

Prophecy Redefined

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:20–22

Code: B140312

In [episode 215 of Ask Pastor John](#), Dr. Piper gets to the crux of the cessationist-continuationist debate. In his view, modern prophecy is not “infallible, Scripture-level, authoritative speaking,” but rather “something that God spontaneously brings to mind in the moment, and—because we are fallible in the way we perceive it, and the way we think about it, and the way we speak it—it does not carry that same level of infallible, Scripture-level authority.”^[1] He claims three texts of Scripture to provide “exegetical reasons” for his view.

John’s view is also Wayne Grudem’s view, and represents a radical departure from the historic position of the Christian church. More to the point, it is a direct contradiction of 2 Peter 1:21: “No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” What God gave to His prophets was not diminished one iota by human fallibility. The Holy Spirit so superintended the speaking (and writing) of every single word such that what God wanted to say *was* spoken, and it was spoken unequivocally. Piper’s and Grudem’s novel view departs from the biblical, historic view of the gift of prophecy and dangerously tampers with divine integrity and authority.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible demonstrates four foundational characteristics of true prophecy. First, true prophecy is always *verbal*, the very words of God. It’s never an impulse or an impression; it’s never a feeling that needs interpretation.^[2] Rather, true prophecy is a precise message.

Second, true prophecy is *propositional*—it is testable as either true or false. That’s what logicians recognize as the law of the excluded middle—a proposition is either true, or its negation is true. If someone invokes the Holy Spirit as the source of his prophecy, but what he says is false, God commands His people to reject both prophecy and prophet (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Deuteronomy 18:20–22).

Third, true prophecy is *infallible*. Whatever God spoke through His prophets was error-free and utterly unaffected by human fallibility.

Fourth, because a true prophecy is verbal, propositional, and inerrant, the only conclusion to draw is that it carries the full weight of divine authority. Ever since the end of the apostolic age and the completion of the canon, only Scripture can legitimately claim that level of authority (2 Timothy 3:16).

John Piper defended his departure from the biblical, historical view of the gift of prophecy by citing three biblical texts. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21, Paul says: “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.” Piper makes much of the fact that Paul speaks of *prophecies*, or prophetic *utterances*, rather than the prophets themselves. He insists that this is a categorical difference from 1 John 4:1, in which the apostle John calls the church to “test the spirits . . . because many false *prophets* have gone out into the world”

(emphasis added).

A Distinction Without a Difference

To distinguish between (a) testing and rejecting false *prophecies* and (b) testing and rejecting false *prophets* is to make a distinction without a difference. Nowhere in Scripture is a prophet divorced from the words he speaks, as Piper proposes. On the contrary, by the very definition of the word, a prophet was one who spoke forth the words of God. A true prophet was judged on the basis of the truth or falsehood of his prophecies. A false prophet was one who uttered false prophecies; and false prophecies are, by definition, the utterances from a false prophet. This distinction without a difference indicates the kind of interpretive overparsing used to arrive at a particular interpretation. That is something so unlike nearly every other aspect of John Piper's ministry.

Testing Does Not Legitimize Prophetic Fallibility

In his podcast comments, Piper reveals an assumption that lies at the heart of the continuationist view of fallible prophecy. He believes that testing and evaluating prophets by their prophecies are things “you would not do if they spoke with infallible, inerrant, Scripture-quality authority.”[\[3\]](#)

But isn't that precisely what we see in the Old Testament—God commanding His people to test those who spoke with *infallible, inerrant, Scripture-quality authority*? Whether someone predicted falsely (Deuteronomy 18:20–22), or predicted truly and yet *prescribed* falsely (Deuteronomy 13:1–5)—if what he spoke was not in accord with God's previously revealed words—God commanded the people to judge him as a false prophet and condemn him to death.

So, does the command to test and judge Old Testament prophets imply they could legitimately deliver fallible prophecies? Absolutely not. God's command required Old Testament believers to guard zealously, and without prejudice, the truth entrusted to them, which is remarkably consistent with commands in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14). To assume, as Piper does, that being told to test *New Testament* prophecies implies a brand-new category of “fallible prophecy” is baseless. It fails the test of biblical scrutiny.

Radical Redefinition Without Comment

There is a second reason why biblical commands to test prophecy (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21) do not amount to *evidence* for fallible prophecy. Such an interpretation assumes that New Testament prophecy is radically different from the Old Testament gift.

Following Grudem, Piper posits a radical discontinuity between prophecy in the two Testaments, as if Old Testament prophecy is infallible and authoritative, while the New Testament gift of prophecy is not. But that bold conclusion is nothing more than a highly questionable inference. However, if such a radical redefinition of this gift had taken place between the Old Testament and New Testament eras, we would be right to expect explicit statements in Scripture to inform us of this change. As Sam Waldron states:

If New Testament prophecy in distinction from Old Testament prophecy was not infallible in its pronouncements, this would have constituted an absolutely fundamental contrast between the Old

Testament institution and the New Testament institution. To suppose that a difference as important as this would be passed over without explicit comment is unthinkable.^[4]

That is, however, precisely what the continuationist asks us to believe.

Not only is an explicit redefinition of prophecy absent from the New Testament, the overwhelming witness is to the *continuity* of prophetic gift from the Old to the New Testament. First, the New Testament uses identical terminology (e.g., *prophet*, *prophecy*, *prophecy*), side by side, to refer to both (a) Old Testament prophets and prophecy and (b) New Testament prophets and prophecy. Taking just the book of Acts for example, Luke refers to Old Testament prophets in 2:16, 3:24–25, 10:43, 13:27, 13:40, 15:15, 24:14, 26:22, 26:27, and 28:23. Interspersed among those passages are references to New Testament prophets and prophecy in 2:17–18, 11:27–28, 13:1, 15:32, and 21:9–11.^[5] Luke makes no distinction between the nature of their prophecies and the level of their authority, but considers them equal in every respect. Anyone who reads Luke’s record in Acts would naturally conclude that the prophetic gift of the New Testament is on par with that of the Old Testament—indeed, that they were one and the same gift.

The burden of proof, then, weighs heavily on the continuationist to clearly defend from Scripture this radical redefinition of prophecy. Appeals to dubious inferences drawn from texts that speak about testing prophecy “do not approach the kind of explicit precedent”^[6] required to meet that burden. As long as the cessationist can provide plain-sense interpretations of texts like 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21 that are consistent with the traditional definition of prophecy, there is no biblical warrant for anyone to accept such radical and unfounded redefinitions.

Why *Would* Christians Despise Prophecy?

Piper goes on to raise the question of why Thessalonian Christians would have been tempted to despise prophecies if those prophecies had Scripture-level authority.^[7] His own answer to that question is, “Probably because they [the prophecies] are wacko . . . stupid . . . weird . . . [and] off the wall.” Piper is by no means the only continuationist to create that kind of chaotic background as a setting for the early churches. But the error, as I see it, is that he and others have superimposed their personal experiences in the contemporary charismatic movement onto the local churches of the New Testament. While that’s unjustified and anachronistic, it does help us understand Piper’s abiding reluctance to reject modern-day “prophets” when they speak forth “prophecies” that are wacko, stupid, weird, and off the wall.

So why *would* the Thessalonians have been tempted to despise prophecies? Can we answer that question *without* resorting to radically redefining the gift of prophecy? Is there a plausible answer to that question that *doesn’t* require us to impose a radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments? I believe there is. As I wrote in *Strange Fire*:

Because false prophets were prevalent in Old Testament Israel (Deuteronomy 13:3; Isaiah 30:10; Jeremiah 5:31; 14:14–16; 23:32–22; Ezekiel 13:2–9; 22:28; Micah 3:11), God’s people needed to be able to identify and confront them. That same reality applied to New Testament believers as well, which is why Paul instructed the Thessalonians to test prophetic utterances carefully. . . .

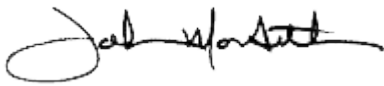
The presence of false prophets in the first-century church is a fact that is clearly attested in the New Testament (Matthew 7:15; 24:11; 2 Timothy 4:3–4; 2 Peter 2:1–3; 1 John 4:1; Jude 4). Commands to

test prophecy must be understood against that backdrop. Believers were commanded to discern between those who were true spokesmen for God and those who were dangerous counterfeits. The Thessalonians, in particular, needed to be wary of false prophets. Paul's two epistles to them indicate that some within their congregation had already been misled—both with regard to Paul's personal character (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12) and the eschatological future of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). Much of Paul's instruction was in response to the erroneous teaching that was wreaking havoc within the Thessalonian church. Perhaps that is why some of the Thessalonians were tempted to despise all prophetic utterances, including those that were true.^[8]

Whatever you might conclude about the interpretation I've offered of 1 Thessalonians 5, it is, at the very least, more preferable than the continuationist interpretation, which requires Christians to radically redefine the gift of prophecy without a single explicit comment from any New Testament author.

Conclusion

Since this post is long enough already, I'll stop here and ask you to stay tuned for my response to John Piper's interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:4–5 and 1 Corinthians 13:8–13. If I didn't write another word to interact with his interpretations, I hope what I've written is enough to help you think carefully about some continuationist assumptions you may have come to accept or embrace uncritically. It's my prayer that you'll find the continued interaction helpful and illuminating as you rightly divide the Word of Truth and work out your salvation before God with fear and trembling.



[1] [Ask Pastor John, Episode 215, 0:51–1:28.](#)

[2] In the case of revelatory dreams, which required interpretation (e.g., Genesis 40:8–13), even the interpretation was a matter of revelation, since “interpretations belong to God” (Gen. 40:8b). The one who claimed to be an interpreter of dreams was required to report the revelation he received from the Lord accurately and without error.

[3] [Ask Pastor John, Episode 215, 2:24–2:32.](#)

[4] Samuel E. Waldron, *To Be Continued? Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Greenville, SC: Calvary Press Publishing, 2005), p. 65.

[5] Supporters of Grudem's hypothesis of a two-tier gift of NT prophecy—that is, that there are both *apostolic-level* and *congregational-level* gifts of prophecy—might object that these references refer only to apostolic-level prophecy. However, the passages listed include the examples of Philip's daughters (Acts 21:9–11) and Agabus (Acts 11:27–28), whom Grudem himself regards as a congregational-level fallible prophet.

[6] Waldron, *To Be Continued?*, p. 66.

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[7] [Ask Pastor John, Episode 215, 2:33ff.](#)

[8] MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, p. 125.