

Romans (73) **The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy**

After our Lord saves us from the guilt of our sin, He begins to conform us to the image of His Son. This is because the Father desires that His Son would be the eldest Son, even the Firstborn Son, one of an immense number of brethren in His family. As Romans 8:29 declares, “For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.” This is a transformative work of God, as He fashions us into a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, teaching us to have a genuine and sincere love for one another even as we seek to encourage and serve one another.

We have seen that this work of transformation involves us, first, dedicating ourselves wholly and unreservedly to our God. As God spoke to us through the apostle, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Upon our commitment to serve God without reservation, we are then to begin this work of conforming our thinking to the Word of God. True spirituality is to be governed by our understanding the Word of God and then conforming our attitudes and behavior to that Word. As Romans 12:2 commands us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” And so, our Lord would have our lives transformed as we come to understand and fully in our minds, our thinking, who we are in Jesus Christ and what He would have us become through Jesus Christ.

The first adjustment to our thinking as Christians is to be humble before the Lord and before one another. All of the true blessings that are ours are ours because of the multitude of God’s mercies. If any one of us stood alone with respect to our self based upon what he has done or could do, he would be justly damned to hell forever. God has given to us who believe all things freely wholly due to His grace alone. Therefore, we are told by the apostle in 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...” A right understanding that we are what we are and have what we have solely due to the mercies of God will lead us not to think more highly of us than we ought to think.

But not only are we not to think too highly of ourselves, but we are “to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” We are to see ourselves as Christians, but as Christians to whom God has entrusted a “measure of faith.” We might say then, that we are not to view ourselves as deserving anything from anyone, but rather that God has entrusted each of us with a stewardship toward others. We owe to others a debt of love to God and we are to serve His people through the use of the spiritual gift that God has given to each one of us. If I put it another way, in looking to your own transformation into the kind of person God has destined for you to become, ***the first area of thinking that you need to change when you become a Christian is that you are no longer to see yourself primarily as an individual, but rather as a gifted person who is a vital member of a new community, the church.*** This is the major theme and the very first point of teaching and emphasis that the apostle presses upon the people of God in the light of the mercies of God that has been shown them. We read in **verses 4ff.**

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

And so, if you desire to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, at the heart of the matter, the first priority for you is to see that ***God has called you by His grace to be a member of His church, serving other members of the church through the gift that God has given to you.***

The church, as defined and described in the Holy Scriptures, is at the center of God's sovereign work of bringing salvation to His chosen people. We are not speaking of the universal church, the total number of the elect of God through history. Rather, we are speaking of belonging to and serving within the local church. It is only within the setting of the local church that the each of us may serve others "***according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.***" And so, again, if you desire to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, at the heart of the matter, the first priority for you, is to see that ***God has called you by His grace to be a member of His local church, serving other members of that church through the gift that God has given to you.***

In **verses 6 through 8** Paul delineates the different ways that different members of the body are gifted by God to serve the body. Here we read a list of seven spiritual gifts. This should not be seen as an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts, for there are other lists in the New Testament that speak of other gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:8-10 (9 gifts); 1 Cor. 12:28f (8 gifts); Eph. 4:11 (4 gifts)). . But Paul identifies these and he declared that they are gifts given to Christians by God's grace. These are not talents brought over from our pre-Christian days. These are spiritual gifts that the grace of God has given to His people. Every Christian has at least one gift. We read the first spiritual gift listed is that of prophecy. Paul wrote of the Christian serving the Lord's people according to the measure of faith, or according to the spiritual gift,...

1. "if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;"

Prophecy was spiritual gift that had a unique role in the early church. The gift of prophecy was God enabling a man or woman to discern spiritual truths or foresee events before they happened. Paul wrote of prophecy, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge..." (1 Cor. 13:2). Here we see that prophecy is a divine enablement to see realities that others do not see. The gift of prophecy imparted this knowledge to the Christian, the Christian was then to impart this knowledge to the people of God.

The Scriptures teach that the risen Lord gave some to be prophets in the church. Ephesians 4:10f read, "He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He gave the apostles, ***the prophets***, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers..." That it was a spiritual gift given to some only in the apostolic age may be seen in its association with the office of apostle, which was clearly limited to the first generation of the Christian era. We read in Ephesians 2:19ff that the Lord has built the church upon the temporary and foundational offices of the apostle and prophet. Of Gentile Christians Paul wrote,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets***, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph. 2:19-21)

Prophets were ones wholly passive in the manifesting of their spiritual gift. God would communicate directly with a prophet, revealing some detail of His will or of some event that was to occur. We read in the Book of Acts of several occasions when this spiritual gift was manifested. In Acts 21 we read of Luke's account of staying with Philip and his four daughters who did prophesy and there they met another prophet.

On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹***He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.*** ¹⁰While we were staying for many days, ***a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.*** ¹¹And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy

Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”¹²When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:8-12)

It was Agabus who had earlier foretold through his gift of prophecy the great famine that came throughout Palestine.

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27ff)

When I was a young Christian, I had an experience of having a prophecy given to me regarding my future “ministry” although I was not yet in the ministry. I was a grocery clerk, a new Christian, and very zealous for the things of the Lord. There was a husband and wife who lived next door to the store, who would come into the store several times a day. They were truly an odd couple. They were probably in their 60’s. He was a very thin man with an English accent, when he spoke, which was rarely. He wore a tweed coat and vest and always seemed to wear a dress hat. He was quiet and tended to follow his wife about. She was equally different but in another way entirely. She was very friendly and outgoing, but she was rather eccentric. She wore rather loose shabby clothing that looked like it had been pulled out of the laundry hamper. Her hair was long and dark, with a silver streak through it. She had a twitch about her and it seemed that she chewed tobacco. They owned a little pet store, mostly birds, in an old converted little house, painted purple, with the words “Jesus saves” on one of the door posts of the front door. She seemed always to have residue from the birds that she would allow to perch on her shoulder when at home. She had a way of talking loud and laughing out loud. The best way that I could describe her was that she was a cross between a female Merlin the Magician and Captain Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* played by Wallace Beery. But they were devout Christians. They heard that I had become a Christian, so they would always make a point of coming up to me and encourage me in the Lord. I really appreciated them in spite of all their eccentricities. She asked me to stop in to their house one day. And there while she was talking with me she said something like this: “The Lord has a purpose for you. I see you traveling far and wide preaching the Word of God.” Again, this was before I had intention of going into the ministry, although it was on my heart. I was impressed and encouraged. She then went on to tell me of one of the most clear prophecies the Lord had ever given to her. She said that back in the 40’s the Lord revealed to her who was the future antichrist. She saw his face in a vision. She then said that years later they were watching TV, when the picture of a man was shown. She said that there on the television screen was the very image she had many years before. I asked his identity. She said it was Henry Kissinger. And so, the Lord taught me early on through her to be skeptical about claimants to the gift of prophecy. Thankfully the people who issued false prophecies in the New Testament age were not regarded and treated as the prophets of the Old Testament if they gave a false prophecy.

Prophecies that were given in the church were not always of the Lord; that is, those who claimed to give prophecies as they were moved by the Spirit did not always do so. Each prophecy given in the church was to be assessed by other prophets present as to its validity. Paul gave clear and detailed instruction to the church at Corinth on the right use of the gift of prophecy. Let us look at the larger context of 1 Corinthians 14 to understand this matter clearly. Here we read of the nature of both the gifts of prophecy and the gift of tongues and how they were to be used in the church. Paul wrote in verse 1: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” He set forth the gift of prophecy to be the superior gift, one that should be desired and used within the church. He then explained why the gift of prophecy was to be preferred to the gift of tongues. Verses 2 and 3 read, “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”

Now we would make the point that when the New Testament speaks of the gift of tongues, it is referring to a miraculous ability for one to speak in a foreign language that he has not previously known or learned. The gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost reveals this clearly. There we read,

⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” (Acts 2:4-8)

The practice of our Pentecostal and charismatic friends in which they claim to speak in an “unknown tongue” in that it is an unintelligible language, or the language of angels, or some even claim to be the language of the Holy Spirit, is never mentioned in the Bible. Every place the gift of tongues is spoken about it refers to the spiritual gift of being able to speak in a foreign language that one has not previously known or studied. Paul’s comment in verses 2 and 3 is what occurs when no one with the gift of interpretation of tongues is present. The one who would speak in a tongue with no translator present would not be speaking to men, for no one understands him, only God would understand him. But in contrast to the person who speaks before the church in a foreign language with no one present to interpret, we read in verse 3, “On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” Everyone in the church would hear and understand what the prophet was speaking to them.

In verse 4 Paul continues to argue the preference and greater benefit of prophesying in the church rather than speaking before the church in a language which no one can understand. “The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.” Our charismatic friends argue that this is one of the blessings of the gift of tongues, in that it builds up oneself. They practice tongue speaking when alone and in prayer, claiming to feel blessed with the presence of God and the peace of God. But Paul was actually condemning the use of the gift of tongue when no one was present in the church to interpret. The result is that the individual is “built up”, rather than the church, and this is not a good thing. Every spiritual gift is given for the benefit of others in the church, never for the benefit of oneself. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” After having said that, Paul is not reversing himself and saying here that God intended the gift of tongues was to build up the individual. Again, Paul was showing the superiority of the gift of prophecy over the gift of tongues, if there were no translator present.

However, Paul was not forbidding the use of the gift of tongues in the church. Just the opposite was true. Verse 5 reads, “Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.” You see, if there were one present to translate or interpret the language for all, then it was of the same value as the gift of prophecy, for in both cases a message from the Lord would have been communicated to the church body.

Next Paul reasons further why it is common sense that for a Christian to speak in a language in the church that no one could understand that it would be useless to the church, therefore it would not be of God. Beginning in verse 6 we read,

⁶Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? ⁷If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. ¹²So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Paul then argues that speaking in tongues in the church, again meaning speaking another language through divine enablement, is only to be done when the message is translated and conveyed to the gathered church.

¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Two principles are underscored here. First, there must be understanding with the mind in order for the gift of tongues to be used rightly, which means that an interpreter would have had to be present. Second, the gift of tongues was only profitable if the church benefited.

The apostle then explained that the gift of tongues was for a sign to unbelieving Jews

²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” ²²Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Paul quotes the Old Testament, Isaiah 28:11 and 12. Let us turn back and consider the OT context of these verses. This is a passage in which God pronounces salvation for a faithful remnant, but He announces His intention to bring His judgment upon them who refused to hear His words. First, God promises blessing upon those who are faithful to Him.

⁵In that day the LORD of hosts will be
For a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty
To the remnant of His people,
⁶For a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
And for strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

God then declared His judgment upon them in whose drunken stupor they failed to hear and heed God’s words.

⁷But they also have erred through wine,
And through intoxicating drink are out of the way;
The priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink,
They are swallowed up by wine,
They are out of the way through intoxicating drink;
They err in vision, they stumble in judgment.
⁸For all tables are full of vomit and filth;
No place is clean.

⁹“Whom will he teach knowledge?”

And whom will he make to understand the message?
Those just weaned from milk?
Those just drawn from the breasts?
¹⁰For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,
Here a little, there a little.”

The present generation was ruined to Him. They would not hear from Him no matter how easy and simple He spoke to them. In spite of the clarity with which He had spoken to them they would not hear. Therefore, God determined that He would “speak” to them through a foreign tongue that they did not know. He declares His judgment upon them that they would hear the strange tongue of the Assyrians in their own streets. They will have invaded them and captured their cities and defeated them.

¹¹For with stammering lips and another tongue
He will speak to this people,
¹²To whom He said, “This is the rest with which
You may cause the weary to rest,”
And, “This is the refreshing”;
Yet they would not hear.
¹³But the word of the LORD was to them,
“Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,
Here a little, there a little,”
That they might go and fall backward, and be broken
And snared and caught. (Isa. 28:5-13)

Here we see that the language of the conquering Assyrians was a sign to them that God had judged them and that they were under His wrath.

Now let us return to 1 Corinthians 14. Again, Paul wrote:

²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.
²¹In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” ²²Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.

The gift of tongues of the Gentile Christians was a sign to the unbelieving Jews who had refused to believe on Jesus the Messiah. It was a sign that the wrath of God was upon them, just as it had been in the days when God judged Judah by the Assyrians.

Paul then concludes this portion of his argument with the application of verses 23 through 25:

²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Here is the explanatory note in **The New Reformation Study Bible**:

Up to this point, Paul has been discussing the use of tongues among believers. But what about unbelievers who hear the tongues? The Corinthians have ignored them, and Paul admonishes the church for this display of spiritual immaturity. He appeals to “the law,” (the Old Testament) to show that God uses unintelligible speech as a sign of judgment. Isaiah 28:11 explains how God judged the Israelites through Assyrians speaking a foreign language. If non-Christians come to the worship and hear an

unintelligible language, they will be repelled (v. 23) and reject the gospel. In this situation uninterpreted tongues are a sign of judgment “to unbelievers” (v. 22). But the Corinthians should aim at bringing unbelievers to repentance and to the recognition that God is present (v. 25). Because God uses the understandable words of prophecy to accomplish this purpose, prophecy is a sign “for those who believe”; it is evidence of god’s goodness to them.¹

Paul then gives some counsel on the proper practice of speaking in tongues and employing the gift of prophecy in the church. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:26ff:

²⁶What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

Here we see that the revelatory gifts of tongues and prophecy were only to be used if it brought benefit to the gathered church. “Let all things be done for building up.” Further, we see that not every prophetic utterance was to be accepted without properly authenticating that it was of God. The gift of prophecy was not manifested in such a way that the gifted person was overwhelmed or overpowered by his gift; he was able to remain silent in the situation warranted it.

But with respect to passing judgment on the legitimacy of any prophecy, women were not to take part publically. We read in verses 33ff,

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

There is difference of opinion on how to interpret this. Some see this as prohibiting any speech by women in the church. But what Paul said earlier seems to suggest that this is not what he meant here. In 1 Corinthians 11:4f Paul wrote, “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.” It is clear from these verses that it was proper for a woman to pray or prophesy if her head were covered, but it would not have been proper if her head were uncovered. I would argue, therefore, the prohibition in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is a prohibition of women to pass judgment upon the authenticity of prophetic utterances in the public church gathering.

Paul then concluded his discussion of the revelatory gifts in verses 36ff.

³⁶Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But all things should be done decently and in order.

What about women as prophets? Does not the Scripture declare, that the four daughters of Philip prophesied? Did they and other women prophesy in the church? Yes, if their heads were covered to show submission and respect toward their husbands. But does not Paul write elsewhere, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim. 2:12). Why then, would a woman prophesying in a church setting be proper if here head were covered if she were not permitted to

¹ R. C. Sproul, gen. ed. *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1819.

teach men? I think that the answer is that in the employment of the gift of prophesy, the speaker, whether a man or woman, was wholly passive, God was speaking through him or her. It was not, therefore, the woman teaching men, but God speaking directly through her to the church.

The New Testament teaches that the revelatory gifts were of temporary duration. We read in 1 Corinthians 13:

⁸Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. ¹³And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:8, “whether there are prophecies, they will fail.” The question arises, “When do the prophecies ‘fail’; that is, cease to be seen among the people of God? Paul declared, “when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.” The question is, therefore, “What is that which is ‘perfect’ and when will that time arrive?”

There is not agreement as to what Paul was referring to as “that which is perfect.” The non-cessationists, that is, those who believe the continuance of these revelatory gifts until the end of the age believe that which is perfect is a reference to the perfect state we will find ourselves after the Lord Jesus returns the second time for His people. Cessationists, like myself, hold to that which is perfect as something that had been realized toward the end of the apostolic era.

The most common view of the cessationists, those who claim the revelatory gifts ceased in the early Christian era argue “that which is perfect” refers to the New Testament Scriptures. “Once the Bible was completed, then the need and presence of the revelatory gifts was no longer needed. Their presence and use became less frequent and then extinguished.

I have a different view, however. “That which is perfect” refers not to the New Testament Scripture, and not to the Second Coming of Christ or the eternal state. It speaks of the maturity of the church as a world-wide body of believers without ethnic distinction. In other words, the revelatory gifts were designed to incorporate Gentiles into the church along with believing Jews, so that all would be convinced that this was God’s plan for His people. Once the church became fully world-wide and it was no longer seen as a narrow Jewish sect, the revelatory gifts ceased to be seen and used among the people of God.

In argument for the support of this position, we may understand that the Greek word translated here as “perfect”, is also translated elsewhere as “mature.” Paul had wrote,

⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰But when that which is perfect (mature) has come, then that which is in part will be done away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Here the “childish things” are giving forth prophecies, speaking in tongues, and enjoying a miraculous gift of “knowledge. These were gifts used in the early church before it had become mature. But once the church had matured, these things “childish” things ceased.

There are other passages that confirm this idea. Consider **Ephesians 3:1-7**:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles-- ²if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵*which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets*: ⁶that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the

gospel,⁷ of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

Both the office of the apostle and the office and function of New Testament prophet were for the purpose of establishing the universal nature of the church. Once that was accomplished, “prophecies ceased.”

Our non-cessationist friends who claim to have God speaking directly to them or through them because they have the gift of prophecy, undercut the authority and the sufficiency of the Holy Bible to be the only source of objective truth about God and His dealings with people. And when one surrenders the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures, problems will result.

A case in history that illustrates this is the life and ministry of **Edward Irving**, a popular London preacher of the 19th century. I mention this man because he is a prime example of what can happen when a sincere Christian surrenders the Bible alone as authoritative revelation for the Christian life. The account is chronicled in the book written by Arnold Dalimore, *The Life of Edward Irving* (Banner of Truth, 1983).

Irving was a very popular London preacher in the first half of the 19th century. He was tall, good-looking, and very eloquent. He had a large following from early on. Some viewed him as being one of the brightest prospects in the ministry in that period of time. *But he was not right on this principle of the sole authority of the Scriptures in matters of faith and practice.* For he was a man who envisioned himself becoming God's great spokesman in the last days before the Second Coming of Christ, which he taught would occur in his day. He believed and taught that the end would be preceded by a great revival in which the miraculous gifts of healings and prophecies and speaking in tongues would be reintroduced by God into the church. As such, he had **the longing for new revelation from God.** This became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people are looking for "new" revelation, they will probably find it. And Irving and his followers did.

(Life of Irving, p. 106).

Because Irving made popular this movement, he has been termed “the Forerunner of the Modern Charismatic Movement.”²

Irving began to give credence to dreams and visions. One such occasion was when a young Scottish girl of 16, Margaret Macdonald, had a dream through which she believed God revealed a new understanding of the Bible's teaching respecting the church and the tribulation period. Irving went to see her and believed her. Afterwards he popularized the teaching in London. It was picked up by others, particularly the Plymouth Brethren, through whom the teaching came to the States. Not many people know that the teaching of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, the belief that Christ will return in two stages, had its origins in this manner.

One of the problems of abandoning Scripture as one's sole authority is that you become quite speculative and even creative in your doctrine. Your thinking will lack discipline. Because there is not this firmly fixed “fence” about your thinking, you embrace notions and ideas in an uncritical fashion. This happened to Irving. He began to teach strange doctrines, one that was quite bizarre and contrary to Scripture, was the idea that Jesus Christ possessed a sinful nature.

Back in his church in London, “the gifts” began to be manifested in the membership. People would be allowed to stand and proclaim the word of God as it came to them supernaturally. Other gifts were manifested, those of healings, speaking in tongues, and prophetic utterances. Some in his congregation objected to the disturbances. They were denounced in that criticism of the manifestations was viewed as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

² This is the subtitle of his biography. Arnold Dalimore, *The Life of Edward Irving the Forerunner of the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Banner of Truth, 1983).

(Life of Irving, p. 143).

The result of this was that Irving himself was marginalized. His preaching of the Scriptures was viewed as the Word of God second hand, but when a person was "moved to speak by the Spirit", that was seen as God speaking directly. He was often interrupted while preaching. Persons who were viewed as having the greater gift of prophecy discredited him.

(Life of Irving, p. 161).

Eventually Irving was dismissed from the church and deposed from the ministry itself.

Irving lost his health. But to the end, alone and without a ministry, he believed that God was going to miraculously heal him and raise him up once again to be the mighty evangelist of the end times. The lesson of all this is: ***do not abandon the principle of the Scriptures as your sole authority in matters of faith and practice.***

Even in the height of its use, the gift of prophecy was never given as an infallible assurance that God's Word was being communicated. There would have been doubts until and if the prophetic word was confirmed. Scripture is not like that. The written Word of God is true in all of its pages and is true to anyone and everyone at all times. Only the authoritative all-sufficiency of Scripture can maintain this claim.

Finally, I think it would be good if those who believed and practiced the gift of prophecy asked themselves if they are guilty of violating the warnings in Scripture about adding to the Word of God. Revelation 22:

¹⁸For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. ²⁰He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! ²¹The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. (Rev. 22:18-21)

Additional Sources about this Subject

Benjamin Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (Banner of Truth Trust, orig. 1918).

Babcock, Neil, *My Search for Charismatic Reality* (The Wakeman Trust, 1992).

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word* (Banner of Truth, 1993).

Arnold Dalimore, *The Life of Edward Irving; The Fore-Runner of the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Banner of Truth, 1983).