



Psalm 119.105

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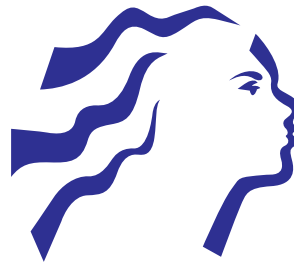
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We cannot let  
counterfeit  
prophecy...  
discourage us  
from practicing  
the real thing...



## The Church's Hairbrush

The Gift of Prophecy  
In The Contemporary Congregation

By Roderick A. Graciano

### A Proverbial Observation

King Solomon took a spiritual principle he had learned from his own family's history, and preserved it in a pithy saying. The translators of King James put Solomon's proverb this way:

Where there is no vision, the people perish:  
but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.  
(Prov. 29.18 KJV)

Let's examine this verse closely, beginning with the first phrase: "Where there is no vision..." Interestingly, this vision Solomon spoke of had nothing to do with corporate goal-setting. He was not thinking of an aspiration or an inspired objective, but rather of a prophetic vision. The Hebrew noun is *chazon* (pronounce the *ch* as in *Bach*), and the Old Testament uses it frequently and uniformly to mean a prophetic revelation, as in Isaiah 1.1: "The *vision* concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw..." Hence, the NIV translates the beginning of Prov. 29.18, "Where there is no revelation..." and the NRS translates, "Where there is no prophecy..."

The next phrase in the King James translation needs tweaking. The words, "the people *perish* [Heb. *parah*]," are better handled by newer translations that render them: "the people *cast off restraint*." In other Proverbs, Solomon used *parah*, the Hebrew verb in this clause, to express the act of ignoring *counsel* or *discipline* (Prov. 1.25; 8.33; 13.18; 15.32), i.e., the act of casting off moral restraint and accountability. *Parah* actually roots back into the idea of letting one's hair grow wild. Picture a head of hair in tangled disarray. This is how Solomon pictured a community without prophetic revelation; he saw its people running wild, morally out of control and in spiritual disarray (like the Israelites with the golden calf in Exodus 32.25 where again *parah* is used).

Thankfully, the second half of Proverbs 29.18 provides the solution for this spiritual disarray: “but he that keepeth the *law* [Heb. *torah*], happy is he.” The translations of this clause are essentially correct, but they tend to miss the point that the third-person pronoun (usually translated *he*) refers back to “the people,” or more correctly, “a people,” in the first line. Here’s how I would translate this proverb:

Where there is no prophetic vision, a people casts off restraint,  
but a people keeping the Law—happy is that people!

We see that Solomon, with his wonderful observational powers, had crystallized into words the important synergy between prophetic ministry and the biblical law. He recognized that simple possession of the Scriptures (*Torah*) will never keep the people of God in spiritual order for long. A prophetic voice (*chazon*) is also required to regularly call a people back to Scripture, and urge them forward in the orderly pursuit of biblical holiness. When this synergy occurs, a people (whether a nation or a smaller community) experiences true happiness. In short, prophetic ministry is like a hairbrush that takes the snarls out of a morally confused community and helps restore it to an orderly obedience to Scripture.

Let me pause here to define what I mean by *prophecy*. The Bible provides abundant information about prophecy, but the present article hasn’t the room for a thorough word study. Permit me, therefore, to share my own working definition, which I believe is supported by the biblical data: Prophecy is the gift of *disclosing the thoughts of God, as prompted spontaneously by the Holy Spirit*. Within the scope of this definition of prophecy, there have always existed two orders of prophetic revelation. Revelation of the *first order* is that kind which:

- (1) is recorded as Scripture,
- (2) has wide application,
- (3) requires the obedience of God’s people, and
- (4) is often appropriately introduced with the phrase “thus saith the Lord.”

Such revelation was last given through the apostles of Jesus Christ and preserved as the New Testament, and we can rightly call it *authoritative*. The *second order* of prophecy is that kind which:

- (1) was given both through “canonical prophets”<sup>1</sup> as well as through people whose words were rarely preserved,<sup>2</sup>
- (2) is usually addressed to a narrower audience,<sup>3</sup>
- (3) is often less directive than revelation of the first order,<sup>4</sup> and
- (4) is always subordinate to revelation of the first order, i.e., subject to testing and correction by the Scriptures (1Cor. 14.29,37).

Our present interest lies in this prophecy of the second order, which we can appropriately call *subordinate prophecy*. While this kind of prophecy does not have the authority of a first-order revelation, it does come as a gift of the Spirit, and thus has a supernatural element to it. Subordinate prophecy may involve all kinds of declarations, even of a predictive nature at times, but in this article I focus particularly on that kind of declaration intended to *disclose the thoughts of God* for the sake of restoring spiritual order to a community.

### **National Level**

2 Kings 17.13 summarizes this historical work of the Prophets who called their communities back to Torah and spiritual order:

The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers:  
“Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees,  
in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey  
and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.”

1 Kings 18 records a great example of prophetic ministry thus restoring a people to Torah. This chapter describes Israel in spiritual disarray, at a time when some people followed the LORD and many others followed Baal or other false deities. Based on a revelation from God, the prophet Elijah summoned the religious leaders of the nation to a showdown on Mount Carmel. By a prophetic act, Elijah successfully “brushed” the prophets of Baal out of the community. The Lord used Elijah’s prophetic voice to turn the people’s “hearts back again” into the straight and untangled way.

### **Congregational Level**

In New Testament times we see the straightening and ordering ministry of *chazon* (prophetic vision) in the church of Ephesus. The Ephesians had received the Gospel under the ministries of Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, and Paul. The first Christians emerging from the Ephesian synagogue knew the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul disciplined these Christians for a period of two years “in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19.9), and later wrote a powerful epistle to them. Timothy labored in Ephesus, publicly reading and teaching the Scriptures (1Tim. 4.13; 2 Tim. 4.2). If possession of the Scriptures were sufficient by itself to keep a congregation on track, the Ephesian church would have remained in good order. However, by the final decade of the first century, this Scripture-rich church had lost its first love. What was required? A prophetic revelation (*chazon*) to reveal the spiritual deception that had crept up on them. The Holy Spirit, speaking through the prophet John, exhorted the Ephesians to return to the straight path of genuine love for Christ and one another (Rev. 2.1-7).

### **Individual Level**

Of course such prophetic ministry to a corporate body, and the outworking of Solomon’s principle, must ultimately make its impact on the personal level. For the prophetic “hairbrush” to brush the snarls out of a congregation, it must bring spiritually off-track *individuals* back into line by repentance. Paul envisioned this work as one of the functions of the New Testament gift of prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14.22-25, Paul explained how a prophetic revelation in a church service could arrest an unbelieving or spiritually ignorant person, causing him to “be convinced by all that he is a sinner.” As a result of such a prophecy, Paul continued, “the secrets of his heart will be laid bare, so he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” Apparently, in a congregation made up of individuals at diverse levels of spiritual health and maturity, God uses *chazon*, prophetic revelation, as a means to keep the people from “casting off restraint.”

No wonder people in biblical times considered prophecy a great blessing, and no wonder they saw the *lack* of it as a curse! As Wayne Grudem writes,

The existence of prophecy among the people of Israel was a great blessing, for it indicated that God cared about them enough, even in their sins, to speak personally to them. While God was giving prophecies, he still had a relationship with them. On the other hand, the cessation of prophecy was a sign that God had withdrawn his favour from people who had strayed far from him (1 Sam. 3:1; 28:6; Lam. 2:9; Is. 29:10; Hos. 9:7; Mic. 3:7). The extensive outpouring of the gift of prophecy at the inception of the new covenant was thus an indication of God’s abundant favour towards the new covenant church (Acts 2:16-18), and a functioning gift of prophecy is a sign of God’s blessing on a church (1 Cor. 14:22).<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the gift of prophecy is *the church’s hairbrush*, given to help brush a congregation into a unified path of obedience to the Scriptures. In our day when the moral behavior of church people is often indistinguishable from that of the society at large, it behooves us to recognize the prophetic gift as a blessing and

give the church's hairbrush its proper place in our public ministries.

### **Why Do We Need Prophecy When We Each Have The Spirit?**

Some will object that we don't need the gift of prophecy today, since we all have the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit convicts us directly without the need of some "prophet." Indeed, we have all experienced the Spirit's direct conviction, but by this logic, we don't need teachers or counselors either, since the Spirit is able to teach and counsel us without the aid of others (1John 2.27). Such reasoning reveals an individualistic and particularly Western approach to Christianity. The biblical portrait of Christianity in the early (and Eastern) church is a much more corporate picture. Paul emphasized that the temple of the Holy Spirit is the *corporate* church body. "For *we* are the temple of the living God, as God has said: 'I will live with *them* and walk among *them*, and I will be *their* God, and *they* will be my people'" (2 Cor. 6.16, emphasis added). The Spirit delights to work in the corporate body of the assembled church. God delights to "walk among" the gathered congregation. The Spirit of God is perfectly capable of ministering to us directly (and does), but He often chooses to minister to us through the spiritual gifts of other believers.

With regard to the gift of prophecy, God knows when it is more effective—for whatever reason—to speak to us from without rather than from within. Solomon observed that even a man after God's own heart, like his own father King David, needed the external voice of the prophet bringing a corrective *chazon*. Inspired often by the Holy Spirit, King David knew God and God's *Torah*. Nevertheless, there were times in David's life when he resisted the inner work of the Spirit and rationalized even the grossest of sins. At such a juncture, the Spirit of God would work through a prophet like Nathan to break through David's blindness and rationalization with a prophetic message (2 Sam. 12.1-25). If a man like David occasionally needed a prophetic revelation to keep him from casting off spiritual accountability, how much more must we need it?

### **Haven't Some Gifts Like Prophecy Passed Away?**

Unfortunately, opponents raise additional objections to exercising prophecy in the church today. They usually undergird their objections with the doctrine that *some* spiritual gifts have passed away. Those who hold to this cessationism cannot teach that *all* spiritual gifts have passed away, for to do so would call into question their own gift of teaching, since gifts like teaching, serving, and giving are listed *with* prophesying in passages like Romans 12.4-7. But how can theologians chop up the New Testament lists of spiritual gifts and say that some have passed away and others haven't? This debate certainly has its complexities, but in the end, unpopular spiritual gifts can only be dismissed by building a theological construct to support a preconceived idea. Let us take note: there is no scripture that teaches that any spiritual gifts will pass away before the perfecting of the body of Christ at His coming (1 Cor. 13.8-11; Eph. 4.11-13). While many have taught that some spiritual gifts passed away at the completion of the New Testament canon, the New Testament itself teaches no such thing. It does teach that spiritual gifts will pass away, but not "until we *all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4.13). All the spiritual gifts were given for the building up and maturing of the church and will operate until that work is done. The Book of Revelation and the prophecy of Joel, quoted by Peter in Acts 2, confirm that charismatic phenomena including prophecy will occur up until "the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord" (Acts 2.20).

### **What About The Abuses!**

While we ask how theologians can teach the cessation of some gifts, we should answer the more important question of *why* they have felt compelled to teach this. The answer is that throughout church history, even when men of stature like Augustine or Luther taught the cessation of spiritual gifts, it was *not* because of something they found in Scripture. Instead, cessationism has always been born from *subjective experience*. Early in their careers, both Augustine and Luther taught the cessation of gifts like healing, because they had

not personally experienced it. Happily, both men changed their views later in life, based on their subsequent experiences of the miraculous. When it comes to the gift of prophecy in today's church, it is not so much lack of experience as the overabundance of *bad experiences* that has negatively biased the church. False prophecy has hurt so many people, that entire denominations have been tempted to bar this particular gift from their corporate life. However, false teaching has hurt countless people too, and the church is not about to outlaw teaching! As Gordon Fee and other godly counselors urge us, "the antidote for abuse is proper use."<sup>6</sup> We cannot let counterfeit prophecies intimidate us and discourage us from practicing the real thing, any more than we can let the phenomenon of counterfeit money keep us from using real cash. We cannot afford the consequences of surrendering these assets.

## Consequences Of Neglecting the Gift of Prophecy

### *Lack of Holiness*

If we quench the Spirit by avoiding prophecy in our church life (1Thess. 5.19-22), we risk various consequences. First of all, the prophecy-poor church may fall short in purity and holiness. Many sins go unexposed in the church without prophesy, even as Solomon's proverb implies. Indeed, this connection between prophecy and purity reveals a deeper reason why churches, both non-charismatic *and* charismatic, have eschewed *genuine* prophecy in their midst. Oracular pronouncements of peace, prosperity, prestige, fertility and romance are fine, but when prophecy begins to expose our personal sins, we do exactly what the woman at the well did. When Jesus surfaced the problem of her husband-hopping, the Samaritan woman said, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet" (John 4.19). She was not yet ready to embrace Christ's prophetic agenda, though, and quickly tried to redirect the conversation onto a doctrinal issue that had nothing to do with her personal life. In like manner, when the Spirit of prophecy uses someone to address our secret sins, we often divert the discussion onto a doctrinal issue, perhaps onto the question of whether prophecy is valid for today. However, our problem in *these* situations is *not* with the continuance or discontinuance of prophecy, any more than the Samaritan woman's problem was with the proper locale for worship. Instead, as independent-minded Americans (or Samaritans), we simply resent anyone invading our privacy and pressing us to change! When the prophetic hairbrush yanks at the snarls of our souls, it irritates us so much that we want to hurl the brush away. Nevertheless, we need prophecy to guide people into deeper holiness, and when it does its purifying work, lasting benefit follows.

The ministry of Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, illustrates how the prophetic hairbrush might do this work in a church similar to those of today. In chapter 51 of Spurgeon's *Autobiography*, the great man wrote:

While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, "There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took ninepence, and there was fourpence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for fourpence!" A city missionary, when going his rounds, met with this man, and seeing that he was reading one of my sermons, he asked the question, "Do you know Mr. Spurgeon?" "Yes," replied the man, "I have every reason to know him, I have been to hear him; and, under his preaching, by God's grace I have become a new creature in Christ Jesus. Shall I tell you how it happened? I went to the Music Hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place; Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul."

I could tell as many as a dozen similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description, that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, "Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he

could not have described me so exactly.” And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen person’s nudge their neighbors with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going out, “The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Lack of Healings**

Closely related to a lack of holiness in the church is the lack of healings. In James 5.13-18, the Scripture teaches that *some* sickness is related to sin in the life of the ill person or his community. “Therefore confess your sins to each other,” James writes, “and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” A prophetic voice in the congregation can help identify specific sins and thus serve as an aid to confession and repentance. Without prophetic insight, church elders sometimes never get to the heart of the issue between God and the ailing subject.

Furthermore, the lack of prophetic insight often hinders church elders from discerning a basis for the “prayer of faith,”<sup>8</sup> whether or not there is sin involved with the illness. The first dramatic healing that Kaaren and I experienced early in our marriage was the restoration of one of her molars. We had sought the Lord about how to take care of a cracked cusp since we had no money for a dental crown. As I prepared for church one Sunday, the Spirit spoke to me and said, “This is the day, take your oil to church.” That day, as the church elders anointed Kaaren with oil and prayed, God instantly healed her and brought physical relief to her tooth. I have often prayed for sick people since then *without* any leading from the Lord, and the results have been generally disappointing.

### **Loss of Encouragement**

Lack of holiness and infrequent repentance and healing certainly bring malaise to a congregation. A prophetic ministry combats these lacks and provides encouragement in other ways. “You can all prophesy one by one,” writes Paul, “so that all may learn and all be *encouraged*” (1 Cor. 14:30-31). During the last eighteen months, a pastor I know has suffered some deep losses in the church he shepherds, but he has confessed to receiving great encouragement and strengthening from the Lord through prophecies that predicted *specific* trials before they occurred!<sup>9</sup> An interesting aspect of the Spirit’s prophetic ministry to this pastor is that it has come primarily through women.

### **Lost Voice For Women In the Church**

Many churches have lost out on a great deal of encouragement and correction from the Lord because they have made no place for the prophetic voice of women. The first-century church had women who prophesied (Acts 21.9; 1 Cor. 11.5),<sup>10</sup> but we have often marginalized spirit-led women in the modern church. I am convinced that God will hold us accountable for this, in fact He already has, for we have suffered from a lack of strategic direction that God would have given to us had we been willing to receive guidance and correction from *women* prompted by the Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

It behooves every congregation, then, to reconsider the place of prophecy in their church life. Some of our congregations need to reexamine their cessationist position *or practice*, and ask again whether Scripture truly warrants their stance. If, on the contrary, the New Testament urges us to pursue this gift (1Cor. 14.1, 39; 1Thes 5.20), then we must not disobey for fear of abuses, but begin to identify and train the prophetically gifted, providing opportunities for them to contribute in public ministries. Other congregations, who already encourage the gift of prophecy in their midst, need to sharpen their discipline of testing the spirits (1Thes. 5.21; 1John 4.1), and maintain vigilance in providing *accountability* for their prophets (1Cor. 14.29). Dear friends, we have long prayed for revival, awakening and cultural transformation. Is it possible that these divine blessings are delayed because we have mishandled the church’s hairbrush?

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The prophetic words of Samuel “came to all Israel” (1Sam. 3.19; 4.1), yet none of those words were recorded as Scripture from the time of the vision against Eli’s house (1Sam. 3) until the gathering at Mizpah (1Sam 7).
- <sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 2.3-5 records an instance of revelation given to the anonymous prophets of both Bethel and Jericho. These men did not write Scripture nor did they purport to repeat the very words of God, but God had revealed to them that it was the day of Elijah’s departure.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g., the revelations Paul shared with the ship’s crew in Acts 27.
- <sup>4</sup> E.g., the prophetic warnings to Paul by the Christians of Tyre and Caesarea (Acts 21.3-15). The Spirit revealed to Agabus and others that troubles awaited Paul in Jerusalem, but this was not a directive, “thus-saith-the-Lord,” kind of prophecy. Paul felt free to go on in spite of the revelations.
- <sup>5</sup> *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000.
- <sup>6</sup> Gordon Fee quoted in *Your Sons & Daughters Shall Prophesy*, by Ernest B. Gentile, p. 240.
- <sup>7</sup> *C. H. Spurgeon’s Autobiography*, available on AGES Digital Library, *The C. H. Spurgeon Collection*. I do not intend this excerpt as a comment on the issue of Sabbath-keeping but only as a testimony of how prophetic utterance brought a man to repentance who had neglected his spiritual life for the pursuit of material gain.
- <sup>8</sup> I contend that the “prayer of faith” for healing as taught in James 5 can only be prayed when God has somehow indicated His will to heal the specific person in view—just as Elijah could not pray for rain until God revealed His will to send rain (cf. 1John 5.14,15). Until that discernment is given, we should nevertheless intercede for the ill person and wait upon God for His guidance on their behalf.
- <sup>9</sup> This testimony reminds me of the prophecy to the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2.10.
- <sup>10</sup> This presents a question for those who have redefined prophecy as “inspired preaching.” If prophecy and preaching are essentially synonymous, should we not allow women to preach since they prophesied in the early church?