
Chapter 1

The Prophet: “A Man for All Seasons”?

In 1842 William Ellis Foy received two visions several weeks apart in Boston, Massachusetts. The first (on January 18) lasted two and a half hours, and the second (on February 4) an incredible twelve and a half hours! His physical condition in the trance-like vision state resembled the description found in Daniel 10. Like Daniel, he did not breathe (though his heart continued functioning normally) during the visions. (See especially Daniel 10:17.)

William Foy, however, did not actively pursue his calling to the prophetic office. By the summer of 1844 God called another man, Hazen Foss. Foss, likewise, defaulted after temporizing. And so in December 1844 God turned to one who was “the weakest of the weak,” but that story remains to be told in the next chapter.¹

Prophet. What images that word instantly brings to the mind of someone familiar with those larger-than-life figures of sacred Scripture!

Almost instinctively we picture a lonely figure, perhaps like Elijah in the Old Testament, standing alone in defense of God. Elijah challenged more than four hundred priests of Baal and called down fire from heaven—a fire so hungry it consumed not only his sacrifice but also the water that drenched it and the stones of the altar that supported it (1 Kings 18).

Or perhaps we hear the distant echo of “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (Matthew 3:3, RSV; cf. Isaiah 40:3) coming from the lips of the austere John the Baptist.

Clad in a robe of camel's skins, John was not a self-indulgent man. His diet consisted chiefly of the Middle Eastern locust-bean pods and wild honey from the desert (Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6).

Indeed, it is utterly impossible to think about the Bible at all without immediately thinking of the approximately forty authors of its sixty-six books. We popularly call them “prophets,” “holy men of God [who] spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21). And it all began with a man named Enoch. A mere seven generations from Adam, Enoch is the first recorded prophet in human history (Jude 14). The prophets from Enoch to Moses presented their messages orally. Moses marks the watershed in historical prophethood by using the written word to share prophetic communication.

Then the literary branch of the stream subdivided. On the one hand were those authors whose writings are preserved in Scripture, and on the other hand were prophets whose writings were not preserved as Scripture. These prophets (or seers, as they were first called) whose writings were not included in the Bible—Jasher, Gad, Nathan, Ahijah the Shilonite, Shemaiah, Iddo, Jehu, and Elijah—were just as inspired as their biblical counterparts. But their works were not preserved for posterity.

By the time of Jesus, students of the Old Testament divided it into three parts: the Law (the writings of Moses), the prophets, and the sacred writings.

God, who is “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34)—or of gender—gave the prophetic gift in Bible times to women as well as men. In the Old Testament we read about Miriam (the sister of Moses), Deborah, and Huldah. In the New Testament there are Anna and the four daughters of an evangelist named Philip.

Today we usually associate the office of “prophet” with the prediction of future events, but in biblical times the prophet engaged in a broad range of spiritual activity. The prophets had many functions.

(1) They spoke for God. (2) They revealed God's purposes. (3) They strengthened and guided rulers. (4) They encouraged the people to faithfulness. (5) They protested against evils. (6) They directed activities. (7) They taught. (8) They served as consultants and counselors for every phase of individual and national activity. (9) They gave warnings. (10) They reproved sin. (11) They pronounced the judgments of God. (12) They sometimes performed miracles. (13) They preached. Furthermore, their ministry was not limited to the Hebrew nation. God used some to win Gentile nations to His truth.

Prophets and Bible times just seem to go together quite comfortably. But some Christians become quite *uncomfortable* when the discussion of prophethood after New Testament times comes up. There is, however, evidence (direct as well as indirect) in both Old and New Testaments that the Holy Spirit's function as the Inspirer of human prophets would not cease once the "canon" (the books making up our Bible as a whole) was fixed.

Jesus Himself promised the *presence* of the Spirit within the Christian church until the end of time. One of the Spirit's specific ministries, He said, would be to teach the truth of God (see John 14:15–17, 26). In connection with the signs of His soon return, Jesus pointedly warned against *false* prophets (Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24). If no true prophets would arise at the end of time, Jesus would merely have needed to say, "Beware of prophets." The inclusion of the adjective "false" implies that both true and false prophets would coexist before the Second Coming.

Paul's doctrine of "spiritual gifts" provides some of the most striking evidence in favor of prophetic activity after New Testament times. He clearly referred to prophecy as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12; and Romans 12). In fact, in order of merit, prophecy is second in significance only to apostleship. The New Testament uses three terms interchangeably for the same concept: "the gift of prophecy" (1 Corinthians 13:2), "the

testimony of Jesus,” and “the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). All refer to the divine gift of supernatural revelations and visions.² The context of Paul’s various pronouncements about these gifts of the Spirit—including prophecy—makes it clear that these various ministries will exist in the church until the end of time. All these gifts will serve their function until the church is ready for Christ’s return (see Ephesians 4:12–15). Paul does not give even the slightest hint that one gift (namely, prophecy) would drop out, while all the rest would continue.

Paul’s epistles are undoubtedly the first documents of the New Testament to be penned, and 1 Thessalonians was one of the earliest of these epistles. Near the end of this letter Paul admonishes the early Christian believers: “Quench not the [Holy] Spirit.” He then points out how to comply with his advice: “Despise not prophesyings.” Instead, the Christian is to “prove all things” and then “hold fast [to] that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). (The apostle John phrased this admonition in a slightly different way: “Try the spirits.” Why? Not every spirit comes from God, and “many false prophets are gone out into the world” [1 John 4:1].)

Most likely something was happening in the early Christian church that happens in some Christian circles today. Perhaps those earliest Christians, who had converted from Judaism, were saying among themselves, “We don’t need any more prophetic writings. If the Old Testament was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” Today some Christians repeat this erroneous idea. In effect, they would limit the work of the Holy Spirit to the past by suggesting that since the biblical canon is closed, we don’t need any further prophetic writings today. It may well have been to forestall this idea that Paul urged the “proving” of prophetic claims—rather than the dismissal of them out of hand.

In Joel 2:28–32, probably written some eight hundred years before the *first* coming of Christ as the Babe of Bethlehem, this prophet

of antiquity looked down the long corridor of time to the *second* coming of Christ. And he saw God honoring the people at the end of time by a special bestowal of the gift of prophecy. Both men and women, young and old, would experience prophetic dreams and visions.

Some Christians have objected to seeing the fulfillment of this passage later than Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion of Christ. They refer to Acts 2:16–21, where Peter pointed to the phenomenon of Pentecost as a fulfillment of Joel 2. However, for two important reasons Pentecost must be viewed as only a *partial* fulfillment of Joel 2.

First, the prophecy of Joel 2 makes specific reference to the gift of *prophecy* in the end time. The spiritual gift most in evidence at Pentecost, however, was the gift of *tongues* (the miraculous speaking of contemporary languages the individual Christian had not previously studied). The gift of prophecy was not in evidence at Pentecost.

Second, Joel pointed to signs in the heavens—in the sun and moon particularly—at the time when the gift of prophecy would be restored (Joel 2:19, 20). We find no scriptural evidence that these signs in the heavens accompanied the scene at Pentecost.

Were there no prophets between the end of apostolic times and the middle of the nineteenth century? Paul King Jewett, in a thoughtful article in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, points out that “with the death of the apostles, who had no successors, gradually those with the gift of prophecy also disappeared, so that from the third century onward, of the original triad of apostles, prophets, and teachers, there remained only the teachers.” Jewett also adds that “by the time of Hippolytus (235) and Origen (250), the word ‘prophecy’ is limited to the prophetic portions of Scripture.”³

According to the Bible, however, there is no question: The gift of prophecy did *not* end with the apostolic age. Arguments given in favor of the proposition of abolition (which many Catholics and

Protestants hold) are interesting, but subject to refutation. According to one such view, the apostle John placed a curse upon anyone who adds to (or takes away from) the Bible (Revelation 22:18, 19). Thus with the close of the canon of Scripture, the gift of prophecy ceased, according to this view.

In response, we would suggest that (1) the proscription against adding or subtracting refers to the book of Revelation itself (it does not apply to the entire Bible, of which it now appears sequentially as the last volume); (2) there is no evidence that Revelation was the last book of the New Testament to be *written* (some scholars believe that 1, 2, and 3 John, and even John's Gospel, may have been written *after* he completed Revelation); and (3) not until the fourth century A.D. did the Christian church finally arrive at a consensus as to which books should be included in the New Testament.

John's warning at the end of Revelation does not preclude the gift of prophetic inspiration after A.D. 100.

Some scholars maintain that the close of the New Testament canon rules out the possibility of any fresh revelation of divine truth.⁴ In response to this argument, the British scholar J. P. Baker declares,

Others have sometimes sought to identify this completion of the NT canon with the time when prophecy will pass away according to 1 Corinthians 13:8ff.; but this does violence to the context, which clearly shows that these gifts will pass away 'when the perfect comes,' which is defined as when we 'see face to face' (i.e., beyond this life and age altogether). . . .

All may agree that there is no new revelation to be expected concerning God in Christ, the way of salvation, the principles of the Christian life, etc. *But there appears to be no good reason why the living God, who speaks and acts (in contrast to the dead idols), cannot use the gift of prophecy to give particular local guidance to a church, nation, or individual, or to warn or encourage by*

way of prediction as well as by reminders, in full accord with the written word of Scripture, by which all such utterances must be tested.⁵

The existence of the Bible today does not rule out other inspired authorities. On the contrary, God's Word, in both Old and New Testaments, tells its latter-day readers that the gifts of the Holy Spirit (including prophecy) will still appear among His people until Jesus returns. It is not a matter of either/or. We may (and must) have both!

1. A brief description of the experience of Foss and Foy is given in Appendix C of T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1955), 485–489; see also biographical sketches in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 1996).

2. L. H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1947), 9.

3. Paul King Jewett, "Prophecy," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 806, 807.

4. John R. W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 100–102.

5. J. P. Baker, "Prophecy, Prophets," cited in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 3:1286, 1287. (Italics supplied.)