

Has All Prophecy Ceased?

Acts 2:14-21

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As we consider the gift of prophecy promised in Joel 2 and realized in its initial fulfillment in Acts 2, the question arises as to whether there is any aspect of the gift of prophecy that continues after the closing of the canon of Scripture or after the death of the last apostle? It is a question that needs to be addressed because not all Reformed Christians or all Reformed Churches (presently or historically) have agreed, and yet the question continues to arise because certain reformers and Reformed Churches record men who had a “prophetic spirit” in regard to future events and specifically detail particular events that came to pass as they predicted on many different occasions. For example, listen to what the appointed historian for the Church of Scotland (Rev. David Calderwood) said concerning John Knox soon after Knox’s death.

Master Knox departed this life, upon the twenty fourth of November [1572], the light and comfort of our Kirk, & a patterne to Ministers for holiness of life, soundness in doctrine, & courageous libertie in rebuking of Persons of whatsoever rank.... HOW MANY THINGS DID HE FORETEL, WHICH CAME TO PASS.... (David Calderwood, *The True History Of The Church Of Scotland*, written at the appointment and approval of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, pp. 59,61, original spelling retained and emphases added).

Likewise listen to one of the bright lights and ministers of that same Church of Scotland (Rev. Samuel Rutherford), who described this prophetic spirit that rested upon the ministries of reformers of Christ’s Church.

There is a 3rd revelation of some particular men, WHO HAVE FORETOLD THINGS TO COME EVEN SINCE THE CEASING OF THE WORD [the closing of the canon—GLP], as John Huss, Wycliffe, Luther, HAVE FORETOLD THINGS TO COME, AND THEY CERTAINLY FELL OUT. And in our nation of Scotland, Mr. George Wishart FORETOLD that Cardinal Beaton should not come out alive at the gates of the Castle of St. Andrews, but that he should die a shameful death; and he [Beaton—GLP] was hanged over the window that he did look out at, when he saw the man of God [Wishart—GLP] burnt. Mr. Knox PROPHESED of the hanging of the Lord of Grange. Mr. John Davidson UTTERED PROPHESES, known to many of the kingdom, DIVERSE HOLY AND

MORTIFIED PREACHERS IN ENGLAND HAVE DONE THE LIKE (Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of Spiritual Antichrist*, London, 1648, p. 42, emphases added).

And one more example—this time an eminent pastor and teacher from the Reformed Church of Holland, William a' Brakel.

WE DO BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY CONCERNING FUTURE EVENTS HAS NOT FULLY CEASED IN THE CHURCH. We believe that the Lord will still reveal to this or that one of His faithful servants such things which relate either to themselves, His judgment upon the enemies of the church, redemption, or the oppression of the church. This agrees with what Christ said, 'And He will shew you things to come' (John 16:13) (William a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol.1, p. 530, emphases added).

Although many more reformers and divines of the Westminster Assembly might be cited, this at least demonstrates that godly men of great learning and of solid Reformed convictions clearly believed that there was an aspect of prophecy (predictive prophecy) that the Holy Spirit bestowed at certain times in history for the benefit of Christ's Church. Neither these reformers nor the Church of Scotland in its most pure times were like the Quakers of that time or like Papists and Mormons at the present time, who believe that new revelations might be given that become superior or equal to the authority of Scripture.

These reformers and many like them along with the faithful Church of Scotland firmly believed in the absolute, supreme, and infallible authority of Scripture, as expressed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, **and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation**: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy scripture to be most necessary; **those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased** (1:1, emphases added).

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence

may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (1:6).

These reformation divines saw no contradiction with what is declared in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* because their predictive prophecy was not about revealing the gospel which is necessary for salvation, was not about revealing doctrine, worship, or church government, and was not about revealing any new commandment from God to His people, it was about warning both the wicked and the righteous of God's judgments to come, glorifying God who knows the end from the beginning, encouraging God's people to remain steadfast in spite of the trouble to come, and submitting themselves and their prophetic spirit under the supreme authority of Holy Scripture to be judged thereby.

With that extended introduction, let us consider the following main points in the sermon this Lord's Day: (1) Some Preliminary Remarks about Predictive Prophecy; (2) Some Contextual Observations from Acts 2:14-21.

I. **Some Preliminary Remarks about Predictive Prophecy.**

A. First, prophecy in Scripture has one of two basic aspects to it. Prophecy is either forthtelling or foretelling.

1. ***Prophetic forthtelling*** was declaring by inspired revelation the truth of God concerning some doctrine or concerning some commandment for life. It was always authoritative and demanded obedience and submission because God was expressly speaking forth His will to His moral creatures. Some prophetic forthtelling was inscripturated (2 Peter 1:20-21). Some prophetic forthtelling was not inscripturated (1 Corinthians 14:3). The forthtelling of the prophets was to be judged by other prophets and by what was already revealed in Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:29; Acts 17:11). In this sense, the reformers

denied they were prophesying, and denied God's purpose to continue this aspect of prophecy. This aspect of prophecy ceased with the last New Testament Book. The Scripture was perfect, complete, and sufficient for salvation, doctrine, worship, church government, discipline, and moral/ethical living (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

2. ***Prophetic Foretelling*** was declaring by the Holy Spirit events that were yet future. It did not require a particular act of obedience on the part of others—in fact, there may be varied responses to a prophesied future event that even Christians might take (Acts 11:27-28; Acts 21:10-14). In this secondary sense of prophecy, the reformers saw predictive prophecy subsequent to the closing of the canon of Scripture as a gift which the Holy Spirit wrought at His appointed time in history for His glory and for the benefit of His Church.

3. There are some who also see a third aspect of prophecy, which is equivalent to preaching forth the will of God from Scripture (Revelation 11:3). This is more likely a subcategory under forthtelling (not inspired prophecy, but faithful preaching). For that reason some of the reformers were recorded as saying that the faithful preaching of God's Word is the Word of God (not formally, but materially as giving the true sense of God's Word). That was why preaching among the reformers was absolutely essential in the worship of God if there was to be salvation, reformation, sanctification. Reading the Word was prophetic, but giving the accurate sense of the Word was also prophetic (Nehemiah 8:8).

B. Second, predictive prophecy was not viewed by the Reformers as being something ordinary in the life of the Church throughout history, but was understood to be extraordinary—that is, a gift of the Spirit granted at certain times and periods of history according to God's appointing, not man's appointing. Certainly, we should always pray for the best gifts to be given and manifested within the Visible Church (1 Corinthians 14:1), but it is God, the Holy Spirit, that distributes such

gifts as it pleases Him and at what time it pleases Him (1 Corinthians 12:11). We have Scripture which is a more sure light than any mere prophetic utterance (2 Peter 1:16-19).

C. Third, predictive prophecy was never viewed by the reformers as being beyond the judgment and scrutiny of Scripture. It was to be judged by Scripture (Deuteronomy 13:1-3; Deuteronomy 18:21-22). The predictive prophecy of the reformers was tied to their understanding of God's Word and the general principles of God's Word in judging the wicked and in saving and sanctifying the righteous by the same prophecy. Remember, Jesus said, "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). Those exercising such extraordinary gifts of predictive prophecy were therefore to be judged by the fruit of their doctrine and by the fruit of their life (their character, speech, conduct, marriage, and family). To be learned and faithful in doctrine, but to be scandalous in life did not meet those standards (neither did the opposite extreme—to be virtuous, but unsound in doctrine).

D. Thus, the reformers did not understand that prophets in the primary sense of revealing new truths by immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit continued after the completion of Scripture. Such prophets had ceased. Only in a secondary sense of predictive prophecy or of some extraordinary insight/knowledge about someone did the prophetic gift extraordinarily continue when the Holy Spirit so willed it.

II. Some Contextual Remarks Observed from Acts 2:14-21.

A. As our text opens in Acts 2:14, Peter now arises to preach and bear testimony first against the foolish charges brought against the apostles and believers who spoke in foreign languages never learned and which were heard by Jews in Jerusalem (both foreign and domestic).

1. Just last Lord's Day we considered the steps Peter followed in denying the Lord Jesus, as well as the shame and grief that came upon him as he denied the Lord Jesus for the third time and then the cock crowed (in fulfillment of Christ's prophecy). The eyes of Peter and the eyes of Jesus then met and Peter left weeping with great bitterness of soul. But in Christ's previous warning to Peter about the severe sifting by Satan that he was about to face, Jesus had given Peter hope—and through Peter hope to us all (Luke 22:31-32). Just 50 days after that terrible fall, Peter now arises with the other apostles to bear a faithful and courageous testimony on behalf of Christ. Dear ones, this is the power of the resurrection and power of the Holy Spirit at work in transforming Peter from a proud coward to a bold witness (and this is the same power that is the same resurrection power and same Holy Spirit that you have, dear Christian, in overcoming those besetting sins in your life).

2. As Peter arises he defends himself and his brethren against the mockery of the crowd who said they were all drunk with new wine when they spoke in foreign languages never learned. This is so typical of how those will act toward us who hate us, despise us, or vehemently disagree with us. Rather than consider the amazing work of the Spirit and the truth proclaimed in glorifying God, they will attack the messenger by *ad hominem* arguments—"they are drunk"; "they are fanatics"; "they think they are better than us"; "they are separatists"; "they are unloving in not approving of our sin or defection". Dear ones, let us shut our own mouths in all name-calling at home, at work, or on internet groups—it is usually not motivated by speaking the truth in love, but rather motivated by anger, pride, and vindictiveness.

3. Peter's defense against drunkenness is that it is only the third hour of the day—i.e. 9 a.m. (Acts 2:15). Peter is saying that it would be unheard of to be drunk at 9 in the morning on the very feast day of

Pentecost at the very hour of prayer for any sincere Jews gathering in Jerusalem for this feast.

B. As we consider Peter's sermon in explaining the miraculous gifts and activities on the Day of Pentecost (particularly what is said in regard to prophecy), let us give especially not the time indicators found in the prophecy from Joel 2:28-32. These time indicators do not prove that predictive prophecy continues past the closing of the canon of Scripture, but they at least allow for it.

1. What we first note is that Joel's prophecy says nothing specifically about speaking in tongues, even though Peter is seeking to demonstrate from Scripture that the speaking in tongues on the Day of Pentecost was the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter is quoting Joel 2 to demonstrate that the same Holy Spirit that was prophesied to be poured out in Joel 2 in bringing forth prophecy, dreams, and visions is that same Holy Spirit that was poured out on the Day of Pentecost in bringing forth speaking in tongues. When Peter says, "But this is that" (Acts 2:16), he means this outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is that outpouring of the Spirit that was prophesied to come in Joel 2 (the gifts may be different, but the Spirit that is poured forth in New Covenant abundance is the same).

2. Whereas Joel uses the term "afterward" (Joel 2:28), Peter give the true meaning of that term and says, "And it shall come to pass in the last days" (Acts 2:17). The "last days" refer to the period of time between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ (Isaiah 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 3:1-5). In other words, the Spirit is to be poured out during the New Covenant age (the last days), and nothing is said that would limit this outpouring to the Day of Pentecost or to the first century alone. There is no specific limitation on all aspects of prophesying (although that prophecy that reveals the gospel, doctrine, and worship of the church through the apostles and prophets is laid in their ministries of

the first century, Ephesians 2:20). Thus, the use of the time indicator, “last days”, does not in itself limit the time in which the Lord would pour forth His Spirit or yet give the gift of predictive prophecy.

3. Peter extols the abundance of God’s blessings of the Spirit that would be enjoyed by “all flesh” in the “last days” (Acts 2:17-18). Peter then warns that there are going to be many signs of God’s judgment upon nations and kingdoms (upheaval and destruction) that will continue until that “great and notable day of the Lord come” (Acts 2:19-21). This “great and notable day of the Lord” may very well refer to such a day of judgment that would be more near in fulfillment (the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d.), but this is not simply “the day of the Lord”, but is “the great and notable day of the Lord” and ultimately points to the bodily second coming of Christ on that final day of judgment at the end of the world. In fact, the various historical days of the Lord in Scripture (whether in the Old Testament—Isaiah 13:9-10; or whether in the New Testament—Acts 2:20) all point to that final day of the Lord in judgment upon the whole earth when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Once again, I would suggest that both the outpouring of God’s Spirit and the calamity of peoples and nations will be present until “the great and notable day of the Lord” (which also allows for predictive prophecy as one of those evidences of God’s Spirit to be manifested until the second coming of Christ rather than being limited to the Day of Pentecost or to the first century).

4. This I submit is witnessed in history by the actual statements and events in which an aspect of the Spirit’s blessing, namely, prophesying by means of predictive prophecy was exercised by our reformed and covenanted forefathers. Listen to the testimony of another learned and godly Reformed Presbyterian forefather, Rev. James Durham.

Yet it is not altogether to be denied, but that the Lord may in particulars of the last kind sometimes reveal himself to some BY FORETELLING EVENTS BEFORE THEY COME, such as the

famine that Agabus foretold of, or Paul's imprisonment, were: of such the story of the Martyrs and Saints do sometime make mention; and particularly, Athanasius is often advertised of hazards, as is recorded, AND IN THEIR VERITY CANNOT BE DENIED: AND OF THIS SORT THERE WERE MANY AT THE REVIVING OF THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL, WHO BY FORETELLING OF PARTICULAR EVENTS WERE FAMOUS, as John Huss his FORETELLING within an hundred years after him to follow the outbreking of Reformation; such, it is like, was Hieronymus Savonarola, who was burnt by the Pope, not, as was pretended, for foretelling of events, as they imputed to him, by unlawful means, but for faithful reproving of his faults, as he is described by Philip de Cumius, and other Authors: of such many were in this Land, as Master Wishart, Master Knox, Master Welch, Master Davidson, etc.. AND THIS CANNOT BE SAID ALTOGETHER TO BE MADE VOID: FOR, ALTHOUGH GOD HATH NOW CLOSED THE CANON OF THE SCRIPTURE, YET THAT HE SHOULD BE RESTRAINED IN HIS FREEDOM, FROM MANIFESTING OF HIMSELF THUS, THERE IS NO CONVINCING GROUND TO BEAR IT OUT, ESPECIALLY WHEN EXPERIENCE HATH OFTEN PROVEN THE CONTRARY IN THE MOST HOLY MEN (James Durham, *Commentary Upon The Book Of The Revelation*, pp. 597,598, Old Paths Publication, emphases added).

Joel's prophecy ends with the words, "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). This is not a call that is made to only those who know they are the elect of God, for no one knows or is assured of his/her election until one calls in faith upon the name of the Lord to save him/her. There are no qualifications listed. There are no works you need perform. You don't have to show yourself worthy, because you are not worthy (and neither am I). There is no changed heart that you must first present to the Lord. There is simply the word and promise of God—whenever you are, call on the name of the Lord and thou shalt be saved.

My friend, you do not have to face the wrath of God on that great and notable day of the Lord when you stand before His mighty throne in your unrepentant and unforgiven sin. You do not have to hear those dreaded words of the Lord Jesus, "Depart from me ye workers of iniquity." You do not have to be cast into everlasting flames of judgment and condemnation before Christ, the righteous Judge. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Saved from God's righteous wrath and saved unto God's gracious glory in heaven. That is the promise of God. Look in faith to Christ and His righteousness alone.

Look away from your own sin and your own righteousness to Jesus who fulfilled all God's righteousness and will impute that righteousness to all of you who trust Him and who bore all God's wrath and will pardon all the sins of you who trust in Him alone. Don't wait. Today is the day of salvation. Call upon the Lord right now and be saved for all eternity.

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