

# **Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, early Christianity and contemporary Pentecostal churches: A question of continuity and discontinuity**

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## *Abstract*

### **Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, early Christianity and contemporary Pentecostalism: A question about continuity and discontinuity**

Prophecy plays an integral part in the spirituality and worship of the Pentecostal movement. Although it exists in diverse forms, the essence of charismatic prophecy is that it is understood to contain a word ascribed to God that is relevant to a person or group of people. The presupposition is that their prophecy stands in continuity with the phenomenon found in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the New Testament and the early church. This article provides a critical investigation of this presupposition, posing the question whether there is a demonstrable continuity between these different phenomena which are separated not only in terms of time, but also in terms of function and essence. This should be answered in the light of the hermeneutical approach in Pentecostal theological tradition that the Bible does not merely contain information about God, but intends to introduce the contemporary believer to God. The believer will experience what biblical people experienced in an encounter with God, including various charismatic revelations, such as prophecy. Therefore Pentecostalists do not read the Bible for the purpose of formulating theological doctrines but to order their practice. They expect to hear directly from God, not only when the Holy Spirit explains Scriptures, but by a direct, extrabiblical word, insight, dream or vision that reveals God's will and word for a current situation. The study provides an overview of the framework of the Pentecostal view of prophecy, in order to view the framework itself critically.

Prophecy is defined as a word attributed to the inspiration of the Lord through the Spirit. Pentecostals assume that God still speaks through prophets and prophecy that often contains social and religious criticism against the church or individuals. Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible displays diversity, sometimes as the interpretation of dreams and visions and at other times as insights formed in the mind. It can also be experienced as powerful and emotional in the life of the prophet, leading to actions reminiscent of the behaviour of a drunken or disturbed person. Prophecy is also taken seriously, whether as an answer to a question or as a word ascribed to God's initiative. The individual to whom it was addressed took it seriously and so did the people gathering at the temple or court. Prophetic messages were tested at times because false prophets consistently posed a threat. In cases where prophecy contained words of encouragement, it could be tested on the basis of existing revelation and in cases where it contained prediction, the test was whether it came true or not. Where Moses wished that God's entire people should

be prophets, Joel announced that this would happen when God pours the Spirit over people of all age groups and genders and every socio-economic status.

In New Testament times Paul emphasised that prophecy is no longer limited to some gifted individuals, but that the Spirit equips all believers to serve the church. The practice of prophecy as outlined in 1 Corinthians differs from prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, where prophets did not submit their message to the people's judgement to discern whether or not it was acceptable. Jewish prophets spoke their word as authoritative, as the word of YHWH. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians did not require divine authority, but had to encourage and comfort the congregation. The practice in contemporary Pentecostalism still is to judge and discern prophecies before they are accepted. The Bible is used as criterion against which a prophecy is measured. Pentecostals argue that in the Hebrew Bible and early church, prophecy was regarded as a threat to institutional structures. Structures of authority in the church gradually eliminated prophecy. Religious experience was replaced by religious text and emerging authoritarian structures (such as the bishops' exclusive right to interpret the Bible). Rituals were controlled and performed exclusively by the priest. Within one generation, denominations that became part of or were established in the classical Pentecostal movement became institutionalised and established a professional pastorate because of their cooperation with evangelicals. Prophecy now gained a further important function, namely to critically evaluate the practice of the local congregation and professional leadership from the perspective of charismatic inspiration.

Possible similarities and contact points between the phenomenon of prophecy in the Old and New Testament, the early church and contemporary Pentecostal churches are the following: Revelation, consisting of words, insights, images, dreams or visions, underpins a diversity of numinous experiences. The congregation within its worship service is the context for the practice of this gift of proclaiming God's Word, apart from preaching and teaching. Theoretically, anyone who participates in worship can and may prophesy. Persons of both genders and all age groups are encouraged to be channels of communication through prophecy. The expectation of 1 Corinthians 14:3 can be fulfilled as a result of prophetic practices. True Christian prophecy is a mixed phenomenon that has limited authority. It requires discernment and assessment by the congregation and leadership before it can be accepted and executed. The prophet is not connected to an office in the congregation and can thus afford to be critical of existing practices and teaching. The inspired speech also addresses unbelievers.

Nuances in the definition of *prophecy* as well as its practice in the church have probably shifted with time. What can be historically determined is that charismata, including prophecy, came under the control of, or were totally blocked by, religious institutions. Contemporary charismatic prophecy is not infallible, faultless or absolute. It has only relative authority. Even when it is considered true and valid it does not mean that people or groups must perform what it suggests, just as Paul had accepted the

prophecy that he was to be captured in Jerusalem and still decided to go to the city where he was arrested.

The conclusion is that all modern prophecy must be evaluated in the light of existing orthodox doctrinal norms, which implies the test of the Bible itself. A further conclusion is that the New Testament and early church assumed continuity between their practice of prophecy and that of the Hebrew Bible. This is also the case with the Pentecostal movement, which intends to restore the values and practices of the earliest church.

**Keywords:** continuity; early church; Hebrew Bible; hermeneutics; New Testament; Pentecostals; prophecy; spiritual gifts

## **1. Introductory**

Prophecy plays an important role in the worship and life of individuals in the classical Pentecostal movement. The assumption is that in our days prophecy is being pursued in continuity with the phenomenon of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the early church. The question is, however, whether there is indeed continuity between these various phenomena that are separated by time, in function and in essence. This can be answered only if the hermeneutic perspective in Pentecostology is kept in mind, that the Bible does not only provide information about God and God's actions with people in history, but introduces the contemporary believer to God. During a meeting with God, the believer experiences what Biblical people experienced, including various charismatic revelations, such as prophecy. Therefore, Pentecostals do not read the Bible to formulate theological teachings, but to order their practice. They expect to hear directly from God, and not only when the Holy Spirit explains the Scriptures. This takes place by means of a direct word, insight, dream or vision that contains the revelation of God's will and word. The question is therefore whether it is possible to assume continuity between the phenomenon of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament Church and the contemporary Pentecostal Church's exercise of prophecy. This study provides a broad overview of the framework of the Pentecostal view of prophecy, with the aim of critically considering the broad framework itself.

## **2. Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible**

Biblical data regarding prophecy and prophetic activity must be discussed in the light of similarities with greater historical, religious and cultural backgrounds and context. In the Ancient Near East, the declaration of signs, dreams and visions was in service of divination with the purpose of understanding one's circumstances in terms of the intentions of the gods, inquiring about the wisdom of certain acts of everyday life or to predict the future (Poloma and Lee 2013: 75). Such practices are banned by the

Hebrew Bible because "prophecy" for Israel was acceptable only when it conveyed the word of YHWH (Robeck 1988: 731). Exodus 4: 10-16 (cf. 7: 1-2) explains, according to Aaron, who is appointed as a 'prophet to Moses', that a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of someone else. Moses will convey (as or as God) the message to Aaron which conveys it as the mouthpiece (or prophet). Moses views himself as a prophet (Deut 8:15) because his words come from God. The implication is that the person who prophesies does not think of the words but only transmits the message. There is also no confusion between the messenger and the one whose message is conveyed. The prophet acts in the name of the assignor only if the message is conveyed to her or him.

The prophetic movement as a vast historical phenomenon and an essential part of Israel's theopolitical structure goes back to Samuel and his followers in the 11th century BC. at the time of the transition from the judges to the beginning of the monarchy (Freedman 1997: 59). 1 Samuel 9: 9 contains the interesting remark that the prophet of that time was previously called "seer", which indicates that there was a clear connection between dreams, visions and prophecies, as in the case of Isaiah (6), Ezekiel (1, 8) as well as Amos (7: 1-9) and Jeremiah (23:25). In other cases, prophets get insight into the meaning of contemporary disasters such as grasshoppers, droughts, pests and forest fires (eg Joel 1: 1 - 2:11) so that they explain what they understand YHWH wants to say to his people. 1 Samuel 10: 5-6 explains that after Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel, he came to a group of prophets who prophesied under the guidance of harps and tambourines. Then the Spirit of YHWH works strongly in Saul, he acts with them as prophet and becomes another human being. It creates the impression that the fruit of prophecy is that the prophet's life is sanctified by the working of the Spirit to come in line with the One giving the command to prophesy. In Saul's case, prophetic activity is accompanied by ecstatic phenomena. When, according to 1 Samuel 19: 18-24, he arrived at Rama again to seek David, he went to the prophet's quarters where the Spirit came upon him, and he began to prophesy while walking. Arriving, he removed his clothes in the presence of Samuel, lying on the ground all day and night. The oddity of his behaviour leads to the the king's question, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Some prophets have telepathic and heroic gifts. Elisha had the reputation of knowing what a king said in the secret of his bedroom (2 Kings 6:12), while Ezekiel (8-11) was aware of what happened to Jerusalem, even though he stayed in Babylon. Prophecy sometimes came with amazing psychological insights, as evidenced by the detailed descriptions of prophets of which they could not have had ordinary knowledge (eg 1 Kings 13: 2, Isaiah 44:28, and also Acts 9 : 11-12). According to the Hebrew Bible, prophecy can also be accompanied by music (1 Chronicles 25: 1, 3, 6; Ps. 89: 19-37; 150: 3-5).

The Hebrew Bible describes (genuine) prophecy in two ways, i.e., where some people bring a word that they think represent God's thoughts about a situation; and the written precipitation of some of the prophets' preaching. What is important is that not all the prophets' words had been recorded and that prophets exercised a political and social influence.

The Hebrew Bible interprets the Spirit as the presence of YHWH with charismatic-prophetic and religious-ethical expressions (Rabens 2012: 149). Prophets sometimes showed signs of ecstasy when the Spirit came upon them (e.g., Numbers 11:25; 24: 2-3; Judges 14: 6; 15:14; 1 Sam. 10: 6; 10:10; 19:20; 2 Chronicles 20: 14-5), while there was clearly the expectation that the presence of the Spirit would intensify in future (cf. Acts 2: 15-8's utilization of Joel 3: 1-2 ; Heliso 2012: 163-4).

The prophet is a social analyst who provides socio-contextual commentary on society from the perspective of faith in God's involvement with man, and thus criticizes inherited structures that do not comply with God's terms. He or she was also a spokesman for the oppressed, a voice on behalf of the faith community for the aggrieved (Fourie 1990: 11-2). The prophets were acutely aware of the need, pain and malfunction of their society. According to them, it could only lead to disaster. They also had the courage to portray a future that invites Israel to dream beyond despair (Brueggemann 1997: 625-6). The imagined future is often subversively colored (Von Rad 1965: 263-77). It deliberately undermined the status quo to criticize it. Prophets used appeals on divine counsel, a messenger formula and narratives about their calling to give authority to judgments that often undermined human institutions (Barton 2007: 272). This happens, for example, in the tension between Samuel and Saul, Nathan and Gad to David, and Elijah to Agab (Niehr 1998: 215).

Freedman (1997: 67) distinguishes between two historical phases in the development of prophetic activity. First, there is a phase that begins with Samuel and his followers, stretching to Elijah and Elisa, and a second period of Scriptural prophets in the early 8th century BC. until the end of the prophetic canon in the 6th or 5th centuries. Both periods are characterized by an emphasis on the ethical dimension of religion and the way it influences the nation, sometimes contrary to the cult's domain of the priests. The survival and success of the community depend more on the righteousness of the nation and its leaders than on the cult activities of the priests or the military, political or socio-economic exploitation by the king and his company. Each Israelite / Jew had the responsibility to obey the commands of God and to comply with God's ordinances. Therefore, idolatry had to be crushed. At the same time, obligations to the neighbor were often emphasized by the prophets. In spite of these emphasis shifts, the basic ethical requirements remained the same. Later, the political scene changed: smaller nations to the west were confronted by the 8th century neo-Assyria and 7th century neo-Babylonia, and the future of Israel and Judah was in the balance. Israel's God reigned over all nations and had a special relationship with these two small kingdoms. Faith in God enabled the people to dream of a restored Israel who would take her place among the other nations as head of a kingdom characterized by the harmonious resolution of conflicts (Isaiah 2: 1-4; Micah 4 : 1-4). Personal faith and morality form the core of prophetic religion with global social and national implications.

In summary, prophecy in the Hebrew Bible is characterized by the prophets conviction that the preaching of God's Word would radically change the situation. The word was viewed as an active ingredient that was added to the situation so that it moved in a specific direction (Motyer 1962: 1038).

### **3. Prophecy in the New Testament**

The Greek προφητεύω means to speak under the influence of divine inspiration, with or without reference to future events (Louw and Nida 1996: 440 [33.459]). A prophet is then a proclaimer, declarer or interpreter of divine things that cannot be known under normal circumstances and which is therefore the product of special revelation (Matthews 1979: 723). The prophet speaks on behalf of, in the name of or on authority of God, and does not provide personal contribution to the communicated communication (Aune 1983: 204) .

The New Testament also refers to "prophets." Aune (1983: 82) argues that "prophecy" for most Palestinian Jews of the late Second Temple period, which ends with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, refers to a phenomenon that was limited to the distant past or the eschatological future. Only in apocalyptic sects that soon expected the end, prophecy was a present experience. After the destruction of the monarchy and national independence in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC. prophetic action and speech were transformed, which inter alia led to the canonization of Hebrew writings, a process largely finished by the first century BC., and elevated classic Israeli prophecy to a unique, sacred and paradigmatic status. Although apocalyptic writings flourished during the late Second Temple period, the special role attributed to Jewish writings made it essential and desirable for later forms of oral and written revelation to take seriously into account the canonical revelation (Aune 1983: 82).

Acts 11:27 tells that prophets moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, Agabus, predicted that a famine would hit the entire inhabited world, which happened in Emperor Claudius's time (Acts 11:28). This led to the initiative to support the Christians in Judea with voluntary contributions (Acts 11:29; Romans 15:28).

Christians have used prophecy in at least two ways: by reading the Hebrew Bible and interpreting references in terms of Jesus as the Christ or Messiah (Matthew 1:22; 2: 5; 2:15; 2:17; 3: 3; 4: 14; 8:17; 12:17; 12:39; 13:35; 21: 4; 24:15; 27: 9; Luke 24:19; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17), and by interpreting references to the "end time" in the Hebrew Bible as well as in Jesus' words and their own writings as (future) predictions. Prophets in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the person of Jesus (Matthew 14: 5; 21:26; Mark 6:15; 11:32 explain that the people saw Jesus as a prophet), as well as other preachers (Luk 1:76; 7:26; 20: 6 refers to John), were regarded as "fore-tellers" (predictors) as well as "forth-tellers" (narrators) (Motyer 1962: 1038; Maguire 2013: 58).

The early Christians based their faith on what they regarded as the fulfilment of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. To name two examples: when Peter gives his

first sermon on Pentecost, explaining what happened, he returns to Psalm 16: 9-10, according to which King David already predicted the resurrection of the Messiah (Acts 2: 26-27 ); and the writer of 1 Peter 2: 24-25 refers to Deutero-Isaiah's prediction of the Suffering Servant as a prophecy of the extent of the effect of Christ's crucifixion. Matthew, directing his gospel to the Jews and utilising the midrash method (Dennert 2013: 33-8; Nolland 2005: 21), may have based his book on the Pentateuch for the purpose of portraying Jesus as the new Moses that leads the people from the slavery of sin, but also about Jesus as fulfillment of the Pentateuch's prophecies (Deuteronomy 18:18). Prophecy meant in the New Testament that the words of the prophets were applied to Jesus as the Messiah, in addition to cases where prophets had a contemporary word for a particular occasion.

### 3.1 Paul and Prophecy

Pentecostals believe that Paul makes a distinction between prophecy (προφητεία) as one of the spiritual gifts (Riedecker 1976: 428) and the prophet as a gift to the church (Ephesians 4:11 καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους - he also appointed apostles, prophets, others as evangelists, others as shepherds and ministers) for the equipment of the saints to build up the body of Christ; Eph 4:12) (Gaffin 1979: 58). The difference between "prophecy" and "prophet" is that any Spirit-filled person may receive the gift of bringing a message of word from God on occasion, while the prophet has proven himself or herself as someone who has been periodically serving the church with the prophetic word, with the result that the person's message can be regarded as authoritative (Horton [1934] 1975: 161; Möller 1975: 205-6) . Such a distinction cannot, however, be based on biblical data, as the New Testament merely refers to "prophets" and "prophecy." From the *Didache* it appears that the early Church knew the phenomenon of traveling prophets and prophets connected to a congregation, while Paul's Corinth references to prophecy refer to a phenomenon within a specific congregation.

The gift to prophesy is discussed in further detail in 1 Corinthians 12-14 in terms of the Spirit-filled person who is inspired occasionally to bring a word to the congregation. Paul wishes, like Moses (Numbers 11:29), that all believers prophesy and encourages his readers to strive to receive that particular gift (1 Corinthians 14: 1, 5, 39), but at the same time he emphasizes that prophecy is only one of many gifts (Witherington 1995: 255) . If Paul encourages his readers to sing spiritual songs (ὠδαὶς πνευματικαῖς; Ephesians 5: 18-19; Col. 3:16), it probably indicates that songs in the early church sometimes contain a prophetic-ecstatic element (Porter 2000: 712). Every believer possesses the Spirit, but the Spirit-filled person also possesses the potential to prophesy (or receive any of the other gifts), which the Spirit gives (1 Corinthians 12: 8-11). Yet the Spirit gives the different gifts to different persons to serve the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:29's rhetorical question whether all are prophets clearly expects a negative response). 1 Corinthians 11: 5 also emphasizes that the gifts (including

prophecy) are not linked to gender: women also pray and prophesy within the context of worship (Prime 2005: 96).

1 Corinthians 13: 8 explains that the gifts will disappear, cease and perish; in other words, it is imperfect and temporary (καταργηθήσονται ... παύσονται ... καταργηθήσεται—will no longer be valid, cease) in the light of the perfect or complete (1 Corinthians 13:10, τὸ τέλειον) which is on its way when Christ returns. Meanwhile, it serves a clear purpose, as 1 Corinthians 14: 3 states: someone who prophesies, speaks words that build up (reinforce, realize potential), encourage and comfort (convince) (λαλεῖ οἰκοδομῆν καὶ παράκλησιν καὶ παραμυθίαν) (Forbes 1995:237). It is aimed primarily at believers (1 Corinthians 14:22), although it can also serve an evangelistic purpose to speak to the unbelievers' conscience (ethical purpose) so that they come to self-examination, revealing the hidden things of their hearts and bow down to God in acknowledging that he is with the believers (1 Corinthians 14: 24-25) (Bartlett 2012: 261 ). It recalls John 4: 9-26's description of how the Samaritan woman responds to Jesus as a prophet (cf. John. 4:19, Κύριε, θεωρῶ ὅτι προφήτης εἶ σύ - "Sir, I see that you are a prophet").

The importance of the gift to prophesy is emphasised by Paul when he provides guidelines in 1 Corinthians 14 for practicing it in worship services (versus speaking in tongues): prophecy serve the building up of the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:26), as well as teach and encourage believers (1 Corinthians 14:31, ἵνα πάντες μανθάνωσιν καὶ πάντες παρακαλῶνται - so that everyone receives information by instruction and can be built and comforted) as a reflection of the Giver, characterized by peace and order (1 Corinthians 14:33; Möller 1975: 144-5).

Paul's explanation shows that prophetic leadership is shared by the congregation (1 Corinthians 14: 29-31) and that the emphasis falls on the message that the Spirit of God brings rather than those who serve as inspired mediators (Robeck 1988: 732). Leadership is not determined institutionally or democratically, but charismatically and pneumatologically (Langerman 1983: 51; Lederle 1988: 69). What is important is that the gifted ones serve the church in worship and do not pursue self-interest ( 1 Corinthians 14: 1-12); Therefore, the assignment: strive for those gifts that build up the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:12, πρὸς τὴν οἰκοδομῆν τῆς ἐκκλησίας ζητεῖτε ἵνα περισσεύητε—make it your priority to seek those gifts that build the church - Bartlett 2012 : 256).

Prophecy, according to the description of 1 Corinthians 14:32, is not an ecstatic experience that overwhelms people so that they lose control of themselves. The prophet remains in charge of his or her spirit (καὶ πνεύματα προφητῶν προφήταις ὑποτάσσεται - the spirits of prophets are subjected to prophets). The personality of the prophet does not disappear in the divine (1 Corinthians 14:30). Prophetic contributions to worship are also limited. Only two or three persons are allowed to share prophetic messages (1 Corinthians 14:29), and the congregation must weigh their words on the basis of detailed information (οἱ ἄλλοι διακρινέτωσαν; Louw and Nida 1996: 363 [30.109]).



Although prophecy forms an essential part of worship (at least in the Corinthian congregation), it is clear that Paul considers it to be one of several other elements, and that it may not be overemphasized at the expense of other gifts (1 Cor. 14:26). Prophecy may not dominate the meetings or serve as independent authority (Robeck 1988: 733).

In his earlier letter, 1 Thessalonians, Paul warned that the working of the Spirit should not be resisted (μη σβέννυτε - literally: that the fire should not be extinguished) and that prophecies should not be underestimated (μη ἐξουθενεῖτε - It should not be considered as meaningless or useless—Louw and Nida 1996: 762 [88,195]). Everything must be tested for its authenticity (πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε) and the good must be kept while staying away from the bad (1 Thess. 5: 19-21). For Paul, the gift of prophecy always works with the gift to distinguish between good and bad (διακρίσεις πνευμάτων) (1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 Thess. 5: 20-21). In the same sense, the gift of speaking in tongues functions with the gift of interpretation of languages (1 Cor. 12: 10b) (Bartlett 2012: 220). Prophecy is not the word of God as such. It must first be judged by the community of faith. About this, Paul feels so strong that he regards it as an instruction from the Lord (ἃ γράφω ὑμῖν ὅτι κυρίου, 1 Corinthians 14:37).

### 3.2 Luke-Acts and Prophecy

Luke offers in Acts examples of prophetic activities that are genuine as well as those that are demonic in nature (cf. Jesus' words in Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24). As in the case of the Hebrew Bible, it can serve as warning, as illustrated in Paul's actions against the slave of Philippi with a spirit of divination (Acts 16:16, πνεῦμα πύθωνα - spirit of the snake Python killed by Apollo; Louw and Nida 1996: 148 [ 12.48]) who followed him and Silas, shouting that they were men of God who proclaimed the message of salvation (Acts 16:17, Οὗτοι οἱ ἄνθρωποι δοῦλοι τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου εἰσίν, οἵτινες καταγγέλλουσιν ὑμῖν ὁδὸν σωτηρίας). Although she spoke the truth, Paul exorcised the spirit (τῷ πνεύματι) in Jesus' Name (Acts 16:18). Luke's narrative implies that prophecy must be tested, not by virtue of its truth, but according to the spirit that inspires it (which corresponds to 1 Corinthians 12:10's "distinction of the spirits"). Demonically-inspired messages can be based on evangelical truths (Lenski 1961: 666).

In Acts, Lukas presents two examples of prophecy accepted by the church: Agabus, who is typified as a prophet (he came together with a group—κατήλθον ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων προφηῆται εἰς Ἀντιόχειαν; Acts 12:27) and predicted a famine (Acts 11: 28-30; his prophecy is recorded in Scripture) and Paul in paradoxical language pointed out that persecution and imprisonment awaited him, which probably referred to prophecies he received (Acts 20: 22-23) ). Paul stated that he was on his way to Jerusalem, driven by the Holy Spirit (δεδεμένος ἐγὼ τῷ πνεύματι) without knowing what would happen to him, though the Spirit warned him in every city what was waiting for him. When he came to Tyre, the believers warned him, guided by the Spirit (διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος), not to go to Jerusalem. (Acts 21: 4). In Cesarea, the same happened when Paul stayed with Philip with his four unmarried daughters who had the gift to prophesy (θυγατέρες τέσσαρες παρθένοι προφητεύουσαι) (Acts 21: 9). After a while, Agabus,

a prophet from Jerusalem, came and challenged Paul (Acts 11: 27-29), demonstrating symbolically, as prophets in the Hebrew Bible also sometimes did, that Paul would be bound and delivered to the Gentiles. Agabus's opening words were: "Thus says the Holy Spirit" (Acts 21:11, *Τάδε λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον*), which reminds of the early Jewish prophets "Thus speaks YHWH." The incidents creates the impression that the church in Acts considered prophecy as something usual and natural. In spite of clear warnings, Paul preferred to go to Jerusalem, where the prophetic pronouncements came true and he eventually ended up in prison in Rome. The congregations interpreted the prophecies as warnings that Paul should not carry through his plans; Paul regarded it as preparation for suffering (Nel 1997: 164). Therefore, the believers rested in Paul's decision and asked that the will of the Lord would take place (Acts 21:14).

Luke's examples explain that true prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit comes and although it sometimes contains a predictive element, this is not always the case. Prophecy also requires evaluation and judgment and requires application, as in Paul's (non-)utilization of prophecies on his journey to Jerusalem. Even when a prophecy is brought, it is necessary for the congregation to always seek purposefully for God's will in the situation (Möller 1975: 49).

According to Acts 2: 16-18, Peter interprets Pentecost in terms of Joel 2: 28-29, and equates Joel's "prophecy" to the "speech in tongues" perceived by those present on the Day of Pentecost. Luke understands that speaking in tongues can be interpreted as prophecy even though Luke (like Paul) makes a clear distinction. If speaking in tongues is interpreted as inspired speech by and through God, it is clear that prophecy can be described in the same terms.

### 3.3 Other Gospels, Revelation and Prophecy

The Gospels sketch John the Baptist as a prophet in continuity with the Hebrew Bible (Luke 1:76; 7:26; Matt. 11; 9; John 1:21, 25). The people around him also interpreted his ministry as prophetic (Mark 11:32; 14: 5; Matthew 21:26; Luke 20: 6). Luke 1:15 explains that he was filled with the Spirit from birth (*πνεύματος ἁγίου πλησθήσεται ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ*). As a prophet, he preached repentance and forgiveness (Matthew 3: 7-10; Luke 3: 7-9; Mark 1: 7-8) with the prophetic apocalyptic expectation that the ax would cut down the tree and the eschatological judgment would hit Israel's wickedness (Matthew 3:10, Luke 3: 9), following the prophets in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Amos 5: 4-5; Jer. 4: 4-5; 6: 1; 50: 8-10). He prepared the way for someone who would baptize with the Spirit and fire (Matthew 3: 11-12; Luke 3: 16-17; Mark 1: 7-8).

The Evangelists also sketch Jesus as a prophet (John 1:21, Mark 8: 27-28; Matthew 16: 13-14; Luke 7:16; 9: 18-19) although it is especially Luke who developed the prophetic role of Jesus and indicated that the same fate was waiting for him as some of the other prophets (Luke 4:24; 6: 22-23; 13: 34-35).

John the Baptist, as well as Jesus, demonstrate that prophets did not fit in well with society because their words often threatened the status quo. Both were killed by Roman representatives, related to the predecessors' nervousness about a potential Jewish uprising.

Revelation is an extensive example of Christian prophecy. Although the author does not call himself a prophet, the Scripture becomes a revelation (1: 1 Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) and prophecy (1: 3 τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας; 22: 7, 10, 18-9). The seven letters follow the same pattern: it begins with the words of the glorified Christ (2: 1, 8, 12, 18; 3: 1, 7, 14) and ends with the words of the Spirit (2: 7, 11, 17 29: 3: 6, 13, 22). The prophetic message of Revelation is the word of the glorified Christ, the living Spirit (Gaffin 1979: 68). Although John's style and some of his images originate from apocalyptic traditions, the author stands in his interpretation of history, as well as his sensitivity to the actuality of his situation, in the tradition of prophetic faith and proclamation (Hill 1979: 68). This prophecy involves vocabulary, phrases and extended formal speech elements in the first person of the Deity, with narratives of calling, statements of holy laws and patterns of instruction and conversion preaching. Hill concludes that John is in a way inseparable from the body of believers, who also has a prophetic character. Yet he (Hill 1979: 75) believes that John's prophetic authority is greater than the authority of the group of prophets he leads. The writer's intention was that his work would be read in worship (Rev. 1: 3; 22:18) and serve as substitute for oral prophecies, as the author was in exile. The oral nature of the prophetic style is demonstrated by the seven letters where the "I know" parts mainly determine the content of each letter (Aune 1983: 275).

In other respects, it appears that New Testament prophecy differs from the Old Testament prophecies. The latter is conditional in nature ("if you do, that will happen"). The Old Testament distinguishes between true and false prophets, often in response to cult prophets by the "powerless" inspired. This group claimed that they had access to meetings of the heavenly cabinet and might plead on behalf of Israel. But they also believed that they could talk to God on behalf of God with regard to his people. The New Testament encourages believers to weigh prophecies to determine if it is true. 1 Corinthians 14 creates the impression that "prophecy" had the authority of general content, but was not regarded as a literal transcription of God's words. Therefore, the faith community should judge the words of the prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29) (Witherington 1995: 286). Prophecies in the Hebrew Bible are characterized by "Thus says JHWH", and the impression is made that it represents verbally what JHWH proposed to the prophet (cf. Ex. 19: 3; 2 Kings 19: 7, 28, 33, 35 ). The incident where Paul does not obey the prophecies creates the impression that prophecy in the New Testament did not have the same authority as "the word of YHWH," although true prophecy reflects the truth.

By way of summary, prophecy in the New Testament is in some (important) respects similar to the phenomenon in the Old Testament, where the word "prophecy" refers to expressions that are attributed to the inspiration of the Spirit from the mouth of the Lord. The Old Testament prophet was in a unique

position because of direct communication with God through the working of the Spirit, which the rest of the people did not experience or know. After Pentecost, all believers were filled with the Spirit, with the result that the congregation became a prophetic community where everybody could experience direct communication with God (Fourie 1990: 9). Where prophecy in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament agrees is that it serves as symbols of morality and social conscience of the people (Fourie 1990: 10). Prophecy is also understood as speaking on behalf of God, and in some cases prophecies are recorded. In the New Testament, men as well as women participate in prophetic activities, as in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet is also not connected to the office of the congregation, as in the case of Old Testament prophets who were often not employed by the temple. The prophecy serves a dual purpose: to build up believers and to address unbelievers. Prophets make use of symbolic acts, which emphasize some of the similarities between prophecy in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

### 3.4 The early church and prophecy

The practice of prophecy was continued in the early church (after the conclusion of the New Testament) where opportunities existed for traveling as well as local prophets. The church was a building built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (*ἐποικοδομηθέντες ἐπὶ τῷ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν*), a building of which Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone and in which God lives (Ephesians 2:20-22). Prophecy generally occurred in the "apostolic" era until about 70 AD, after which it became scarcer in the subapostolic era (70 to 100 AD) and subsequently only sporadically occurred until the rise of Montanism in 170 AD (Forbes 1995: 247). There is reasonable proof that prophecy continued in the 2nd century and beyond, in response to the institutional structures of the emerging episcopate (Stander 1986: 89). Prophecy also did not disappear with the rejection of Montanism. Then it was more often associated with a gift dedicated only to well-known saints and others who are orthodox (like martyrs) (Forbes 1995: 249). By the middle of the 2nd century, however, the ideal of congregational prophecy, that every believer is a prophet, is still maintained, although there is evidence that a growing institutionalization systematically replaced it. Stander (1986: 60) argues convincingly that the early church did not reject Montanism for its emphasis on prophecy, but due to the content of his prophecies that emphasized matters that were not acceptable to the church. Such issues included that Christians had to eat dry food; do not drink wine; had to comply with all sorts of rules which had no connection with biblical prescriptions; were not to marry; that a second marriage was forbidden; and the expectation of the second coming that would lead to Christ's rule in Phrygia for 1 000 years (Ward 1972: 57). The church referred to these issues as the "New Prophecy". The orthodox church in answer argued that Christians represent the continuation of true prophecy, contrary to Montanists who did not have true prophets. It was thus not the practice of charismata that the Montanists made unacceptable to the Christians (Stander 1986 : 61).

The Didache (about 90 AD) refers to a prophet as someone speaking "in the Spirit" (11: 7-12; 1983: 310), indicating that such inspired statements were oracular. The text also refers to resident and traveling prophets, but more attention is given to the last group (10: 7; 11: 1-12; 13: 1-7). Congregations had to pay attention to the fruit of the prophet's life when they evaluate the prophet, and not create the opportunity for prophets to prophesy for financial gain. Where prophets had a proven ministry and were connected to the congregation, they had to be substantively supported (Holmes 2007: 343-344). Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (early 2nd century), described how he occasionally experienced in his preaching in Philadelphia how the Holy Spirit talked through him and revealed disagreement in the congregation (Ign. 7: 1-2). He writes that he was unaware of the problems that unleashed the prophecy.

The Shepherd of Hermas (Ποιμὴν τοῦ Ἑρμᾶ; early 2nd century) contains a series of visions attributed to the Spirit, as well as guidelines on how to distinguish between true and false prophets (chapter 11). Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 5.6.1) acknowledges the existence of prophecy in his day and disapproved those who rejected the gift.

The church father Origenes rejected all forms of ecstasy, madness or embarrassment as signs of true prophecy in response to the Montanists, but endorsed the authenticity of some prophetic statements (possibly due to circumstances that occurred, showing the prophecy as genuine). He explains (*Contra Celsum* 7.3) that prophecy follows the revelation of things that are clearly "seen" in a moment and then declared so that the profound truths about Christ can be revealed by the Spirit. Origenes brought prophecy in relation to the Bible when he identified prophecy with a gift to explain Scripture. He is the first writer to describe the revealed understanding of the text as a prophetic word.

From the 3rd century there are several descriptions of prophetic activities, mainly in cases where people in church offices were appointed on the basis of a prophecy and in the description of visions and prophecies that believers received during prosecutions. The persecuted church attributed the individual's confession to the magistrate to the Holy Spirit who provided prophetic words (Matthew 10: 19-20; Mark 13: 9-13; Luke 12: 11-12; 21: 11- 19). In this way, there was a close connection between prophecy and martyrdom, especially in the church in North Africa (Robeck 1988: 737). Cyprianus (Letter 16.4, 7) tells how he received personal guidance from the Spirit in a prophetic word when he had to make a decision. He also mentions that his suffering and martyrdom was also predicted on another occasion (*Life and Passion of Cyprianus* 7).

As the biblical canon evolved and was eventually established, it seems that less attention was paid to prophecy, especially in response to radical groups such as the prophetic claims of the Gnostics and Montanists. John Chrysostom (Sermon 29 on 1 Corinthians 12: 1-2) states that the gifts cease to function, mainly as a result of it causing so many problems (De Wet 2007: 243). The assumption that believers received a personal revelation of God was increasingly doubted. It was considered to be so

risky and subjective that the future for orthodox Christianity was rather sought in the authoritative and closed canon of Scripture declared by ecumenical councils and bishops (Maguire 2013: 65).

There are broadly two ways to explain this historical development: either the spiritual gifts ceased to function when the biblical canon was closed (cf. Ruthven 1993), or in the state church of the 4th century, the spontaneous movement of the Spirit were lost in the formalized and Restructured structures.

#### **4. Pentecostal concept of prophecy**

The Reformers of the 16th century responded to the abuses and heresies of the Roman Catholic Church, but on the other hand also to the Zwickau prophets under the direction of Thomas M nzer. Calvin (Calvin 2010: 458) and his followers limited prophecy to Paul and other apostles' interpretation of the Old Testament and to the church's preaching of Christ on the basis of the Bible. Prophecy is the gift to interpret the Bible correctly. It does not happen spontaneously and it can never contain a fresh, new revelation. Pentecostals, on the other hand, read the Bible from another hermeneutical angle: the Bible does not form a closed canon and the revelation is not complete. The Bible is rather regarded as an invitation to the believer to find, through the inspiration of the Spirit, what God had done for people in biblical times, and what God still wants to do for contemporary people (Clark 1997: 5-8). They read the Bible with great earnestness in order to understand what God says to them, but they do not allow the Bible to replace the focus of their faith, which is Jesus. The Bible becomes the gateway to a real understanding of Jesus in that He is met in and through Scripture through the working of his Spirit (Frost and Hirsch 2009: 146).

Where Protestants connected the end of the apostolic era or the New Testament canon with the ceasing of the spiritual gifts, Pentecostals regard its termination rather as a sign of the degeneration of the church since the last half of the 3rd century. They emphasize that prophecy still fulfills an important function today, in addition to the practice of other gifts, which they think characterized the early Church.

The Azusa Street Revival chose to be called the Apostolic Faith Mission to emphasize that they regarded the contemporary experience of the baptism of Spirit with speaking in tongues as an initial sign in restorative terms. It represented a continuation of what the early Church experienced and the apostles taught. The New Testament was also important to them as the primary link between the apostolic tradition of Jesus and the Old Testament as an authoritative influence on the life of the apostles. Therefore, Scripture served as a key to the assessment of contemporary prophecy. With Scripture as a standard, three criteria were distinguished: the authority of the prophet within the community (in larger congregations, people who wanted to prophesy were obliged to discuss it with the leaders first to protect the congregation); the willingness of the prophet to subject the prophecy to the distinction of the faith community; and the content of the prophetic word.

The gift of distinguishing of spirits functions in practice on two levels: the community distinguishes by the Spirit whether the "prophecy" comes from God's Spirit or from another spirit. It is also measured against Scripture and specifically the apostolic tradition, which represents the source of information about Jesus (Möller 1997: 76-8). Pentecostal churches experience that the practice of the gifts of the Spirit often bring reconciliation in relationships, healing and behavioral change. Vondey (2013: 46) notes in this regard: "The charismatic dimension is not simply a performance of the imagination but the occasion where a person engaged in the spiritual life is transformed by the divine power of the Spirit to disengage from the demonic and to participate in the divine."

Prophetic words are seldom concerned with forecasting about the future. It contains rather words that encourage the community or an individual, comfort or warn, or reveal the hidden things of people's hearts (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 5: 8). Watson (1992: 144) considers Paul to regard prophecy as "primarily a spirit-inspired declaration of the will of God for this congregation at this time", a description of how Pentecost considers it. In most cases, it is addressed to the local church or group, or individual, rather than to the universal church.

What is the authority of the contemporary prophetic word? Calvin (2010: 32-3) and many "cessationists" claim that Hebrews 1: 1-2 indicates that all prophetic authority ceased to exist because God gave his final revelation in Jesus Christ. Christ did not only bring a word of God, just like the prophets in the old dispensation, but he is the final conclusion. God spoke for the last time, and therefore, believers should not be content with the Torah like the Jews, but move on to Christ. They do not move beyond the boundaries set by the apostles. They must not endure the Anabaptists, who proclaimed a further, extrabiblical revelation. Calvin has been followed by many Bible readers.

A further argument advocated in this regard is the indication in 1 Corinthians 13:10 that the perfect (τέλειον) that came refers to Christ: now that the perfect came, prophecies ceased (1 Corinthians 13: 8-9). However, the aorist subjunctive ἔλθῃ refers to the moment in the future when the goal will be achieved with the Second Coming of Christ. It will abolish the imperfection that characterizes earthly life because its purpose would then have become obsolete (Lenski 1963: 566). The imperfect perspectives that Christians receive through the gifts, mentioned in the previous two verses, will also change into perfect knowledge when believers see everything as it truly is and fully know as God knows them fully (1 Corinthians 13: 12). Perfect knowledge therefore exists in a meeting with the One who is truthful (1 John 3: 2). Gifts provide a quick glance and shadow of the perfect that is coming, as the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible refers to the crucifixion of Christ (Hebrews 10: 1-14) (Pratt 2000: 234).

Cartledge's (1991: 19) research into contemporary charismatic experiences shows that prophecy is received and transmitted in different ways in practice: sometimes the message is received before it is

transferred. The speaker knows what its content is minutes, hours or days before the prophecy. In other cases, the person receives a part of the message and realizes that he or she must start talking before the rest is transferred to her or him. In most cases, there is an impulse to begin speaking without a clear idea of what the message entails, and the message then comes to the speaker as pronounced. This early starting point means that any attempt to judge contemporary prophecy may not only be based on the actions of the prophetic words. These aspects make it difficult to measure contemporary prophetic experience in biblical or early church experiences.

For Pentecostal historians, church history is interpreted in terms of a hierarchical development of the episcopate who hijacked prophecy (and other spiritual gifts) and elevated it to the papal *ex cathedra* pronouncements, as formulated and pronounced by the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) (Fahlbusch, Lochman and Mbiti 2005: 33). Instead of settling authority in the priest (as well as bishop and pope), Protestants connected prophecy with explanatory preaching and teaching (Ness 1979: 275-9). In the Pentecostal tradition, however, prophecy is linked to the spontaneous action of the Spirit in believers to express a word outside of Scripture, although it must be measured by the faith community to the revelation in Scripture and believers subject themselves to each other (Robeck 1988: 740). In this way, Pentecostals maintain continuity with the New Testament prophecy, but also with Old Testament prophecy.

It is clear that the New Testament assumes a similarity between the phenomenon in early times and the present, although it has been pointed out that New Testament prophecies may be regarded as of less authority, at least in comparison to the words of the Scripture prophets recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It is also clear that the early church knew prophecy and that it was identified in continuity with the New Testament phenomenon. Pentecostal churches regard the appearance of prophecy in their ranks in continuity with these phenomena. They therefore use the same terminology to refer to it and to evaluate it according to New Testament prescriptions.

## **5. Synthesis**

The practice of prophecy, as sketched in 1 Corinthians, differs from prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, where prophets did not submit their message to the people's judgment to discern whether it was acceptable or not. The Jewish prophets had considered the word they brought to be authoritative. Prophecy of the type that 1 Corinthians testify to does not include the claim that it possesses divine authority, but contains material that appears to be the product of revelation and shows the result of building up the congregation. The practice is continued in contemporary Pentecostal churches to judge prophecies before it is accepted. Contemporary charismatic prophecy is therefore not infallible, flawless or in any way absolute. And even when viewed as genuine, it does not mean that people or groups have to obey the word. The conclusion is that the New Testament as well as the early church provided



continuity between their practice of prophecy and that of the Hebrew Bible, followed by Pentecostal churches as a community that wants to restore the values and practices of the earliest church.

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