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*. The MacArthur NT Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 393.

²⁰ Rejection of any other Apostolic writing would be equally as condemnable.

The Scriptural test could easily be applied when dealing with a Mormon who holds to the revelations of the ‘prophet’ Joseph Smith. In Moroni 10:3-5 readers are exhorted to read and pray about the truths in the book of Mormon. By applying the test of Scripture we do not need to pray about whether or not the book of Mormon is true or not. Because of some already stated examples, Mormonism fails the Scriptural test because it contradicts the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Within evangelical Christianity there are often instances where applying this principle is more difficult. Deere gives an insightful statement into one of the challenges in the evangelical realm by pointing out that “the frequent cry, ‘That’s unscriptural,’ often indicates nothing more than disagreement with someone’s interpretation of a minor area of doctrine.”²¹ When dealing with these types of issues, Christians on both sides of the debate must be able to humbly and patiently examine concerns on a case-by-case basis. We will never all agree on interpretations of certain Scriptures, so we must be wise in choosing which areas of Scripture are non-negotiable. If a person makes an interpretation of Scripture and attaches a “thus says the Lord” to it, there are bound to be serious contentions.

The test of Scripture is a delicate yet critical component to testing the words of a prophet. If a supposed revelation contradicts a clearly stated portion of Scripture, the prophet’s message must be rejected as false.

Step 3 – Fulfilling the Purpose of Prophecy

The third test of Scripture seeks to determine if the revelation fulfills the purpose of prophecy. If the revelation is not useful for “edification and exhortation and consolation” (Acts 15:32, 1 Cor 14:3), it should be rejected. This test is much more

²¹ Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 181.

difficult to administer due to its relatively subjective nature and could result in a postponed decision and/or moving onto the next step.

Blomberg states that, “large segments of charismatic Christianity so dwell on alleged words of the Lord, under various labels, that are so trite, repetitive, and predictable in nature that one cannot help but suspect that most of them come from human manufacture.”²² Claiming that vague generalities about God or people are prophetic words seems highly speculative. Prophecy throughout the Scriptures normally is specific and purposeful.

One of the primary purposes for prophecies that foretell the future is that they come to pass. If a person foretells a future event and it doesn’t come to pass, it has not fulfilled its purpose. Deere makes a curious statement when he says, “some people think one missed or failed prediction makes a person a false prophet. The Bible, though, doesn’t call someone a false prophet for simply missing a prediction.”²³ Contrary to Deere’s position, Deuteronomy 18:22 clearly says, “when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously.” If a person prophetically claims something is going and it does not, the statement must be labeled as false.

A word of caution is needed here. Though a claim may pass these criteria, it does not conclusively validate its claim to being a revelation from God. It is important to continually seek the Lord’s guidance through the third step in order to ...

²² Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 289-90.

²³ Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 68.

Often times a prophetic word will not be able to be tested by Scripture alone. This may be due to the nature of the prophecy or that it is a predictive word. At this point, the church must cautiously move forward with the next steps.

Step 4 – Proceeding Patiently

To this point we have had solid biblical precedent as to how to evaluate so-called prophetic messages and determine conclusively whether or not they originate with God. Unfortunately, neither the OT nor the NT give clear instructions regarding messages which slip easily past the previous tests. The reality is that the Bible does not come close to exhaustively dealing with the myriad of situations about which people claim to be receiving revelation. The very nature of prophecy as a broad category including a number of different varieties of messages precludes such comprehensiveness.²⁴

However, simply because the Bible remains silent on a given subject does not mean that the church has been left helpless. The fact that God has granted His Spirit to His people for wisdom precludes the necessity of a manual which covers every possible contingency to which we can unthinkingly turn whenever faced with a dilemma.

In the corporate context, the leaders of the congregation provide the last line of defense for the people of God. Any claim of prophecy affecting the congregation would ultimately need to be evaluated by them. It would be the responsibility of the elders to pray over the matter and seek to determine the best course of action. Luke records that the participants of the Jerusalem Council reached their decision by group consensus through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). Although they were not evaluating a prophetic message per se, this incident provides a good model for the

²⁴ Speaking *broadly* and with reference to content, prophecy normally reveals one or more of three things: What God wants us to believe, how God wants us to behave, or what God will bring to pass.

leadership of a church to follow when considering important decisions such as judgment of prophetic messages. Deere rightly states, “predictive and directive words can be judged by the leadership of the church only through the discernment of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

For the individual, the tests of time,²⁶ prayerfulness, and wise counsel are all critical in the evaluation of claims to revelation. Before one submits to a so-called prophecy, he should take time to pray about the situation and then bring it before others, possibly even the leadership of the church, who would be able to offer sound biblical wisdom.

If a prophecy is made with regards to a future event, the church simply has to wait to see whether or not it comes to pass. J.I. Packer suggests that “the only effect such predictions should ever have on anyone’s conduct is to induce preparedness of mind for the possibility that they will be fulfilled, alongside of preparedness for the possibility that they will not.”²⁷ This advice is wise on several fronts. First, having a heart that is prepared to react to God’s leading is always healthy. Second, Packer’s advice grants a sense of assurance that while a person is waiting for God, they can continue on with life and are not handicapped by an unfulfilled prophecy.²⁸

What Should the Church Do with People who Speak Prophetically?

To this point we have concluded that functioning as a prophet is a unique and important role in the ministry of God because a prophet communicates inspired

²⁵ Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 198.

²⁶ Robeck, “The Gift of Prophecy,” 1011.

²⁷ Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 216.

²⁸ Biblical examples of people who waited for God’s prophecies to be fulfilled include Abraham (Gen. 15:4); Joseph (Gen. 37:5); David (1 Sam. 16:13); Daniel (Dan. 9:1-19); Simeon (Lk. 2:25); Peter (Jn. 21:18)

authoritative revelations from God by the Holy Spirit to their audience. Anyone who claims to speak as a prophet is subject to being judged (1 Thess. 5:18-19, 1 Cor. 14:29-33). The dangerous reality of false teachers stands as a prominent reason for this judgment. This section explores the various ways a prophet should be viewed by the congregation based up on the prophecies they speak.

An Accurate Prophet

As 1 Corinthians 12-14 clearly states the gift of prophecy is among the greater gifts because of its usefulness in edifying the Body of Christ. If someone is gifted in this way and consistently speaks words of accurate prophetic revelation, they should be allowed to use their gift openly in the church. It should be noted however that just because a person has a previous track record of accuracy, the standard of judgment should remain consistent every time they speak. It should also be noted that if a person does speak prophetically, they should not quickly be labeled as having the permanent role of prophet. This will help to guard that person from feeling the need to always “have a word” to speak and will also guard the congregation from over dependence upon this gift.

An Inaccurate Speaker

If someone has claimed to speak prophetically but is found to be incorrect they must be confronted in Biblical love (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1; Js. 5:20-21). Claiming to speak when God does not is a serious issue (Jer. 14:14; Ezek. 22:28; 1 Jn 4:1) and must not be allowed to pass without loving confrontation. Blomberg rightly states that “where several of these principles [for judging prophecy] are clearly violated, the church should lovingly but firmly insist that the speaker stop claiming gifts of

inspired utterance...²⁹ Allowing inaccurate prophecies to go unchallenged in a congregation will result in confusion and possibly even apostasy (2 Cor 11:3).

It is extremely important in this process to remember that the goal of confrontation is not to quench the spirit of well-meaning people who seek to be obedient to what they believe the Lord is leading them to do. Often times an immature or overly zealous, though well-meaning, believer can say things they feel are from God, yet are in fact not. Dealing with these instances requires patience and grace. Luke records an example of this kind of patience in the confrontation between Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos in Acts 18:24-26.³⁰ In this situation Apollos was teaching accurately, but incompletely. Priscilla and Aquila rightly confronted Apollos and “explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Apollos received the rebuke well and was able to be used by God powerfully (Acts 18:27-28).

The process provided in Matthew 18:15-20 also serves as an excellent model of how to confront a well-meaning person who speaks falsely in the name of God. The person should be confronted, preferably by part of the church’s leadership, and the error should be addressed. If the person humbly receives the correction, then discipleship should continue and extreme caution should be used in claiming to speak in the name of God in the future (Matt. 18:15). The goal of confrontation is always reconciliation and restoration to the truth of the Scriptures, the community of faith, and the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:1).

If a person does not receive the rebuke by the church leader, they should again be confronted with the concern by other members of the leadership (Matt. 18:16). It is

²⁹ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 286.

³⁰ Though there are certainly differences in this example (Apollos was engaged in teaching rather than prophesying and he was teaching accurately), the account still gives a solid Biblical example for confronting someone who is well intentioned, but is mistaken.

critical during these confrontations to clearly define the severity of the false claims and support the corrections with Scripture.

An Unrepentant Inaccurate Speaker

If a person resists all attempts of correction by the leadership of the church, and persists to make inaccurate prophecies, they must be viewed as a false prophet until they are truly repentant. The issue of what the church of God should do with false prophets is not unclear, though it may be unpopular. If someone insists on false claims and continues to propagate error in the name of God, they must be brought before the congregation and dismissed from fellowship as a false prophet (Matt. 18:17; 2 Cor. 11:4, 2 Jn. 9-11). The purpose of such drastic measures is not to create an environment where people fear serving God, but rather a safe community where people fear misrepresenting God (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 1 Tim 5:20).

The leadership of the church must be strong on this point. As Deere rightly states “churchgoing people can actually encourage false prophecy. People accept and like false prophets because the false prophets say things people want to hear. False prophets don’t challenge the religious establishment or commonly accepted hypocritical religious practices, nor do they criticize contemporary doctrinal prejudices. Instead, they bless the establishment and status quo.”³¹ The leadership must remember that they will answer to God and “share responsibility for the sins of others” (1 Tim 5:22).

If the one under discipline as a false prophet repents of their error and desires to return to the congregation, they should be received back by the church. Reconciliation

³¹ Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*, 207.

and restoration is always the goal of church discipline (Gal. 6:1), but extreme caution should be exercised in restoring them to any type of leadership or teaching position.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

As seen in Chapter Two, functioning as a prophet is a unique and important role in the ministry of God, because a prophet communicates inspired authoritative revelation from God by the Holy Spirit to their audience. The prophets of God throughout history are messengers who receive inspired truths from God for the benefit of those who hear. Biblical prophets always either build upon and clarify previously revealed truths, or unveil new and inspired truths. A prophet will never contradict or remove previously spoken revelation. Prophecies can be directed to groups or individuals and must be obeyed as authoritative words from God (1 Thess 5:21).

This thesis has sought to give NT guidelines that regulate people who claim to speak messages from God, hence assuming the role of prophetic voice. All who act in such a way must be judged to determine their authenticity. The dangerous reality of false teachers stands as a prominent reason for this judgment. God cares deeply for His church and those who speak to her on God's behalf must be examined.

Chapter Three explored Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church as to rightly exercising the gift of prophecy. From this passage we were able to produce a biblical model of judging NT prophets. It was concluded that two or three prophets were allowed to speak and that each message was followed by a time of judging the prophecies by the leadership of the congregation. It was seen that prophets are able to control themselves when they receive and communicate revelation to the people and are therefore held accountable for what they say.

Chapter Four navigated the difficult waters of determining appropriate and biblically based standards of judgment for those who claim to speak prophetically. As noted in the beginning of the chapter, Paul does not explicitly state these standards in his exhortations to the Corinthians and thus these standards had to be drawn from the wider perspective of Scripture. The tests of upholding the revealed nature of God, scriptural accuracy, prayerful guidance by the Holy Spirit, and intentional confrontation for those who speak incorrectly should be upheld with strict integrity.

In conclusion, this thesis is less about calling people false prophets and more about controlling those who speak falsely when claiming to be prophets. This process is not designed to hinder people from being used by God, but more about helping the body of Christ to establish barriers to protect itself from the things Jesus and the Apostles so strongly warned were coming (Matt. 7:15-20, Acts 20:29-30, 2 Tim 3:1-5). For those who do speak incorrectly and sincerely desire to honor the Lord, this thesis should do nothing but encourage them to recognize the severity of claiming to have a word from the Lord God Almighty. For those who are unrepentant in their false prophetic claims I pray this thesis does not just stand as mile marker on the road to the throne of judgment. As in all things that pertain to theology and the community of fellowship people on all sides of this discussion must humbly pray for God to guide us as we minister in His church and await His return.

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