

There is third response, a Yes, but viewpoint which has been popular among some non-charismatic evangelicals, and affirmed in recent times by John Piper: the gift of prophecy is a special experience that befalls a preacher while in the act. In an essay that synthesizes and defends Piper’s view:

“I pray for the gift of prophecy almost as often as I pray for anything, before I stand up to speak.” This prayer for prophecy is a desire to preach under an anointing, in order to “say things agreeable to the Scriptures, and subject to the Scripture, that are not in my manuscript or in my head as I walk into the pulpit, nor thought of ahead of time, which would come to my mind, which would pierce in an extraordinary way, so that 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 happens.” [3]

The Corinthians text is he refers to is:

But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, “God is really among you.”

The difficulty here is the fact that in the New Testament the sine qua non of prophetic utterance is that the prophets passes along information from God which is not knowable from mere human observation or reasoning. [4] Piper has to minimize the role of immediate, special revelation in 1 Corinthians 14, that is, that the prophet is privy to information, secrets of the heart, information that he or she should not be able to access, and thereby showing that God is at work through the gospel:

Here Paul shows what is only implicit up to this point: that a prophet’s message might lend itself to evangelism. Thus an unbeliever, like a believer, will hear a message of truth that is perhaps tailored specifically for him or her. For a prophet might speak of the facts of the cross-gospel in a clear manner, but also add something like: “and you, friend, although you have a believing wife, you have not yet repented. This is because you are
reluctant to give up your cleverly-concealed liaison with a prostitute, and because you secretly resent the spiritual changes in your wife, even while professing to admire her new devotion to you and the children!” [5]

To return to Piper’s “anointed preaching” viewpoint: John Calvin comments on 1 Cor. 12:28, “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” – Prophets are “not those who were endowed with the gift of prophesying, but those who were endowed with a peculiar gift, not merely for interpreting Scripture, but also for applying it wisely for present use.” [6] Note that Calvin says they preach “wisely”, but not giving secret information. Jean Héring takes a similar viewpoint in his commentary, but applies it generally to all preachers, not just the specially-anointed: “According to 14:3 the aim of prophecy is to edify, exhort, and encourage. It coincides therefore to a large extent with what we call a sermon today.” [7] But Calvin had earlier interpreted “prophecy” in 12:8 in a different manner, one which fits better with the text of the epistle – “By prophecy, I understand the singular and choice endowment of unfolding the secret will of God, so that a Prophet is a messenger, as it were, between God and man…” John Wesley seemed to combine the same two strands, that prophets either foretell things to come or speak by extraordinary inspiration, for the edification of the church.” He did not believe that supernatural prophecy had necessarily ceased. [8]

I believe, and hope, that all true preachers of the Word are familiar with the rich spiritual experience of which John Piper speaks. In fact, it can and should be the norm. But we must put the question to the text of Scripture and ask: Is a preacher in this moment actually prophesying? Piper says yes, but his case is weak.

First, as he admits, Piper has to redefine the boundaries of the charism of prophecy as revealed in the New Testament. That is, his definition is not strictly biblical: the New Testament nowhere applies the terms “prophecy, prophet” in the way that Piper describes. To the contrary, prophets are a group distinguished from pastors-teachers in Eph. 4:11 and teachers in 1 Cor. 12:28. [9] This means that there are prophets who do not teach or pastor, and teachers or pastors who do not prophesy.

Second, Piper commits a basic logical fallacy, a non sequitur, in his exposition of 1 Cor. 14:24-25. His argument is similar to the following:

- Prophecy, according to Paul, may lead to remarkable transformations among the hearers.
- We observed remarkable results due to Rev. Smith’s specially-anointed preaching on Sunday last.
- Therefore, prophecy and specially-anointed preaching must be one and the same phenomenon.
The fallacious nature of this argument is clearer if we use a simpler example: [10]

- All blondes are dumb. (Sorry!)
- Ken is dumb.
- Therefore Ken must be a blonde.

Third, like MacArthur, Piper has to ignore what is patently clear in several of the verses about the spiritual gifts. That is that, people who have the charism of prophecy don’t just experience it once and again; they are also properly known and recognized as “prophets”, that is, people who regularly – but not constantly – manifest prophetic messages. He must diverge from the repeated claims of Scripture: prophecy is a “gift” (1 Cor. 12:10), and people with this gift are properly called “prophets” (1 Cor. 12:28, 29; 14:32, 37; also Eph. 2:20; 4:11). Two or three of said “prophets” should prophesy in a meeting (1 Cor. 14:29). Agabus and others (Acts 11:27-30; 21:10-11) were prophets, so were Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32), but other people were not. Phillip’s four daughters, yes (Acts 21:9) – but maybe not his sons! And Paul urges the Corinthians, few of whom one might guess would have been “preachers”, in 12:31 to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (12:31), which he expands into “especially the gift of prophecy” (14:1); and to “be eager to prophecy” (14:39). They should pray to be changed from non-prophets into prophets, but not necessarily into pastors, teachers, preachers.

Fourth, Piper says that only preachers may experience this boost from the Spirit; and that since women are allowed to prophesy in 1 Cor. 11:4-5, and since (Piper again) women should not be preachers, then prophecy today cannot be practiced by women. [11] (I do not know if he could accept the idea that a woman might “prophesy” according to his definition of the gift if she is teaching other women or children.)

Moving to the early church, we find Ignatius of Antioch making mention of how as a preacher he could say something that was not written in his “sermon outline”. But he uses the typical language of prophetic revelation in his description of “forthtelling” hidden truth:

For even though certain people wanted to deceive me, humanly speaking, nevertheless the Spirit is not deceived, because it is from God; for it knows from where it comes and where it is going, and exposes the hidden things (ta krupta). I called out when I was with you, I was speaking with a loud voice, God’s voice: “Pay attention to the bishop and to the presbytery and deacons.” To be sure, there were those who suspected that I said these things because I knew in advance about the division caused by certain people. But he for whose sake I am in chains is my witness, that I did not learn this from any human being. No, the Spirit itself was preaching (from kērussō), saying these words: “Do nothing
without the bishop. Guard your bodies as the temple of God. Love unity. Flee from divisions. Become imitators of Jesus Christ, just as he is of his Father.” [12]

For those who are familiar with Ignatius’ epistles, it comes as no surprise that his revelation had to do with obeying the bishop. But we must respect his interpretation of the event: he concluded that he had received a supernatural revelation, undistinguishable from prophecy. The Spirit revealed to him certain “hidden things”, that is, the secrets of the heart which God will reveal on Judgment Day (Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5) or, if a person receives grace before the End, during this age (1 Cor. 14:25). His voice was God’s voice; his preaching became the Spirit’s teaching. He was prophesying according to the New Testament definition and vocabulary; Ignatius’ anecdote is not an example of the Anointed Preacher. While it may appear to students of Ignatius that he was probably just preaching the generic sermon he always delivered, he himself clearly believed he had information that could only have come direct from God.

And this viewpoint was emblematic of that of the Fathers of the 2nd century, who did not define prophecy with dynamic preaching. Irenaeus, for example, said that prophets in the late 2nd-century church prophesied about the present and the future: “Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions.” [13] Irenaeus does not conflate the gift of prophecy with that of preaching.

Neither the New Testament Scriptures nor the Fathers employed “prophecy” as a label for teaching, preaching, evangelizing, no matter how powerful; it reserves the term for revelatory speech. Not even in the superlative case of Peter on the Day of Pentecost, whose “anointed” message cut 3000 people to the quick, was he “prophesying” – he himself quoted Joel 2, that “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy…” and announced that “this” (tongues!) “is what was uttered through the prophet Joel.” (Acts 2:16). Therefore, one cannot claim that prophecy is active today but does not include immediate divine revelation of hidden truth, not if one wants to construct a biblical definition.

The NT prophet usually gives directions from God with regard to “particular things”. In the comments by Severianus (4th century) concerning Acts 5:3-4 a prophecy includes data that the prophet could not have known –

There is a difference between ancient and recent prophets, as follows. The ancients prophesied about the redemption of Israel, the calling of the Gentiles and the incarnation of Christ, whereas recent prophets prophesy about particular things or people, as Peter prophesied about Ananias, for example. [14]

Prophets took what was already known (Christian truth) and applied it in a supernatural way: (1) the prophets in Acts 13:1-2 did not invent the Great Commission; rather, the Spirit speaking through them set aside Barnabas and Saul for the task that had already been commissioned by
In a Christian meeting, the prophet does not define new sins; rather, he or she reveals what sins are hidden in the heart of someone present (1 Cor. 14:24-25). Agabus did not invent the rule “love your neighbor”; but in his prophecy of the famine he gave a supernatural alert to the believers of an imminent opportunity to practice it (Acts 11:27-39). Peter did not invent “thou shalt not steal”; but he knew that Ananias and Sapphire had conspired to “lie to the Spirit”, which Spirit informed on them (Acts 5:1-11).

In the West we soak up the thought patterns of a rationalist age, and thus too many evangelical preachers accept as a presupposition that, so long as they stick to the Sacred Text, then everything will come out alright. This is not the Christian worldview: whether we accept modern prophecy or not, I urge that every preacher – or teacher, evangelist, or any person with whatever gift – meditate on Piper’s wish that the Spirit might give us an unusual anointing, which will manifest itself in our own hearts, in the words we say and in the reaction of the audience, so that people are moved to repentance and Christian growth. This should be the normal Christian life, in which we enjoy our birthright, the mighty manifestation of God’s Spirit. But it is not prophecy.

NOTES


[2] We take material from John MacArthur, “Are there prophets today?” August 28, 1914. Online: http://www.gty.org/resources/bible-qna/BQ071012/are-there-prophets-today. Readers should visit the website themselves, especially given that it is a pastiche of various texts by the author and they are not easily synthesized. For now it is sufficient to quote this: “Both apostles and prophets have passed from the scene (Eph. 2:20), but the foundation they laid is that on which all of Christ’s church has been built.”

[3] John Piper, “Piper Addresses Strange Fire and Charismatic Chaos”, Nov 16, 2013. Online: http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/piper-addresses-strange-fire-and-charismatic-chaos. So too the view of Hodge, who defines prophecy both as revelatory speech in the apostolic epoch, and also anointed preaching, both then and now: “It consisted in occasional inspiration and revelations, not merely or generally relating to the future, as in the case of Agabus, Acts 11:28, but either in some new communications relating to faith or duty, or simply an immediate impulse and aid from the Holy Spirit, in presenting truth already known, so that conviction and repentance were the effects aimed at and produced.” Charles Hodge, I Corinthians (reprint; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), p. 247. Hodge’s viewpoint is similar to one of Calvin’s
definitions, that “the singular and choice endowment of unfolding the secret will of God” (emphasis added). See also F. L. Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (reprint; Kregel, 1971), pp. 695-96; M. E. Boring, “Prophecy (Early Christian Prophecy),” *ABD* 5:496.


[6] *First Corinthians* of Calvin’s Commentaries (Galaxie Software, 2002). Calvin continues: “Let us, then, by *Prophets* in this passage understand, first of all, eminent interpreters of Scripture, and farther, persons who are endowed with no common wisdom and dexterity in taking a right view of the present necessity of the Church, that they may speak suitably to it, and in this way be, in a manner, ambassadors to communicate the divine will…the Prophets here spoken of are those who make known the will of God, by applying with dexterity and skill prophecies, threatenings, promises, and the whole doctrine of Scripture, to the present use of the Church. If any one is of a different opinion, I have no objection to his being so, and will not raise any quarrel on that account. For it is difficult to form a judgment as to gifts and offices of which the Church has been so long deprived, excepting only that there are some traces, or shadows of them still to be seen.”


[9] In Eph. 4:11 the sense of “pastors and teachers” (tous poimenas kai didaskalous) has been debated. The word “pastor” has the definite article, “teacher” does not, and they are joined by the word “and” (kai). This, some argue, means that the Granville Sharp Rule of Greek grammar applies (as in Eph 5:5, 2 Pet 1:1 and Titus 2:13), and that there is a single gift, a “pastor-teacher.” Others argue that, no, the Granville Sharp Rule is guaranteed to work only with singular nouns;
these are plural, thus it must be two persons: pastors on the one hand, teachers on the other. In fact the Granville Sharp Rule may work with plural nouns, but it is only guaranteed to work with singular nouns. In the case of Eph 4:11 the Rule apparently applies to the two plural nouns; otherwise there is no reason for Paul to have omitted the definite article with “teachers” (didaskalous). In short: Paul refers to persons who are “pastor-teachers” or “pastors who are also teachers.”

[10] These two non sequiturs are more specifically the Fallacy of the Undistributed Middle. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non_sequitur_%28logic%29.

[11] To turn again to MacArthur, his exposition of Eph. 4:11 is a bit confusing, and contains several unproven premises, for example that “prophets were also appointed by God as specially gifted men”. He may, I suppose, be simply using “men” in the generic sense of “people”; nevertheless it is possible that he is channeling our thinking so that we imagine modern prophets to be (male) anointed preachers. At any rate, it bears mentioning that of the prophets we know from the NT text, three were men – Agabus, Judas, Silas; other unnamed men; four were women, the daughters of Philip. Eusebius mentions these prophets, and with regard to post-apostolic people whom he believes had the genuine gift, he names the woman Ammia of Philadelphia and the man Quadratus (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.17). Women may prophesy according to 1 Cor. 11:5, so long as they are cover the top of the head with a shawl.

[12] Ignatius, Philadelphians 7.1b-2 (Holmes).

