This week we begin a study on some of the miraculous gifts that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Our focus today is on the gift of prophecy. The Westminster Confession of Faith, speaking about how God revealed himself in the past through prophecy, visions, and revelations, says, "those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased" (WCF 1.1.). This is our doctrine. This is what we embrace as a church. This is what we believe. The miraculous gifts of the Spirit have ceased. God does not give new revelation today. The gift of prophecy has ceased.

Yet, there are several strikes against us even as we hold this view. First, in holding this view we are in the clear minority among protestant Christians today. According to the center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, there were 260 million evangelical Christians and 614 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in the world in 2010. So, we're outnumbered at least 2 to 1. When you consider the fact that many among that evangelical number would also hold charismatic views, the reality is that we are likely in a very, very small minority of Christians today. That is strike one against us.

Strike two is this - Paul says right here in 1 Cor. 14:5, "I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophecy." The plain reading of that passage, applied to us today, would seem to be quite simply, "Paul wants us all to speak in tongues, and even more to prophecy" - even today! Later Paul will say, "Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (v. 29). So, a simple, plain, straightforward reading of Scriptures seems to promote and even command their use in the church. Who are we to deny their existence today when Paul says, "Don't forbid them!"? Strike two.

Here's strike three. Many, many Christians today not only profess to believe in the ongoing nature of the miraculous gifts, but they also practice them. Millions of Christians speak in tongues. Many Christians prophesy and apparently receive revelations and visions. Some claim to have the gift of healing. And again, who are we to say that their experience of these gifts is invalid and unbiblical? Strike three.

If you're keeping score, that's no balls, three strikes - so it looks like we're out. Why even bother going against the majority of Christians today, and the experience of so many brothers and sisters in Christ, and most significantly, what appears to be the plain teaching of Scripture? Isn't it possible that by taking the cessationist view we're in danger of quenching the Spirit, the very thing forbidden in 1 Thessalonians? "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies..." (1 Thess. 5:19-20). Would it not be better to simply plead ignorance - to just say, "I don't know" - rather than reject the miraculous gifts altogether? Wouldn't that be safer, more respectful to our charismatic friends, more humble, more unifying?

Well, it would perhaps be more convenient to just plead ignorance, but I am absolutely convinced by God's Word that the miraculous gifts really have ceased. So, this morning we are going to examine the Scriptures very carefully, like the Bereans of Acts 17, and I think it will become plain to us that the gift of prophecy has ceased.
And, although we are in the minority today, that doesn't mean that we are wrong. In fact, when we do embrace the cessationist understanding of Scripture, we stand very firmly in the historic stream of Christianity throughout the ages. The overwhelming majority of Christians, from shortly after the time of Christ until today, have held the belief that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have ceased (not that miracles have ceased, but that the miraculous gifts have ceased).

John Chrysostom, born in 349 AD, says the following in his sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:

This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produces us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?

Writing in the 1700's Jonathan Edwards said, "Since the canon of the Scripture has been completed, and the Christian Church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased." As cessationists we stand in the historic stream of Christianity as this doctrine has been faithfully passed down through the ages. We don't need to be apologetic or uncertain about what has been plain to the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout the ages. Nor, of course, do we need to uncharitably attack our Pentecostal and charismatic friends. For the most part, we should view them as our dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, who are nonetheless in error on an important issue.

As we progress this morning, we will deal with three important questions. First, What is the nature of prophecy in the Old Testament and New Testament? Second, Does prophecy continue today? Third, why is it good news that prophecy has ceased?

What is the nature of prophecy in the Old and New Testaments?

The answer to this first question is that prophecy in both the Old and New Testaments is the proclamation of the perfect and authoritative Word of God. Perfect, because the words of God's true prophets were never mixed with error. Authoritative, because when a true prophet spoke he served as the very mouthpiece of God. When a biblical prophet would speak for God, in every instance, his words were God's words unmitigated in their perfection and authority.

In the Old Testament, we see four foundational passages that deal with prophecy. The first is Exodus 7:1-2: And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land." Here there is a chain. God speaks to Moses. Moses speaks prophetically to Aaron. Aaron speaks prophetically to Pharaoh. Then whatever Pharaoh hears is ultimately God himself speaking to him. God tells Moses that he will be like God to Pharaoh, speaking in essence the perfect Word of God with undiminished Authority.

The second passage is Exodus 4:15-16: You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you
shall be as God to him. Here there is a mouth to mouth relay of God's Word, from God to the prophets. Again, God's Word is ultimately delivered by the prophets with perfection and undiminished authority.

The third passage is Numbers 12:6-7: And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house." Here we see that the words of the prophet come from God in a variety of ways. Sometimes visions, sometimes dreams, or in Moses' case by a significantly more direct communication. However the message came to the prophets, their words were still the perfect and authoritative Word of God. Micah, for example, saw a vision from God, but the message he brought was the word of the Lord: The word of the LORD that came to Micah... which he saw... (Micah 1:1).

False prophets, in contrast, spoke about visions they received, not from the Lord, but from their own minds. In Jeremiah 23:16 we read, Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD."

The fourth passage is Deuteronomy 18:18-22: I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?" - when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

In this passage, God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses who will be the ultimate prophet. We'll come back to that promise shortly. We also see here that anyone who presumes to speak for the Lord, when the Lord has not commanded him, is a false prophet who is to be put to death. And the way you know a false prophet is by the fact that what they speak is not truth.

This brief run through these four passages shows us that the Old Testament prophet served as the mouthpiece of God, speaking God's Word in all of its perfection and authority.

In the New Testament we see the same thing. Agabus, for example, was a prophet in the book of Acts. In Acts 11:28 he foretells a famine. In Acts 21:11 he foretells Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. When he speaks he says, "Thus says the Holy Spirit...." That language mirrors perfectly the language of the Old Testament prophets who would say, "Thus says the Lord." When Agabus spoke, he spoke in the same prophetic tradition as the Old Testament prophets. He spoke the perfect, authoritative Word of God.

Peter says, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). In this important passage, Peter speaks of the origin of true prophecy. It comes, not from the will of man but from God himself. To be "carried along by the Holy Spirit" is not to merely be led or directed or guided. It is nothing less than being given the very word of God, mouth to mouth, as a passive recipient.
No prophet in the Old or New Testament would every say, "I feel as if the Lord is leading me to say this." Instead they would say, "Thus says the Lord," speaking nothing shy than the perfect, authoritative Word of God.

**Does prophecy continue today?**

To the question of whether or not prophecy continues today we generally see one of three answers. Some say, "Yes, prophecy continues today just as in the Bible." Some are gifted prophets and when they speak they speak the perfect, authoritative Word of God. Some churches keep a written record of what their prophets speak, treating those words as the Word of God in all of its force.

Some say, "No. Prophecy has ceased with the closing of the apostolic age." This is our view. We believe that the illumination of Scripture continues. We believe that God's Spirit supernaturally opens our hearts and minds to the truths of God's Word so that we may understand and believe. But God does not continue to offer new revelation today.

Others say, "Yes, prophecy continues, but the Bible speaks of two levels of prophecy." The first level of prophecy is the infallible, perfect, authoritative level of prophecy that we've just seen exhibited in both the Old and New Testaments. They say that this kind of prophecy has indeed ceased. But they also argue that there is a second level of prophecy in which people still receive divine insight through dreams, visions, *a word from the Lord*, etc., yet when someone relays these revelations they do not presume to be speaking God's Word infallibly. That is, while they have indeed received revelation, they are prone to misunderstanding it or miscommunicating it. Anyone who receives a revelation under this second level of prophecy is not really able to definitively say, "Thus says the Lord," instead they must say something like, "It seems like the Lord is saying this."

The main passage that those who hold to two levels of prophecy turn to is 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said." This is frequently interpreted to mean that when one of these second-level prophets speaks, the others are supposed to judge what is said by sifting truth from falsehood. According to this interpretation, if I were to show up next Sunday and say, "I had a dream, and I think the Lord is telling us to paint the sanctuary purple," then the job of others would be to weigh what I've said and separate the truth from error. A reasonable conclusion in this example may well be, "Yes, the Lord is telling us to paint the sanctuary, but probably not purple - probably mauve." In other words, the prophecy was true, but because Pastor Aaron does not know his color shades very well the prophecy is mixed with error and therefore discernment must be made to sort through truth from error.

But there are some serious problems here. First, in 14:29 the English translators have added the words "what is said" to the end of the verse. The Greek simply says, "Let others weigh," without the additional words, so you can cross the words "what is said" right out of your Bible. They simply do not exist. Also, the word "weigh" (Διακρινω) can mean just that, but in the New Testament it does not reflect that meaning anywhere else. The word is often translated in the New Testament as "to make a distinction" (Acts 11:12; 15:9; James 2:4), which more likely reflects Paul's intent in 14:29. A solid translation of 14:29 would read, "Let the others make a distinction."
Now, if we think back to 1 Corinthians 12 we would remember that Paul couples speaking in tongues with interpreting tongues. In 12:10, he speaks simultaneously of the gifts of speaking in and interpreting tongues. These two gifts go together. When one is present the other ought to be there as well. It is then no surprise that when Paul speaks of tongues in chapter 14, he speaks also of interpretation (14:27-28). In chapter 12, Paul also couples prophecy with another gift, "the ability to distinguish between the spirits" (12:10). The word "distinguish" in 12:10 is a form of the word "weigh" or "make a distinction" that is used in 14:29. So, just as Paul speaks of tongues and interpretation as an inseparable pair in chapters 12 and 14, so Paul also speaks of prophecy and distinguishing between spirits as an inseparable pair in chapters 12 and 14.

All of that to say that the idea in 14:29 is not to say that we need to sort through what the prophets say, and then keep the good and discard the bad. Instead, Paul is teaching that we need to distinguish whether or not the prophecy originates from God or from a false spirit. In other words, the real question is, "Is this a true prophet speaking?" True prophecy is, of course, one hundred percent reliable. It is not a patchwork of truth and falsehood. Paul's instruction in 14:29 matches perfectly with the Lord's instruction in Deuteronomy 18:18-22. Both deal with discerning false prophets from true prophets.

This more faithful reading of 14:29 eliminates the idea that there are two levels of prophecy in the New Testament. What we see instead (both in 14:29 and throughout the New Testament) is that there is only one level of prophecy - the same kind of prophecy that is spoken of in the Old Testament, the Word of God perfectly and authoritatively given.

In Corinth it was essential for them to distinguish whether or not the whole of the prophetic message was God's Word or not. The possibility of false prophets and false teachers arising in the New Testament church was a constant threat. Therefore it was incumbent upon the church to have people with the gift of distinguishing spirits.

If we were to hold to two levels of prophecy, one in which modern prophets speak a fallible word, then we are violating the nature of the prophetic office as it is given to us in Scripture. To be a fallible prophet is to be a false prophet. This is the message of Deuteronomy 18:20, "But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak... that same prophet shall die."

Several years ago I heard a pastor speaking with another gentlemen about a phone call he recently received from one of his parishioners. The man called to encourage his pastor. He told him, "God told me to call you up and encourage you and tell you that you are going to do a great job preaching this evening." The pastor replied, "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I'm not preaching this evening. Someone else is." It is a funny story (at least I thought it was funny), but it is also quite serious, for this man was presuming to speak on behalf of God where God had not spoken.

Is it not possible that the common language today of "the Lord told me" is nothing more than the same language of the false prophets of the Old and New Testaments? We dare not speak on behalf of God where God has not spoken. We need to be very careful to never downplay the nature of the prophetic office by creating a second-level prophecy that is less than biblical. Biblical prophets spoke the perfect and authoritative word of God. They did not err. Their words were God's words.

This leaves us with the question, "Does that first-order level of prophecy continue today?" No, it does not. We believe that the miraculous gifts, including the gift of
prophecy, ceased with the passing of the apostles. The New Testament tells us that the miraculous gifts were very closely tied to the apostolic office. Paul says, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Cor. 12:12). In Hebrews we read, "It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (Heb. 2:3-4). And in Ephesians 2:20 we read that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." So, the apostles and prophets serve as a foundation, but their roles have ceased as the church continues to be built.

Although the Bible does not say specifically that the miraculous gifts will cease with the apostles, because of the close association of these gifts with the apostles, the most natural reading of Scripture is to expect their passing with the apostles themselves. This passing of the miraculous gifts seems to play out quite plainly in the New Testament itself. 1 Corinthians was one of Paul's earliest letters, and after this book Paul never again mentions the gift of tongues, nor does any other New Testament author (apart from Luke's Acts 2 account). Paul's command in 1 Cor. 14:39 to seek out the gift of prophecy is never again repeated in all of Paul's letters. Paul does say in 1 Thessalonians 5:20, "Do not despise prophesies," but that also is one of Paul's earliest letters, earlier even than 1 Corinthians, and we don't see a similar command from Paul again.

If the miraculous gifts such as prophecy continued, we would expect Paul to have continued addressing the gifts as time went on, but he did not. In all of his instructions to Timothy, viewed by many to have been Paul's successor, Paul never speaks once of the miraculous gifts or of their use in the church. Instead of speaking to Timothy about prophecy and tongues, Paul speaks to him about preaching and teaching and the absolute sufficiency of Scripture in the life of the church (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

If the gift of prophecy continues today, we then by necessity would have to view the canon of Scripture as being incomplete and insufficient. There is really no way to get around this. Either God's Word is complete and sufficient, or God has more to say to us and His Word is therefore incomplete and insufficient. This is really the heart of the issue.

**Why is it good news that prophecy has ceased?**

I believe with all of my heart that it really is good news that prophecy has ceased. The charge that we are somehow dour, lifeless Christians who quench the Spirit of God because we believe that prophecy and tongues have ceased is absolutely rubbish! We need not make any apology whatsoever about our cessationist convictions today. Why is it good news that prophecy has ceased?

First, since prophecy has ceased, and since God's Word to us is complete, we don't have to live as crippled, do-nothing Christians who are constantly waiting and waiting for a sign or a revelation of some sort before we act to serve the Lord. So many Christians today really are crippled in their Christian service because they don't do anything without some kind of revelation from God. But we don't have to live like that. We don't live like that.

We have God's Word! God has given us wisdom and supernatural illumination as to understanding it. We are growing in the knowledge of the Lord, and with these things
in mind we are free to live boldly for God's glory. We don't have to wait for a word from God because we already have the Word of God.

Second, the greater our trust in the sufficiency and perfection of God's Word, the greater our faith. We don't want to be like Gideon who, having heard the Word of the Lord, did not believe. He tested God by asking for a sign, by putting out his fleece. God was gracious to Gideon, but we ought not presume upon God's grace as he did. Because God's Word is sufficient, we need not ask for anything more.

Third, it is good news that prophecy has ceased because this elevates the importance of the Word and sacraments in our lives. If we are looking for and expecting and desiring new revelation, then the question has to be asked, "What's wrong with the revelation we have?" If we believe, however, that prophecy has ceased, then we can learn to devote ourselves fully to God's Word. And while devotion to God's Word without the expectation or desire for further prophecy may sound like quenching the Spirit to some, I believe it is just the opposite. God's Word is, after all, the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). God's Word is living and active, piercing our souls and spirit (Heb. 4:12-13). God's Word proclaimed is an expression of the very power of God (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

Finally, it is good news that prophecy has ceased because this means that God has fully and ultimately revealed himself to us through Jesus Christ. Because Christ has come as the ultimate prophet who reveals God to us, we need no more. The book of Hebrews tells us, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Bible speaks of Jesus holding three offices - prophet, priest, and king. There were once priests who led God's people in worship and sacrifice, but we don't have them today because Jesus is the ultimate priest, sacrificing himself that we might be saved. There were once kings over God's people in Israel - David, Solomon, and others, but there are no kings like that today because Jesus is our king. And there used to be prophets, mediating God's Word to his people, revealing God's character and will to the world, but today there are no prophets because Jesus is the ultimate prophet, the only prophet we need.

Remember what God promised to Moses back in Deuteronomy 18? He promised a greater prophet who would come after Moses and to whom God's people would ultimately listen. Moses was the first prophet. Jesus is that final prophet. Moses became the first prophet because the Israelites were terrified of God's voice (Deut. 18:16). Direct communication from God to his people was too much for them to bear. But now that Jesus, the final prophet, has come, all of the terror of God's voice at Sinai is gone for the Christian today. We need no more prophets like Moses because Jesus has come. As our priest, he has reconciled us to God. As our king, he reigns over us and defends us. As our prophet, he has shown us God. Because Jesus is the final prophet, the ultimate prophet, we rightly rejoice in the cessation of prophecy today.

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2 John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians: Homily XXIX.
3 Jonathan Edwards, Charity and Its Fruit, 29.
5 Ibid., 15.