

in the early churches is simply incorrect. They also imply that prophecies today should not be prefaced with 'Thus says the Lord'; to do this is to claim an authority that new covenant prophets do not have.

*Spontaneous 'revelation' differentiates prophecy from other gifts*

If prophecy does not contain God's very words, then what is it? In what sense is it from God?

Paul indicates that God can bring something spontaneously to mind so that the person prophesying reports it in his or her own words. Paul calls this a 'revelation': 'If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged' (1 Cor. 14:30-31). Theologians have used the word 'revelation' to refer to the words of Scripture, but here Paul uses it in a broader sense, to denote communication from God which does not result in written Scripture or words equal in authority to written Scripture (see also Phil. 3:15; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 1:17; Matt. 11:27).

Thus if a stranger comes in and all prophesy, 'the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you' (1 Cor. 14:25). In this way, prophecy serves as a 'sign' for believers (1 Cor. 14:22); it is a clear demonstration that God is definitely at work in their midst, a 'sign' of God's hand of blessing on the congregation. And since it will be effective for the conversion of unbelievers as well, Paul encourages the church to use this gift when 'unbelievers or outsiders enter' (1 Cor. 14:23).

Why did Paul value prophecy so highly (1 Cor. 14:1-5, 39-40)? Apparently because it was effective in 'building up the church' (1 Cor. 14:12), spontaneously revealing God's insight into someone's heart or into a specific situation, and thereby bringing 'upbuilding and encouragement and consolation' (1 Cor. 14:3). Even though it had to be tested and was never to be received as the authoritative 'words of the Lord' like the Bible (see above), through prophecies God was still manifesting his gracious presence in the day to day life of the church by guiding, warning, predicting, and giving his perspective on people's hearts and the events in which they were involved. In this way prophecy was a vivid expression

of the genuine personal relationship between God and his people.

However, Paul did not think that everything called 'prophecy' in the ancient world was like Christian prophecy. The Corinthians had previously been led astray to 'dumb idols' (1 Cor. 12:2), and Paul was well aware of demonic spiritual power at work in pagan temples; 'what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God' (1 Cor. 10:20). A failure to recognize this distinction leads to a fundamental error in the massive work of David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, 1983). He considers true Christian prophecy (which is empowered by the Holy Spirit) together with pagan prophecy (which is not) as one general religious phenomenon. Aune fails to consider the possibility that we can distinguish true from false prophecy on the basis of the prophet's willingness to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). No NT writer would have adopted Aune's perspective; nor should evangelical scholars today.

*The difference between prophecy and teaching*

Prophecy and teaching are always mentioned as distinct gifts (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; 14:6; Eph. 4:11), but what is the difference? Unlike the gift of prophecy, 'teaching' in the NT is never said to be based on a spontaneous revelation from God. Rather, 'teaching' is an explanation or application of Scripture (Acts 15:35; 18:11, 24-28; Rom. 2:21; 15:4; Col. 3:16; Heb. 5:12) or a repetition and explanation of apostolic instructions (Rom. 16:17; 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10, etc.). (It is what people today would call 'Bible teaching' or 'preaching'.) The distinction between teaching and prophecy is thus quite clear. If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, including interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in NT terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.

So prophecy has less authority than 'teaching', and prophecies in the churches are always to be tested by the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Timothy was not told to *prophesy* Paul's instructions in the church; he was to *teach* them (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2). The