

The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture

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Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen G. White had the biblical gift of prophecy. They compare her with what the Scriptures say about prophets in both the Old and New Testaments. A strong basis for their conviction is what Paul said about spiritual gifts in Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans. The Adventist view of the gift was also influenced to some degree by how her gift functioned in practice.¹

The Old Testament evidence

In the Old Testament there are three Hebrew word roots for the concept of “prophet-prophecy-prophecy.” The most prominent of these (*nābî*) is normally translated *prophet* or (*nābā*) *prophecy* in English and is always translated with *prophet* words in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament).² During the period of the judges in earlier Old Testament history, prophetic figures were also referred to as “seers” (1 Sam. 9:9).³ The two Hebrew words for *seer* (*rō’eh* and *hōzeh*) can be used interchangeably (Isa. 30:9, 10).

There is a difference in the Old Testament between the noun and the verb form of “prophet-prophecy.” The root meaning of the noun *prophet* (*nābî*) is “speaker” or “proclaimer.” But it can also mean “the called one.” In its verbal form it is normally used for “prophetic speech” and sometimes for frenzied and unusual

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behavior (Num. 11:25–27; 1 Sam. 10:5, 6, 10ff.; 18:10, 11; 19:18ff.; 1 Kings 18:29).⁴

In general, prophets in the Old Testament represented God to people on earth (Amos 3:7). The prophet would receive instruction from God and would then pass that instruction on to the people (Exod. 4:15, cf. Exod. 7:1), who were expected to follow it (2 Chron. 20:20). This role was in contrast to that of the priests, who in worship represented the people before God. While the role of the priest was hereditary, one could become a prophet only through a direct calling by God (Isa. 6:1–9; Jer. 1:1–10; Ezek. 2:1–7; Amos 7:14–17).⁵ Whereas most prophets in the Old Testament were men, four women are designated as “prophetesses”: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and the wife of Isaiah (Exod. 15:20; Judg. 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14–20; 2 Chron. 34:22–28; Isa. 8:3).

Prophets in the Old Testament received information from God in two primary ways (Num. 12:6–8). One of these was more auditory. The prophet heard words directly from God and was expected to pass on the message as it was given by God. This kind of revelation lay behind the repeated use of such phrases as “thus says the LORD” (1 Sam. 10:18; 2 Sam. 12:11; 1 Kings 20:28; 2 Kings 1:4; 2 Chron. 34:23; Isa. 7:7; Jer. 8:4; Ezek. 3:27). The second way that prophets received information from God was through dreams and visions (Num. 12:6; 1 Sam. 3:1; Isa. 1:1; Jer. 24:1; Ezek. 8:4; Dan. 7:2; Hab. 2:2, 3). Generally, the earlier prophets of the Old Testament received direct speech from God, while in the later period dreams and visions became a more common mode of special revelation. Some prophets predicted future events (Isa. 40–66; Jer. 33; Ezek. 36–48; Dan. 2 and 7; Joel 3:9–21), but many prophets did not predict the future. Their primary message was to give God’s perspective and provide warning and encouragement for their time and place (2 Chron. 20:20).

In the Old Testament, much of the prophetic writings are in Hebrew poetry (Isaiah and Micah, for example). The literary style and quality of the prophetic writings reflect the personality, education, and emotional state of the prophet. The prophetic writings also include long historical narratives (books such as 1 Samuel and 2 Kings), exploring how the history of Israel was affected by obedience or disobedience to the covenant. Later prophets such as Zechariah and Daniel had apocalyptic visions, viewing the future through symbolism.

Prophets and prophecy occurred in Old Testament times from the very beginning. Enoch and Noah are antediluvian examples (Gen. 5:24; Jude 14; Gen. 6:13–21). Abraham was called a prophet (Gen. 20:7), and this was also the case with Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Moses (Deut. 18:15, 18; 34:10–12), and the seventy upon whom the “spirit of Moses” had fallen (Num. 11:16–30). Although we can

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infer something about the nature of prophecy from these individuals' statements and behaviors, there is little direct information as to exactly how this office or gift operated in their lives. The most interesting text is Numbers 12:6–8, where it is said that “prophets” received dreams and visions, but Moses communicated with God face to face. In this case, Moses was more than a prophet. His leadership authority in the situation exceeded that of his sister and brother, both of whom are referred to as prophets (Exod. 7:1; 15:10—in Aaron’s case the term is used in a limited sense).

In the period of the judges, Deborah is the only person titled as a prophet until one gets to the time of Samuel, who is the first prophet from whom we can glean considerable information about the nature of the gift. The gift seems to have flourished in the time of the monarchy, with Nathan and Gad at the time of David, and Ahijah in the time of Solomon. Later, in addition to Elijah and Elisha, the monarchy was served by canonical prophets, who wrote books of the Bible, such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. During the period of the exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel served the people of God as prophets. And finally, after the return from Exile, Judah was served by the canonical prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Another major distinction in the Old Testament is between true and false prophets. The writing prophets, in particular, were often confronted by other prophets whose messages contradicted theirs (Isa. 9:13–16; 28:7; Mic. 3:5–7; Jer. 14:13–16; 27:9, 10; 29:8, 9; Ezek. 13:2–17). At times like these, the false prophets tended to uphold tradition and thus proclaimed messages that were comfortable to the people. The true prophets in the Old Testament, on the other hand, brought a word from God that contradicted tradition and brought them into conflict with popular views.⁶

How were people to know that someone consistently spoke or wrote from a genuine prophetic relationship with the true God? The authority of the true prophet in the Old Testament was confirmed by the quality and usefulness of what the prophet said (1 Sam. 3:19–21), by miracles (2 Kings 2:13–15), by the fulfillment of predictions (Jer. 28:9), and by the consistency between their teachings and previous genuine revelations (Deut. 13:1–5). False prophets, on the other hand, could be detected by their desire for money (Mic. 3:11), a willingness to say what people wanted to hear (Isa. 30:10; Mic. 2:11), a failure of their predictions to occur (Deut. 18:22), and by the inconsistency between their teachings and the testimony of earlier revelation (Deut. 13:1–5; Jer. 27:12–16).⁷

There are numerous parallels between the Old Testament prophets and

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the ministry of Ellen G. White. God communicated to her both in visions and dreams and, at times, in direct speech. While at times she spoke and wrote about future events, the primary emphasis of her testimonies was to give God's viewpoint in specific situations and to provide warning and encouragement for those she addressed. Like the writing prophets of the Old Testament, her messages often went against the grain and challenged the church and its leadership to get out of its traditional comfort zones and get in line with God's advancing purpose for His people. Some people have been troubled by her application of specific texts, but there is a broad consistency in her writings with previous revelation (Scripture). And like the Old Testament prophets, her life and ministry have been spiritually useful to many.

The New Testament evidence

When the early church chose the Greek word for *prophet* to refer to individuals in their midst, it was clearly building on the Old Testament concept of the prophet.⁸ The “prophet-prophecy-prophecy” word group in the New Testament needs to be understood.⁹ These words are scattered throughout the New Testament, but are particularly concentrated in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and the book of Revelation. The “apostle-apostleship” word group is also important to this study.¹⁰ It is particularly concentrated in the writings of Paul and of his companion Luke.¹¹

Successors of the Old Testament prophets

Luke 11:47–50 (parallel to Matt. 23:29–37) is part of Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. Just as their ancestors killed the (Old Testament) prophets (verses 47, 48), so they would kill the “*prophets and apostles*” that God would send to them (verses 49, 50). According to this text, both apostles and prophets would be the successors of the Old Testament prophets.

The complementary character of apostles and prophets can be seen as well in Ephesians 2:20. In Ephesians 2:19–22, the church is portrayed as a house built of people upon a solid foundation, which is the apostles and prophets in their relationship to the cornerstone Jesus Christ. Who are these apostles and prophets? In Ephesians 3:5 and 4:11, they are clearly in the New Testament era, not in the Old. The apostles and prophets together were agents of God's revelation to the fledgling church.

The apostle word group

The root meaning of *apostle* concerns one who is “dispatched for a specific purpose,” a messenger or ambassador of some kind. While used in Scripture as

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a noun, it is really an adjective, “the *sent* one.” This word is related to the verbal form *apostellō*, which is usually translated “send.” The status of an “apostle” depends on the status of the one who sends him or her (John 13:16). The apostle can be simply a messenger between ordinary individuals. But when the “apostle” is sent by a king or by God, their status becomes extraordinary. In the New Testament, therefore, the apostle is highly honored by other believers as a special envoy direct from God.¹²

In the fullest sense, then, Jesus is the ultimate Apostle (Heb. 3:2), the One in whom the definitive revelation of God has taken place (Heb. 1:1–3).¹³ All other apostles derive their authority from Him. The earliest definition of apostleship in New Testament times, therefore, limits the office to those “who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection” (Acts 1:21, 22, NIV; cf. 25).

This would seem to limit the office to those who walked with the God-man throughout His time on earth. Paul expands this definition, however, as his connection with Jesus was limited to visionary experience well after the Resurrection (1 Cor. 9:1, 2; 15:1–11; Gal. 1:15, 16). So apostleship was not limited to the twelve disciples. Nevertheless, the office requires some sort of direct calling from the New Testament Jesus, in Paul’s case a call to reach out to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:1, 8). Individuals such as Apollos and Timothy who meet the other criteria, but did not have a direct call from Jesus, are not called apostles (1 Cor. 3:3–9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 3:2). While apostles were generally men, such as Peter (1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1), James (Gal. 1:19), and Paul (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1, etc.), one apostle in the New Testament was perhaps a female, named Junia (Rom. 16:7).¹⁴ The apostles, driven by the Spirit, take up the role that Jesus had played on this earth (John 14:12–17).

As a result, the apostle is to be obeyed just as much as the word of the Lord Himself (1 Thess. 2:13). This is true not only of the apostle’s personal presence, but in the apostle’s absence his written word substitutes for his presence (1 Cor. 5:3, 4; Col. 2:5; 2 Cor. 13:10; Eph. 3:4). It is to be obeyed without question (1 Cor. 7:6, 10, 25, 40; 9:14; 14:37, 38; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess 3:4, 6, 10, 14). The unique authority of the apostle is due to his or her nearness to the Christ event.

The duties of the office centered on traveling from place to place, proclaiming what the apostle had experienced with Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1, 5; Eph. 3:5). In the process, apostles would found and administer new churches (1 Cor. 15:10, 11; Eph. 2:20).¹⁵

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It is interesting that although Paul speaks prophetically to the churches (1 Cor. 14:6),¹⁶ he never calls himself a “prophet.” His own self-identity is as an apostle (Rom. 11:13; 1 Cor. 9:1, 2; 2 Cor. 12:11, 12; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11, also in the opening lines of most of Paul’s letters). This suggests that the designation “apostle” includes the gifts and activities of the prophet and more (2 Cor. 12:1–7; Eph. 3:3–7).¹⁷

In 1 Corinthians 12:28–31, the gifts of the Spirit are listed with ordinal numbers that point to a hierarchy of authority. Paul also urges believers in Corinth to strive for “the greater gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31, NIV). That Paul intends a hierarchy in this list is further substantiated by two elements in the context: (1) In 1 Corinthians 14:5, the gift of prophet is listed as more important than speaking in tongues, which is listed eighth in order (1 Cor. 12:28). (2) As important as apostle and prophet are to the church, in the chapters that follow this list, genuine love is portrayed as superior even to the greatest of the gifts (1 Cor. 13:13). So in terms of offices, apostle is listed as first in rank in the church and prophet is second. This ranking is grounded in the direct knowledge the apostles had of the Christ event and the personal commission each had received from Jesus.

The apostle is everything the prophet is and more, according to the New Testament. They are equal when it comes to being the objects of direct revelation. But the apostle’s authority of office is even greater than the prophet because of the special commission of leadership and the unique relationship in time to the first-century Christ event. In the Old Testament, Moses—who was more than a prophet—led the children of Israel and established the “church structure.” In the same way, the New Testament apostles were commissioned to begin the Christian church and establish its structure. The Old Testament prophets were called to reform the people when they fell away from God. They did not lead the “church,” rather they spoke to the “church” from outside the leadership structure. The same can be said for New Testament prophets.

No later prophet can fill the apostolic role. Although Ellen White plays an important authoritative role for Seventh-day Adventists, she will never be placed in the canon; she is a “lesser light” that points us to the “greater light” of Scripture.¹⁸ Ellen White wrote clearly that her writings were not a part of the canon:

During the ages while the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament were being given, the Holy Spirit did not cease to communicate light to individual minds, apart from the revelations to be embodied in the Sacred Canon. The Bible itself relates how, through the Holy Spirit, men received warning, reproof, counsel, and instruction, in matters in no way

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relating to the giving of the Scriptures. And mention is made of prophets in different ages, of whose utterances nothing is recorded. In like manner, after the close of the canon of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit was still to continue its work, to enlighten, warn, and comfort the children of God.¹⁹

Inclusion in the New Testament canon is grounded in the context of the first advent of Christ.

Prophets and prophesying

In addition to the distinction between apostles and prophets, it is also necessary to distinguish between prophets, on the one hand, and prophecy or prophesying on the other hand. A prophet prophesies and produces prophecies, but not every prophecy comes from a prophet, and not all who prophesy are prophets. There is a sense in which all who partake of the Spirit may be called upon to “prophesy” at one point or another. This is underlined by Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17, 18, quoting Joel 2:28, 29).

In this context Peter makes the radical observation that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will cause both men and women to “prophesy.” Such prophecies will often be accompanied by visions and dreams, and all who receive the Spirit (“on all flesh”) can be called upon by God to prophesy. This broad view of the gift of prophecy is seen also in 1 Corinthians 11:4, 5 and chapter 14, where believers are encouraged to “desire” prophesying (verse 1; cf. 39), and to “all prophesy one by one” (verse 31; cf. 24, 25).

In other words, God is free to get a message through by any means of His choosing. He used Balaam’s donkey (Num. 22:21–25) and even His enemy, Caiaphas (John 11:51), to prophesy. But it is equally clear that not all who prophesy are prophets. Caiaphas was not a prophet. Certainly Balaam’s donkey was not a prophet. It is even doubtful whether any of the Corinthians mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14 were prophets.²⁰ Whereas all prophets prophesy, not everyone who prophesies is a prophet. In the New Testament, the office of the “prophet” was limited to a few leading individuals (cf. Acts 13:1; 15:32; 11:27–30; 21:10–14) who might also be apostles. These were people of great and continuing authority (such as Barnabas, Paul, Silas, and Agabus).²¹

This might shed light on Paul’s counsel in 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22: “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (NASB).

Paul does not say here that “prophets” should be examined (though Scripture speaks to this elsewhere). What is to be examined is the claimed product of

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the Spirit's work (including prophecy). Not to do so could allow evil to enter the church in the guise of the good (cf. verse 22). That which claims to be prophetic revelation is to be examined in the light of previous revelation. All that claims to be prophecy is not necessarily from God.

A related reference is Romans 12:6. According to this text, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If your gift is *prophesying*, then prophesy in accordance with your faith" (NIV; italics added). A person who has the gift of "prophecy" (the office of a prophet is not in view here) is to exercise it "according to the analogy of the faith."

"According to the analogy of the faith" is an ambiguous expression. The underlying Greek can naturally express several ideas: (1) that the one who prophesies will do so to the degree that he or she has faith that God is speaking through them at that point; (2) that the one who has the gift should always prophesy in agreement with "the faith," that which the church generally holds on the basis of Scripture; and (3) that the Spirit will only manifest the gift of prophecy through those who already have faith in Christ. Whatever option best expresses Paul's intention, it should be kept in mind that the text does not address the office of prophet, but rather the broader New Testament category of "prophecy" and "prophesying."

The New Testament prophet

What exactly is the function of the New Testament prophet? The Greek root of *prophet* is a compound word, combining a Greek word for "speaking" with the prefix "*pro*," which is ambiguous in meaning. It can mean "speaking openly" or publically, much like preaching. But it can also mean "speaking ahead of time" or "in advance."²² In ancient Greece, the word came to be used for appointed people through whom the gods revealed their will.²³ So by New Testament times the prophet comes to be known as "a proclaimer or expounder of divine matters or concerns that could not ordinarily be known except by special revelation."²⁴

The New Testament adds at least three criteria for a true prophet to those of the Old Testament. First, those who prophesied in Corinth would submit to the authority of Paul, an apostle and an author of what would become New Testament Scripture (1 Cor. 14:37). So any noncanonical prophet in the New Testament era was subject to the authority of the New Testament, which was written by the apostles. Second, the true prophet will manifest the presence of the Spirit by a true confession of Jesus Christ (1 John 4:2, 3). Since false prophets can

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confess the name of Jesus also (Matt. 7:21–23), this criterion by itself is not decisive. Third, the life of the true prophet will reflect the high ethical principles of the revelation, while the revelations of the false prophet will produce evil fruits (Matt. 7:15–23; Rev. 2:20). This latter point needs to be tempered, however, by the recognition that some canonical prophets, such as David and Solomon, made some very immoral life choices.

In the epistles of Paul, prophets generally exhort people to obey the will of God that has been revealed to them through the prophet or through earlier revelations in the Scriptures; they rarely predict future events. In Revelation, the prophetic role is reversed: prediction of future events is central to the “prophesy” (Rev. 1:3), and exhortation takes a more marginal role.

New Testament prophets can be seen at work in the book of Acts. In Acts 11:27–30, the story is told of a delegation of prophets who came to Antioch from Jerusalem. One of them, Agabus, foretold “by the Spirit” a worldwide famine that was about to happen (verse 28). The message was accepted as authoritative, and action was taken so that the brethren in Judea would not suffer unduly. Here a New Testament prophet (1) foretold something that was about to happen, and (2) the message called for an obedient response.

In Acts 15:30–32, two prophets, Judas and Silas, were sent by the council in Jerusalem to report the decision of the council. As prophets, they not only read the epistle but spoke many words to encourage and strengthen the church. The phrase “being prophets themselves” (verse 32, NASB) seems to set them in continuity with those (the apostles and elders in Jerusalem) who had sent the epistle. The purpose of the epistle was the unity of the church, and God used Judas and Silas to support that purpose “with many words” of encouragement.

In Acts 21:10–14, Agabus again appears and foretells the captivity of Paul in Jerusalem. Here the prophet is seen delivering a message from God to an individual. He does not specify whether or not Paul should go to Jerusalem, he just informs him of roughly what will happen to him there. Interestingly, there is a division in the church regarding how to apply this prophecy. Luke and others around Paul at the time believe it means he should not go to Jerusalem. Paul, on the other hand, determines to go anyway. After some discussion of the matter, Paul’s colleagues give in to his determination.

This incident is an excellent example of the church struggling to understand how a prophecy should be applied in a specific situation. Agabus’s message or role as a prophet was not in question. But it was recognized that the prophecy did not specify what Paul’s action should be. Paul, following the leading of the

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Holy Spirit as an apostle, chose to go to Jerusalem anyway, and the prophecy of Agabus was fulfilled in a general way.²⁵

This story is extremely relevant to the church today. Like Paul and his followers, the words of the true prophet need to be accepted by us today as a word from God. But like them, we also need to use sanctified common sense in applying such counsels to our own situation. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the original utterance will assist in the application. But that does not mean that genuine believers will have no difference of opinion as to how the word from God applies in a given situation. Believers need to be both humble and gracious as the church wrestles with complex issues in the light of inspiration. We “know in part” (1 Cor. 13:9), and some aspects of the will of God in specific situations will not always be clear.

Some may argue that there is no need for common sense and discernment (“I take it as it reads”). But counsel written to another time and place does not always fit neatly into a radically different situation. This means that genuine prophetic messages can be applied in disastrous ways by sincere followers of the prophet. For example, a father writes a letter to his lazy son, urging him to action. But if that letter were mistakenly sent to his workaholic son, great damage would result. Circumstances alter cases, and through careful discernment, studied in context with the whole of revelation and guided by the Holy Spirit, the written word from the past can become a living and powerful word from the Lord for today!

Outside the book of Acts there are several more important examples of the nature of the prophetic office in the New Testament. In the letters of Paul to Timothy, mention is made of very specific prophecies regarding Timothy (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14). These prophetic messages were evidently delivered, perhaps by Paul, at the time of Timothy’s ordination to the gospel ministry. These “prophecies” may have been along the lines of 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25, where prophetic messages expose the secrets of a person’s heart. This kind of thing often occurred in Ellen White’s ministry.

Key passages

The two parts of the New Testament where the language of prophets and prophecy are most heavily clustered are 1 Corinthians 12–14 and the book of Revelation.

1 Corinthians 12–14

The major passage that deals most directly with the question of prophets

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and prophecy in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 12–14. The Corinthians want to know about the workings of the Holy Spirit in the church. Paul, however, is more concerned about the unity of the church (cf. the one-body imagery of 12:12–27), which is a co-theme of this section. In 1 Corinthians 12, the work of the Spirit is divided into two lists of gifts (verses 7–11 and 28–31), which are commonly assumed to be equivalent. However, there are significant differences between the two lists.

The first list (1 Cor. 12:7–11) is made up of “manifestations” that are accomplished by the Spirit, not offices or roles. The focus of this list, therefore, is on specific expressions of the Spirit’s work, such as words of wisdom and knowledge. So this list concerns the products of the Spirit’s work in human beings, manifested in actions. Therefore, you do not find “apostle” or “prophet” in this list, but there is mention of “prophecy.” In contrast to the second list, individuals have no steady claim on these manifestations, they are given by the Spirit to whomever He wills and whenever He wills.

The second list (verses 28–31) is made up of gifts in the form of offices into which God has placed people. These roles in the church are listed in plural, with “apostles” and “prophets” being the first two. In contrast to the first list, these offices are not arbitrary on the part of the Spirit; they can be sought or “eagerly desired” (NIV and ESV of verse 31; cf. 11). As we have seen above, they are listed in a hierarchical order of authority.

This passage explicitly articulates the New Testament distinction between the office of the prophet (the few) and the general manifestation of prophecy and prophesying among all the believers. In order of church leadership, a prophet stands above all other offices except that of apostle (cf. 1 Cor. 14:5). The message of the prophet is incomplete in comparison with the clarity of eternity (1 Cor. 13:9–12). God’s revelation to us is like an adult attempting to explain adult things to a two-year-old. It is the clearest revelation of God’s will available to us, yet it is incomplete on account of our own limitations of understanding.

Coming to chapter 14 we must note a number of facts: (1) It was not the purpose of this chapter to lay out the nature of prophecy. Its purpose was to bring order and unity into the worship services in Corinth (cf. verse 40). (2) The Corinthian situation was an aberration, not the norm. Thus we must not assume that Paul’s discussion of the question there is normative for us in every detail. (3) The apostle clearly exercises his apostolic authority over those in Corinth who would claim to be prophets (verse 37). It was the function of an apostle as

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a founder of the church to have leadership authority. The quality of special revelation is the same for apostle and prophet. There are no degrees of inspiration.

The use of *prophet* to describe individuals in Corinth seems to contradict the earlier distinction between the office of the prophet and the manifestation of prophecy and prophesying in a more general sense (1 Cor. 12). Certainly, if the Corinthians manifested genuine gifts from God, the use of *prophecy* and *prophesying* would better fit what occurred in their midst. Yet in 1 Corinthians 14:29, Paul regulates these activities by ordering the Corinthian “prophets” to limit their activities to two or three at a time. Having said that, however, Paul himself seems to doubt that these are real prophets. In verse 37, he challenges the would-be prophets: “If anyone *thinks* himself to be a prophet . . .” (italics added). Therefore, while some statements in chapter 14 (such as verses 3–6, 22–25) seem to be universally applicable, much of what we find here is colored by the bizarre situation of the Corinthian church, a situation so bizarre that a Corinthian prophet could curse Christ and think he was in the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). The temptation to diminish the role of the New Testament prophet on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14 must be tempered by the evidence of Revelation.

The book of Revelation

The book of Revelation, written by the apostle John, focuses on John’s role as a prophet. The “words of this prophecy” are to be obeyed (Rev. 1:3). Their authority is so unquestionable that not a word is to be added or subtracted (Rev. 22:18, 19). The author of the book lays no claim to apostleship, although he could have. It is as a New Testament prophet that he presents his work. A crucial passage in this regard is Revelation 19:10. There it is stated that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Revelation 19:10 must be understood in the light of 22:9 and its context.

The parallel between Revelation 19:10 and Revelation 22:9 clearly indicates that the prophets are those who inherently possess the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit behind all prophecy (Rev. 19:10).²⁶ This fits in perfectly with Ephesians, where the substance of the revelation received by the New Testament apostles and prophets was Christ’s proclamation of peace (Eph. 2:17) and the “mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4). Clearly, like the apostle, the testimony of the prophet is a witness to Christ. According to Revelation, while the apostle is an eyewitness to the earthly Christ event, the prophet is an eyewitness of the glorified Christ. And as Christ is the Word of God, the prophet speaks with authority just as the apostle does.

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Such prophecy was not to cease but was to continue into the future (Rev. 10:11; 11:3, 6, 10).²⁷ In these passages the word *testimony* is once again connected to the work of the prophet (verses 3, 10). So for John, the kind of gift he had received from God was not limited to his time, but also would be manifested afterward as well.

Revelation 12:17 extends the gift of prophecy all the way to the end of time. After portraying in symbols the Christ event and the fate of God's people through history, chapter 12 concludes with a statement that the remnant just before the closing crisis of earth's history will have the testimony of Jesus. This phrase is an exact verbal parallel to Revelation 19:10, which is equated with the prophets of Revelation 22:9. In addition to this, Revelation 1:2 portrays the testimony of Jesus as what John "saw" not what John "wrote." The testimony of Jesus in Revelation 1:2 is the visionary, prophetic gift that John received from God. Revelation 12:17 indicates that such a visionary, prophetic gift would return in the time of the end-time remnant. Though few scholars have noted these parallels, they are too striking to be coincidental.

Thus Revelation underlines four ideas that concern our topic: (1) The New Testament prophet is a counterpart of those in the Old Testament (Rev. 22:9, cf. Luke 11:47–50). (2) The inspiration authority of the true New Testament prophet is the same as that of the apostle. (3) The prophet as well as the apostle is an eyewitness of Christ. (4) This gift does not cease with the canon but is to be expected again at the end of earth's history.

The New Testament prophet and current Adventist issues

Ultimately all authority is grounded in God Himself. As Creator, God is the final authority in the universe. But God has chosen to express His authority through self-revelation. So the question that matters most is, *Where can we find a reliable account of God's self-revelation?*

The Bible is certainly such a revelation of God. Since Christians accept that claim, they should submit to its authority and make it their rule of faith and practice. Many, however, have difficulties with the fact that so many different interpretations of that same Bible are in circulation. Is there a reliable way to interpret the Bible? How can a book speak with authority if it is not perceived clearly?

Many Adventists have endeavored to attack this problem by suggesting that Ellen White provides God's final inspired commentary on the biblical text. Human nature being what it is, however, the commentary often supersedes the Bible in

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many minds, and this she herself refused to allow: “The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”²⁸

But while the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested, many wrest that Word to their own destruction: “Some who profess to make the word of God their study are found living in direct opposition to its plainest teachings. Then, to leave men and women without excuse, God gives plain and pointed testimonies, bringing them back to the word that they have neglected to follow. . . . If you had made God’s word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the Testimonies.”²⁹

Thus Ellen White saw her writings as subject to the Bible, but if the visions come from God, they have authority. “The waymarks which have made us what we are, are to be preserved, and they will be preserved, as God has signified through His Word and the testimony of His Spirit. He calls upon us to hold firmly, with the grip of faith, to the fundamental principles that are based upon unquestionable authority.”³⁰

How should Seventh-day Adventist Christians relate to these two authorities? The New Testament evidence gives us a few clues. In addition to the authority of the Old Testament and the earthly life of Jesus, there are three further sources of authority in the New Testament. These are the apostles, the prophets, and the “prophesiers.” “Prophesiers” are “driven by the Spirit” to speak for God on specific occasions but not in terms of a formal office.

Of the three sources, apostle was the highest and most universal authority, a position that was unquestionable once established. Then came the prophet, whose authority might be more local and was usually noncanonical, but was equal in inspiration as a recipient of revelation. The messages of the prophesiers were questioned because there was often doubt about the divine origin of a particular message.

The Old Testament has three similar groups: Moses, the prophets (canonical and noncanonical), and the occasional “prophesiers” (1 Sam. 10:5–13; 19:8–24; 1 Kings 20:35–43; 2 Kings 2:3–7; etc.). It is tempting to equate these with the three that have been suggested in the New Testament: (1) apostles (source of the New Testament canon), (2) prophets (noncanonical prophets of the New Testament era), and (3) prophesiers (agents of the Holy Spirit’s work throughout the New Testament era).

However attractive this neat division might be, there are problems with it.

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Chief among these is the fact that, in terms of revelation, there is no clear distinction made between apostles and prophets in the New Testament.³¹ But if the apostles, as sources of revelation, are limited to the first century (as many suggest), then a clearer distinction might be a division between the “founders”—made up of both apostles and prophets—whose work is complete (Eph. 2:20), and those New Testament prophets whose work, though not canonical, would continue to the end of time (cf. Rev. 10, 11, 12).

In this context, Ellen White’s gift can be equated with the noncanonical prophets of both Old and New Testaments. She counsels both individuals and the church at large. She reveals the secrets of people’s hearts. She describes heavenly perspectives and places through dreams and visions. She exhorts and encourages, and she speaks with authority in local situations. More than this, she foretells the future, including scenes at the end of history, as did the prophet John in Revelation. Her work is distinguished from the “founders” (apostles and prophets), who wrote the New Testament. It is also distinguished from the “prophesiers,” whose authority is more pastoral. Ellen White doesn’t fit the latter category because of the clear and continuing prophetic nature of her gift and the consistent regard with which her contemporaries treated that gift.

How shall we relate her direct authority in the immediate situation to the need for general authority in the Adventist Church today? Here the same principles should be used as would apply in biblical interpretation. Whereas the written words of the dead prophet are normally less clear in application than the direct word of the living prophet, they still bear witness to God’s explicit instruction in a specific context.³² Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church will use biblically informed discernment, testing, and careful evaluation (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19–21; Rom. 12:6) as it applies the message (sometimes for another time and place) to its own living challenges.³³

In conclusion, Ellen White’s claims are very clear; she was a messenger of the Lord and her words have divine authority. This does not allow us to treat her casually. Some have argued that she was a deceiver (knowingly misleading her audience). Others have suggested that she was brain-damaged or suffering from delusions of grandeur. Neither her life nor her writings are consistent with such negative evaluations. It is better to take her claimed role at face value, a role for which the New Testament calls. Her best intention for everything she wrote must be weighed, using correct principles of interpretation, while also giving thanks to God for the additional clarity her writings bring to our understanding of His will.

Endnotes:

1. Among others: Joseph Bates, “The Gifts of the Gospel Church,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1851, 69, 70; D. T. Bourdeau, “Spiritual Gifts,” *Review and Herald*, December 2, 1862, 5, 6; James White, “The Spirit of Prophecy,” *Review and Herald*, February 1, 1870, 45.
2. The English word *prophet* originated in the Greek.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New King James Version®.
4. Rolf Rendtorff, “προφητης [*prophētēs*], etc.,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:796–799.
5. Siegfried H. Horn, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1960), s.v. “prophet.”
6. Rendtorff, “προφητης [*prophētēs*], etc.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 806, 807.
7. A similar listing can be found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “prophet.”
8. G. V. Smith, “Prophet; Prophecy,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, fully rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 3:1003.
9. *Prophētēs, prophētis, prophēteia, prophēteuō, prophētikos*.
10. *Apostolos, apostolē*.
11. Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, “ἀποστολος [*apostolos*], etc.,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:421.
12. Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀποστολος [*apostolos*].”
13. Rengstorff, “ἀποστολος [*apostolos*], etc.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 423.
14. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 160–204.
15. Hans Dieter Betz, “Apostle,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 1:310.
16. Gerhard Friedrich, “προφητης [*prophētēs*], etc.,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:850. There are many parallels between Paul’s own biographical statements

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in his letters and the prophets of the Old Testament. Paul clearly understands his apostolic mission to be similar to their prophetic one. See M. Eugene Boring, “Prophecy (Early Christian),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:498.

17. Two models for this expanded understanding would be the role of Moses in the Old Testament (Num. 12:6–8) and John the Baptist in the New (Luke 7:26).
18. Ellen G. White [EGW], “An Open Letter From Mrs. E. G. White to All Who Love the Blessed Hope,” *Review and Herald*, January 20, 1903, 15; quoted in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1957), 93.
19. EGW, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1939), viii.
20. Cf. 1 Corinthians 14:37—“If anyone *thinks* himself to be a prophet . . .” (emphasis added).
21. The term *prophet* is used only twice in relation to a woman in the New Testament, to Anna (Luke 2:36) and to Jezebel, an example of a false prophet (Rev. 2:24)! The daughters of Philip, e.g., are not called “prophets” but are said to “prophesy.” In Titus 1:12, the pagan writer Epimenides is also called a prophet.
22. Rendtorff, “προφητης [*prophētēs*], etc.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 783.
23. *Ibid.*, 791.
24. Bauer and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “προφητης [*prophētēs*].”
25. While, in retrospect, one might question the prophecy of Agabus for seeming inaccuracy (it is the Romans, not the Jews, who end up binding Paul in Jerusalem: Acts 21:33), it is instructive that the original hearers of the prophecy did not do so. At its crucial point (the consequences of Paul’s trip to Jerusalem), the prophecy was accurate. Most prophecies contain conditional elements, and circumstances affect the details (see Isa. 11:15, 16 as an example of a prophecy that was fulfilled in principle but not in detail).
26. The additional phrase in Revelation 22:9, “and of those who keep the words of this book,” is not grammatically connected to the “brothers” of John, who are called prophets in Revelation 22:9 and have the testimony of Jesus (spirit of prophecy) in Revelation 19:10. It merely reemphasizes that the angel is not worthy of worship, not by John himself, not by any other prophet like John, not even by the lowliest of John’s readers.
27. It is interesting to note that all of our three key words—*prophet*, *prophecy*, and *prophesy*—are applied to the work of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.
28. EGW, *The Great Controversy*, ix.
29. EGW, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1948), 5:663–665.

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30. EGW, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1958), 1:207, 208.
31. Both are “sent” by Jesus (Luke 11:49, 50). Both are counterparts of the Old Testament prophets (Matt. 23:29–37). Both are part of the “foundation” (Eph. 2:20). Both receive revelation concerning the “mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4, 5). Both author canonical New Testament writings (Revelation).
32. On the difference in the way one treats the oral words of a living prophet and the written words of a dead prophet, see Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2004), 62–78.
33. In the field of mission studies, this kind of careful work is called “critical contextualization.” For a detailed “how-to” approach to contextualization, see Jon Paulien, “Dealing With Syncretism in Insider Movements,” in *Faith Development in Context: Presenting Christ in Creative Ways*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, 2005), 217–251.