A Summary Critique: The Gift of Prophecy In The New Testament And Today

Prophecy. In almost any church where the word comes up, controversy exists. What is the gift of prophecy referred to in the New Testament? Is it available to the church today? If so, how is it to be exercised? These are some of the basic questions dealt with in Wayne Grudem’s *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today.*

Dr. Wayne Grudem is a well-respected evangelical scholar, currently Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Building on the work he did for his doctoral dissertation, he has prepared a readable discussion of the gift of prophecy. In an open, frank way, he deals with the questions surrounding the controversy and offers some fresh insight.

THE BASIC PREMISE

The foundational premise of Grudem’s work is that *the exercise of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church entails reporting in human words something that God spontaneously brings to the mind of the believer.* He distinguishes the exercise of this gift from the activity of both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles — attributing to these two groups a unique authority as those who brought “God’s very words.” Basically, his view is that there can be a “revelation” from the Holy Spirit to a person or persons, and also a spoken response to that revelation which can have “impaired validity” and “unreliability.” That is really the essence of what I am arguing for in this book, and what — it seems to me — the New Testament usually calls “prophecy.” But if the *concept* be admitted even if it is called not “prophecy” but “an unreliable human speech-act in response to a revelation from the Holy Spirit,” there does not seem to be much difference in our understanding at this point (p. 95).

Grudem therefore advocates two *levels* of inspiration and authority. He is clear — at least in his mind — that he is not advocating two *kinds* of prophecy, but rather differences in the type of authority which attaches to the words spoken in the prophecy.”¹

He builds his case on a few well-defined themes. These core concepts are: (1) the New Testament apostles and the Old Testament prophets are counterparts, sharing the same status and authority. (2) These two inspired groups spoke “the very words of God” and provided us with the Scriptures. (3) Those who exercised the gift of prophecy as described in the New Testament spoke something *less* than “the very words of God.”

The first two chapters rally the evidence to prove his first two points — and the case is well made. Chapters three through five offer the grounds for the third concept, but here the case is not made quite as well. Although he succeeds to a large degree in substantiating his position, his argumentation is sometimes weak. This is seen in his failing to consider other interpretations of the passages he uses to prove his point.

SOME WEAKNESSES IN APPROACH
For example, one would-be proof that prophecy in the New Testament church was less than fully authoritative is built on 1 Corinthians 14:30 — “If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent” (RSV). After explaining his understanding of how the “mechanics” of this command would be carried out, he states that “the first prophecy might be lost for ever and never heard by the church.” From this he concludes: “If prophets had been thought to speak the very words of God, we would have expected Paul to show more concern for the preservation of these words and their proclamation. If God actually were speaking his words through a prophet to the church, it would be important for the church to hear those words!” (p. 80).

Yet, challenges to this view are not even considered. If the premise of this argument is left to stand as it is — namely, that if “prophecy” is lost it could not have been authoritative — we would have to conclude that only the words of Paul or the Old Testament prophets or even Jesus that were recorded were authoritative. Were the words of Jesus that were not recorded any less authoritative than those we have in the Gospel records?

Additionally, why must we conclude that the portion of the prophecy left unspoken by the first prophet — the one required to sit — was hopelessly lost? Is it not possible that God could complete the thought of the first prophet who spoke through the words of the second? It is clear that Grudem’s conclusion is not the only way to understand Paul’s words here.

Besides discussing Paul’s instructions regarding prophecy as found in 1 Corinthians, Grudem also looks at some actual prophecies from the Book of Acts to build his case. And, again, he sometimes falls short of building his case completely. One such instance is in his discussion of Acts 21:10-11, which Grudem entitles: “A prophecy with two small mistakes.” His argument centers on the prophet Agabus’s words, where he tells Paul: “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”

According to Grudem, there are two errors in this prophecy. And because of these, he determines that Agabus’s “prophecy” was “a ‘revelation’ from the Holy Spirit concerning what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem, and [that Agabus] gave a prophecy which included his own interpretation of this revelation (and therefore some mistakes in exact detail)” (p. 100).

The first mistake Grudem cites is that (according to Luke’s account later in Acts) the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul (p. 96; cf. Acts 21:33; 22:29). The second has to do with his determination that the Jews did not deliver Paul over to the Gentiles but that he was, in fact, rescued from the Jews by Roman soldiers (p. 97; Acts 21:32-35).

Though Gruden spends many pages discussing how to deal with the “inaccuracies” of Agabus’s prophecy, he overlooks some very crucial data. Acts does contain other pertinent information about the fulfillment of this prophecy — including some comments by Paul himself.

In Paul’s personal comments about his experience, he seems to indicate that he was, in fact, a prisoner of the Jews and was delivered over to the Romans by them (28:17; cf. 27:21). Additionally, the centurion who “rescued” Paul wrote to Felix the governor saying that Paul “was arrested by the Jews” (23:26-30). Seeing that Paul himself says he had been “delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans” and the centurion’s letter confirms Paul’s arrest by the Jews, it will hardly do to say that Agabus’s prophecy was in error. Clearly, “the Jews were responsible for his being in the hands of the Romans.”

It is such less-than-thorough argumentation that mars Grudem’s work. Nevertheless, even with these weak links, he forges a chain of thought that is persuasive. Although the argumentation has some flaws, the argument is not lost.

OTHER ISSUES
The remainder of his book deals with some of the issues that naturally follow from his premise — such as the difference between teaching and prophecy, the content of prophecies, the leadership role of prophets in the church, and so forth.

As a whole, the thoughts that Grudem offers in these latter chapters are challenging and insightful. Yet, there are occasions when he makes assertions that are not well substantiated. One example will suffice.

In discussing whether all believers could prophesy, the author states that “gifts such as administration, teaching, helping, giving aid and (probably) speaking in tongues could be used at will. The believer who had one of these gifts could put it to use at any time. But prophecy was more spontaneous and could only be used when the prophet received a revelation. It seems that no one had the ability to prophesy at will” (p. 210).

This distinction between the exercise of certain gifts does not appear to be as clear as Grudem implies. Different believers would come to a service with different contributions to make (1 Cor. 14:26) — whether it was a teaching, a tongue, or a revelation. Apparently, each had received something from the Lord that was to be offered for the edification of the body. Does Grudem want to suggest that it would be acceptable to offer a teaching or a prayer in tongues that was not Spirit-directed? If not, then how is the work of the Spirit that directs the exercise of these gifts different from that which direct the exercise of the gift of prophecy?

One additional concern arises from Grudem’s treatment. He appears to group together all the “revelatory” gifts; he fails to make any distinctions between the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, or exhortation on the one hand, and the gift of prophecy on the other. Considering the practical and application-oriented approach he has taken, it is unfortunate that he did not apply himself to the task of delineating the relationships between these gifts and prophecy, as he did with the gift of teaching with respect to prophecy.

WELL WORTH READING

The book does have several very helpful features that should be pointed out. It was wonderful to find a section dealing with application at the end of every chapter. In these sections Grudem attempts to apply his insight to practical church life — something that is often lacking in treatments of the theology of gifts. His discussion of the duration of the gift of prophecy beyond New Testament times was excellent; he offers a clear argument for the perpetuity of the gifts. Also, his three appendices — dealing with apostleship, the canon, and the sufficiency of Scripture — are all helpful.

In drawing attention to the shortcomings of this work, there is no intent to discount its value. Dr. Grudem has done the body of Christ a great service by providing an honest look at a controversial subject. The Gift of Prophecy is a biblical, readable, and practical treatment of the subject. He offers evangelical Christians who believe in the perpetuity of the gifts a fine resource for developing a sound and workable view of prophecy that preserves the authority of Scripture and avoids the snare of subjectivism. His work will undoubtedly help the church obey Paul’s injunction: “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:19-21).

— Brian Onken

1 It is worth noting that Graham Houston has also written a book advocating a “two level” approach to understanding prophecy. Unlike Grudem, Houston finds both levels in the Old Testament as well. (cf. Prophecy — A Gift for Today? [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989], 27-41.)

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