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THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PROPHECY IN REV 22:18

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I. DESCRIPTION OF THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PROPHECY

Recent attempts have been made to define prophecy so as to cover all kinds of prophecy, including NT prophecy.[1] These definitions are helpful in pointing out some of the leading characteristics of Christian prophets—that is, those with the spiritual gift of prophecy—but a description rather than a definition facilitates more comprehension of all that is entailed in the gift.

1. *Characteristics of the Gift of Prophecy*

In the following listed properties of prophecy the attempt is to represent a general consensus of current opinions. Because of the objective here of dealing with the gift in the Apocalypse of John, certain assumptions must be made. These assumptions have been effectively developed elsewhere as noted. (1) The gift involved immediate divine inspiration of the

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[1] Some examples of these definitions are of interest. M. E. Boring's definition: "A prophet is an immediately inspired spokesman for the (or a) deity of a particular community, who receives revelations which he is impelled to deliver to the community" ("'What Are We Looking for?' Toward a Definition of the Term 'Christian Prophet,'" SBLASP [Missoula: Scholar's, 1973], 2. 43-44). He more specifically limits his definition to a Christian prophet by saying that he is "a Christian who functions within the Church as an immediately-inspired spokesman for the exalted Jesus, who receives intelligible revelations which he is impelled to deliver to the Christian community" (p. 44). Regarding the Christian prophet, D. Aune says, "The Christian who functions in the prophetic role (whether regularly, occasionally or temporarily) believes that he receives divine revelations in propositional form which he customarily delivers in oral or written form to Christian individuals and/or groups" (cited by Boring, p. 58). J. Lindblom says prophets "are inspired personalities who have the power to receive divine revelations. They act as speakers and preachers who announce what they have to say" (*Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], 6). D. Hill defines a Christian prophet in this way: "A Christian prophet is a Christian who functions within the Church, occasionally or regularly, as a divinely called and divinely inspired speaker who receives intelligible and authoritative revelations or messages which he is impelled to deliver publicly, in oral or written form, to Christian individuals and/or the Christian community" (*New Testament Prophecy* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1979] 8-9). G. Friedrich says that "primitive Christian prophecy is the inspired speech of charismatic preachers through whom God's plan of salvation for the world and the community and His will for the life of individual Christians are made known" ("*Prophētēs*," *TDNT*, 6. 828).

spokesperson or writer.[2] (2) The gift provided exhortation and encouragement.[3] (3) Another aspect of prophecy was its element of teaching.[4] (4) The gift of prophecy incorporated prediction.[5] (5) The gift entailed a degree of authority less than that of the OT prophets and the NT apostles, but some kind of authority was present.[6] (6) A further characteristic of NT

[2] This feature is cited as a prominent part of prophecy by almost every source. Lindblom writes: "Common to all representatives of the prophetic type here depicted is the consciousness of having access to information of the world above and experiences originating in the divine world, from which ordinary men are excluded" (*Prophecy* 32-33). Prophets in early Christian communities regarded themselves as spokesmen for an ultimate authority (D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 204). Possession of a direct revelation from God was one thing that distinguished true prophecy from false prophecy (W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* [Washington: University Press, 1982] 142). Evidence for this characteristic of prophecy is readily available in the Apocalypse where prophets are a group whose special task is to mediate divine revelation to the churches (Rev 22:6, 9; cf. 1:1; Aune, *Prophecy* 206).

[3] This is in line with the "forth-teller" etymology of the word *prophētēs* (Kramer, "*Prophētēs*," *TDNT*, 6. 783-784). This part of the two-part structure of present/future is easily illustrated in the sayings of Jesus (Aune, *Prophecy* 188). The prophet gives God's call to repentance, which torments some (e.g. Rev 11:3, 10) but which convicts others to turn to God (e.g. 1 Cor 14:24-25; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 829). He is essentially a proclaimer of God's Word (ibid.). His *paraklēsis* results in the *oikodomē* of the Christian community (Hill, *Prophecy* 141). In particular, the Apocalypse is a series of messages to bring consolation and exhortations (C. Brown, "Prophet," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2. 88).

[4] The prophet instructed the Church regarding the meaning of Scripture and through revelations of the future (D. Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John," *NTS* 18 [1971-72] 406). The prophetic gift should not be confused with that of the teacher, however. The ministry of prophets was more spontaneous, being based upon direct divine revelations. Teachers, on the other hand, preserved and interpreted Christian tradition, including relevant OT passages, the sayings of Jesus and traditional beliefs of earlier Christian teaching (Aune, *Prophecy* 202).

[5] This was the "foretelling" part that is suggested by the *pro-* prefix but that was a later development in the evolution of the word's meaning (Kramer, "*Prophētēs*" 783-784; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 832-833). This is chiefly the sense of the word in the Apocalypse, but Paul also predicted the future (e.g. Acts 20:22-23; 20:29; 27:22 ff.; Rom 11:25 ff.; 1 Cor 15:51 ff.; 1 Thess 4:13 ff.; ibid. 840). Friedrich notes that in Paul exhortation is dominant in prophecy but that in the Apocalypse prediction is the main focus (ibid. 828-829; cf. Aune, *Prophecy* 5). This, he says, puts John more in the category of OT prophecy than in company with early Christian prophets. Aune disagrees with this appraisal, however (ibid. 6). The predictive element is one of several features that C. Brown uses to relate Luke's understanding of the gift to OT prophets too ("Prophet" 87). Hill observes that prediction is clearly not the main function of prophets in Acts (*Prophecy* 108). The degree of prediction as compared to exhortation is probably not sufficient ground to remove any NT writer's idea of the gift from the realm of NT prophecy, however. Though he could predict the future, the NT prophet should not be confused with the *mantis*. This latter figure belonged strictly to a secular setting and discharged nothing of the hortatory function of a prophet.

[6] Since they were spokesmen for God, they claimed no personal part in the communication they gave (Aune, *Prophecy* 204), so it is inevitable that they possessed authority (Hill, *Prophecy* 87). The limited nature of this authority is quite obvious, however. Utterances of NT prophets were in many cases challengeable in ways that those of an OT prophet would never have been (cf. 1 Cor 14:30; ibid. 135). This limitation may be missed if one takes the prophecies of Paul (1 Cor 7:10; 14:37-38) and John (Rev 22:18-19) as typical. Paul's absolute authority is clear throughout his writings (Hill, *Prophecy* 114), and in the Apocalypse John seemingly

prophecy was its inclusion of an ability to discern the validity of other prophecies.[7] (7) Gifted prophets had an ability to perceive the thoughts and motives of other persons (cf. Luke 7:39; John 4:19; Acts 5:3-4; 8:21 ff.).[8] (8) Exercise of the gift was occasionally accompanied by symbolic acts.[9] (9) Another phenomenon was that most often prophets were residents in a single locality, but some were also itinerant.[10] (10) A further feature was that most NT prophecy was oral, but some was written.[11] (11) Prophetic language was characterized by a variety of literary forms.[12] (12) Another characteristic of prophecy was its dependence on the Holy Spirit.[13] (13) Another observation calls attention to the gift's not being an office in the Church but rather a regular ministry to the Church.[14] (14) A further point is that the gift entailed the prophet's being in a special state usually called "ecstasy."[15] (15) This NT gift provided for a "charismatic exegesis"

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places himself into the category of the OT prophets through such things as his inaugural vision (1:9-20), his use of symbolic acts (10:10) and his use of oracular formulas (chaps. 2-3; Rendtorff, "*Prophētēs*," *TDNT*, 6. 812; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 849; Hill, *Prophecy* 87-88). It must be recalled that Paul and John were also apostles, a fact that enabled them to write with a higher degree of authority. This was not possible for the nonapostolic NT prophet (ibid. 132).

[7] In 1 Cor 14:29 Paul speaks of the need for some to evaluate whenever a prophet was speaking in the local assembly of that city. While there is some disagreement about the identity of the discerners in the verse, the most probable answer is that "the others" referred to are the other prophets in the congregation (Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 855; Hill, *Prophecy* 133; Aune, *Prophecy* 196).

[8] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 842; E. E. Ellis, "The Role of the Christian Prophet in Acts," *Apostolic History and the Gospel* [ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 55]. Such ability was widely regarded as a prophetic phenomenon by Jesus' contemporaries (cf. Mark 2:5, 8 par.; 9:33 ff., 10:21 par.; 12:15 par.; Luke 6:8; 9:47; 11:17; 19:5; Matt 12:25 par.; John 2:24-25; 4:17 ff.; Hill, *Prophecy* 60). This ability was a distinctive part of the effectiveness of the gift for Paul (1 Cor 14:24-25; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 842).

[9] Here is another trait it has in common with OT prophecy. Agabus signified Paul's coming imprisonment this way (Acts 21:10-11). John swallows a small book (Rev 10:8-11) and measures the temple with a reed (11:1; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 849).

[10] Hill, *Prophecy* 90.

[11] There had to be some kind of public communication of the revelation received. Without it the *apokalypsis* could not be characterized as prophecy (Grudem, *Gift* 143-144). In spite of the importance attached to written prophecies such as the Apocalypse, most early Christian prophets appear to have delivered their messages orally (Hill, *Prophecy* 93).

[12] For the most part the NT prophet did not follow stereotyped oracular formulas. A noteworthy exception here is the use of the *tade legei to pneuma to hagion* formula by Agabus and John (Hill, *Prophecy* 107). Aside from this type of rare indicator, Christian prophecy had to be recognized on other grounds (Aune, *Prophecy* 317).

[13] Hill holds that the Christian prophet was always controlled by the Spirit (*Prophecy* 90). This is doubtful, since the Corinthian prophets appear to have been anything but Spirit-filled. Yet they were users or potential users of the gift.

[14] Some might take issue with this, based on the list of Ephesians 4, but the parallels of Ephesians 4 with 1 Corinthians 12-14; Rom 12:4 make more likely a grouping of the Ephesians list with ministries rather than offices (Hill, *Prophecy* 138-139).

[15] This point is debated (T. Callan, "Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in 1 Corinthians," *NovT* 27 [1985] 139), and how the term "ecstasy" is defined is not agreed upon. Nevertheless there was something different about the prophet's condition as he was receiving divine revelation (Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 829).

of traditional material.[16] (16) A last characteristic is that the spiritual gift was described as in some sense temporary.[17]

From the above characteristics it can be concluded that not all prophecy is the same as the spiritual gift of prophecy. For instance, there are differences between this gift to the body of Christ on the one hand and prophecy as practiced in the OT and in Judaism on the other.[18] The NT prophet did not enjoy unlimited authority as did the OT prophet. He was a member of the community, not an authority figure over it.[19] The Apocalypse appears to be an exception to this, until it is remembered that here apostolic authority is represented, not just prophetic authority.[20]

Because of this and other differences, in the words of Aune "Christian prophecy is most adequately treated as a distinctively Christian institution."[21] It is a gift intended only for the body of Christ, and like the body of Christ it has temporal limitations in regard to its appearance in history.

2. *Unfounded Identifications of the Gift of Prophecy*

At times unfounded ideas regarding the gift of prophecy have been advanced. One of them is that prophecy is another name for preaching.[22] To equate preaching with the spiritual gift of prophecy is wrong.[23] Preaching is a merging of the gifts of teaching and exhortation.[24]

[16] The method of using the OT was one that resembled the practice of the Qumran community in its *pĕšārîm* (Aune, *Prophecy* 252). The practice consisted of finding hidden or symbolic meanings that could be revealed only through an interpreter possessing divine insight (Hill, *Prophecy* 91; Aune, *Prophecy* 133). Paul illustrates this in his handling of Isa 59:20-21; 27:9 in Rom 11:25-26 (Aune, *Prophecy* 252). Aune feels this practice could have been followed by one with the gift of teaching also (ibid. 345-346), but this is doubtful.

[17] Hill, *Prophecy* 137. 1 Cor 13:8-13 makes this point, though the extent of the limited time is debated.

[18] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 849.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid. Another difference between OT and NT prophecy lies in the absence of oracular formulas from the latter. None of those with the gift of prophecy attempted to pattern their prophecies after the OT prophetic models (Aune, *Prophecy* 130). Closely related to this is the failure of any collections of oracles to be preserved from the first century of Christian history. This is in "marked contrast to ancient Israelite prophecy and Greco-Roman oracular tradition" (ibid. 247).

[21] Ibid. 230.

[22] G. Mallone writes: "If the source of the preacher's sermon is the Word of God, then it can be said that he is fulfilling a prophetic function when he preaches" (*Those Controversial Gifts* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983] 38).

[23] E. Best, "Prophets and Preachers," *SJT* 12 (1959) 145.

[24] Among the characteristics of prophecy that are missing from preaching is the direct revelation that is necessary for a speech to be prophetic. As Friedrich notes: "All prophecy rests on revelation, 1 C. 14:30. The prophet does not declare what he has taken from tradition or what he has thought up himself. He declares what has been revealed to him" ("*Prophētēs*" 853). When it is noted that preaching includes teaching, Friedrich's further comment is relevant: "Whereas teachers expound Scripture, cherish the tradition about Jesus and explain the fundamentals of the catechism, the prophets, not bound by Scripture or tradition, speak to the congregation on the basis of revelations" (ibid. 854).

It is also significant to note that prophecy is not an ecstatic frenzy of some sort.[25] Whatever terminology is chosen to designate their state, NT prophets never lost control of their senses.[26] The English word "ecstasy" has many meanings, but whatever meaning is attached to it in connection with NT prophecy it must be allowed that the prophet kept his composure.[27]

The notion that there were two gifts of prophecy in the body of Christ also needs to be dispelled. That there could be one gift through which the words were inspired and another through which only the general gist of the prophecy was inspired[28] presses for distinctions that are nonexistent. The major support for such a distinction rests on differentiating prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and prophecy in Eph 2:20; 3:5.[29] But whenever the NT describes prophetic revelatory activity it always uses the same terminology.[30] To bear this out, Paul's prophetic gift is included in both the above sections (1 Cor 13:9; 14:6; Eph 3:1-5).

Another wrong idea advocates that the gift of prophecy was a means of reading back into the life of Jesus words that were uttered long after his ascension. J. Jeremias has written: "Early Christian prophets addressed congregations in words of encouragement, admonition, censure and promise, using the name of Christ in the first person. Prophetic sayings of this kind found their way into the tradition about Jesus and became fused with the words that he had spoken during his lifetime."[31]

[25] In contrast to the *mantis* who may have been in a state of rage, out of his senses, the prophet speaks while in control of himself (Peisker, "Prophet," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2. 76). In some circles the experience of a state of inspiration tended to pass on into a state of ecstasy that might even be accompanied by a foaming at the mouth (Lindblom, *Prophecy* 6; Kramer, "*Prophētēs*" 790). Yet all ecstasy was not of this type (Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 851).

[26] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 851.

[27] He received his revelation either through a possession trance according to which the Spirit took control of him or through a vision trance through which his soul left, as it were, his body to receive the revelation (Aune, *Prophecy* 86). After the trance he delivered his prophetic message. The frequent use of "I saw" indicates that prophecies were "secondary narrations of experiences which had occurred earlier" (ibid. 150).

[28] Grudem, *Gift* 110-113; idem, "Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No: Paul's Consistent Advocacy of Women's Participation Without Governing Authority," *JETS* 30/1 (1987) 11-13; D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 94-100, 160-165.

[29] Grudem, *Gift* 73-74; idem, "Prophecy—Yes" 12-15.

[30] In such places use is made of "clusters" of technical terms that speak of direct divine communication to the prophetic instrument. The same clusters are used in both passages (e.g. *prophēteuō* and *prophētēs*—1 Cor 12:28-29; 13:9; 14:1-6, 24, 29, 31-32, 37, 39 = Eph 2:20; 3:5; *oikodomē* and *oikodomeō*—1 Cor 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26 = Eph 2:20-21; *mystēria*—1 Cor 13:2; 14:2 = Eph 3:3-4, 9; *apokalysis* and *apokalyptō*—1 Cor 14:6, 26, 30 = Eph 3:3, 5; *kryptō* and its cognates—1 Cor 14:25 = Eph 3:9; *apostolos*—1 Cor 12:28-29 = Eph 2:20; 3:5; *sophia*—1 Cor 12:8 = Eph 3:10). There is no basis for saying that the gift is different in the two passages.

[31] J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971) 2. Jeremias bases this conclusion on Christ's seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3) and other of his sayings that have been handed down in the first person (e.g. 1:17-20; 16:15; 22:12 ff.).

Such reasoning is faulty. The prophetic utterances cited in support of this notion are known to this day to be words of the risen Lord. They offer no basis for attributing to the historical Jesus words of the exalted Christ spoken to the prophet through the Spirit.[32]

II. THE APOCALYPSE AS A PRODUCT OF THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

For the sake of clarity it is well to point out specifically that the Apocalypse is the result of the spiritual gift of prophecy. Its character is primarily that of a prophecy rather than Jewish apocalyptic and that of NT rather than OT prophecy.

1. *Apocalyptic Versus Prophecy*

Revelation was the first book to be called an "apocalypse," being so labeled on the basis of the first word in its Greek text (Rev 1:1). Since 1822 the term has become widely used to describe a distinctive literary genre of works that resemble the Apocalypse of John in both form and content.[33]

Since John's Apocalypse is the source of the terminology, one might be inclined to call it apocalyptic rather than prophecy. This is not accurate, however. This work differs from the usual apocalyptic pattern in a number of important respects, such as its lack of pseudonymity.[34] This and other differences bolster the book's claim that it is a prophecy (1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and it must be accepted as such even though it has a number of features in common with apocalyptic.[35]

2. *OT Prophecy Versus NT Prophecy*

Similarities between the Apocalypse and OT prophecy are observable.[36] Yet arguments can be produced to offset these similarities and to show John to be representative of, if not typical of, early Christian prophets.

[32] Hill, *Prophecy* 165.

[33] Aune, *Prophecy* 108. According to this pattern, a work to which the term "apocalyptic" is applied has an author who is a seer and who records visions he has experienced with their meaning that is usually supplied in a conversation between the seer and an angel. The revelatory visions tell of an imminent intervention of God in human history to end the present evil world system and replace it with one that is perfect. Such is accomplished by punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous (ibid. 108, 376 n. 39).

[34] Peisker, "Prophet" 80; Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets" 403; idem, *Prophecy* 72. Along with its lack of pseudonymity is its lack of a claim to antiquity through the appropriation of the name of an ancient worthy such as Elijah, Enoch, Ezra, or Baruch. Another distinction between Revelation and apocalyptic lies in their distinctive views of history. Prophecy such as is in the Apocalypse is firmly rooted in salvation history, while apocalyptic gives very little attention to the acts of God on which salvation was based (G. von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament* [San Francisco: Harper, 1965], 2. 303-308).

[35] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 853.

[36] Some of these include the use of the *tade legei* formula (Revelation 2-3), the positioning of the vision of prophetic calling (1:9 ff.; cf. Isa 6:1 ff.; Ezek 1:1 ff.), the swallowing of a small book (Rev 10:8-11; cf. Ezek 2:8-3:3), the measurement of the temple (Rev 11:1; Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 849; Aune, *Prophecy* 206), John's authority and prophetic role in relation to other prophets, and the proportion of predictive prophecy in comparison with hortatory prophecy (Aune, *Prophecy* 206-207).

Like other Christian prophets, John received divine revelation that he relayed to his prophetic colleagues in the churches.[37] He exhorted and encouraged. He also taught and predicted the future. He claimed authority, more so than the typical prophet, because he was an apostle. His insight into the inner lives of the people in the churches is reflected in the seven messages of chaps. 2-3. His prophecy was accompanied by symbolic acts. While his prophecy was not delivered orally in a local church setting, it was directed to be read there. His prophecy was the message of the Holy Spirit. He received his visions while "in the spirit," probably a reference to an ecstatic state of some kind. He interpreted traditional material, particularly the OT, with the charismatic exegesis typical of a prophet.

Since John was a member of the body of Christ and since his prophecy was overwhelmingly similar to the spiritual gift of prophecy, it is concluded that John produced this prophecy through the use of that gift.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE END OF NT PROPHECY AND REV 22:18

Any lingering doubts about whether the Apocalypse is prophecy should be lessened further by a closer look at Rev 22:18-19: "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that have been written about in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which have been written about in this book." The literary form of these statements has been cited by Käsemann and Aune as evidence of the prophetic nature of the book.[38]

1. *A Proposed Purpose: To Assure Accuracy*

Aune sees these verses as typical of the effort of prophets to insure the accurate transmission of their writing. H. B. Swete and Caird note other writers who followed the same practice of giving scribes added incentive to copy their works carefully.[39] This kind of warning was particularly characteristic of the Jews in their view of the inviolate nature of Scripture (cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32).[40]

The idea that Rev 22:18-19 is designed primarily to assure accurate transmission is open to serious question, however. The admonition is not

[37] Ibid. 207-208.

[38] E. Käsemann gives these words as an example of the "sentences of holy law" that originated in prophetic utterances ("Sentences of Holy Law in the New Testament," in *New Testament Questions for Today* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969] 76). Aune observes that the tendency of apocalyptists in early Christian prophecy to view themselves as witnesses is evidence that the statements fit the pattern of oath formulae used so widely in prophetic practice (Aune, *Prophecy* 115). He also labels these words as an "integrity formula" such as was used in prophetic writings to preserve the accuracy of the revelatory text (ibid. 115-116).

[39] H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 311; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper, 1966) 287-288.

[40] Caird, *Revelation* 287.

addressed to potential copyists but, as 1:3 states and 22:18 confirms, to listeners at church gatherings in the seven cities to which the Apocalypse was sent. For them, adding and subtracting could hardly come by way of altering the text that the public reader held in his hand.[41] The listeners had no control over that written document. Besides this, if the purpose of the warning was to assure accurate transmission it has signally failed, because today no other book of the NT has such an uncertain text.[42]

2. *A Proposed Purpose: To Assure Obedience to Commands*

If accurate transmission was not the goal of the warning, then, what was it? Others have noted that its purpose must coincide with the purpose of the book as a whole: to obtain higher moral behavior.[43] Eliminating soft-pedaling of the book's teachings would uphold its high ethical standards and jealously guard its spirit. No distorting thought to evade the required behavior was allowable. This was the thrust of Moses' similar injunction in Deuteronomy.

Such a purpose as this for the whole book is undeniable, but it hardly fits the wording of 22:18-19. "Keeping the things written" in the words of this prophecy was John's way of speaking of obedience in 1:3. This is very clear, but it takes much manipulation to make the warning in 22:18 mean that. The prohibition pertains to the content, not to the hearers' moral response to the content. In Deut 4:2 Moses was zealous to preserve intact the commands he had written. He wanted the log of commandments to be retained without any alteration. Compliance by way of obedience was certainly the purpose of the Pentateuch, but Deut 4:2 pertained to the source document itself. So the same must be true of 22:18 and this purpose of the warning ruled out.

3. *The Condition of the Churches of Asia*

Before consideration of a final possibility, a closer look at the situation in the churches will help us discover how they would have understood such a warning.

The Christian communities to which John wrote were distinctly prophecy-conscious.[44] Apostleship was disappearing, and Christians were searching for new leadership authority. John was one of a larger group of prophets who ministered to these seven churches: According to 22:6 "the God of the spirits of the prophets" sent John to make this revelation, and according to 22:9 the angel was also "a fellow slave of John's brothers, the prophets." The role of these gifted prophets was to mediate divine revelation to the churches (cf. 1:1, 3).[45] The focus on prophecy is further

[41] I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919) 778-779; G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 295; R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 395.

[42] Swete, *Apocalypse* 311.

[43] H. Alford, *The Greek Testament* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1903), 4. 749; Swete, *Apocalypse* 311-312; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 779.

[44] Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets" 415, 417-418.

[45] Aune, *Prophecy* 206.

confirmed by the warning in 2:20 about Jezebel, who claimed to be a prophetess. The words of 22:18 must be understood in light of a wider prophetic ministry that was prominent in the churches.

Widespread prophetic activity in Asia during the last decade of the first century is also attested by the Johannine epistles. 1 John 4:1 reflects a major problem created by the multiplication of prophets: "Many false prophets have gone out into the world." Very likely, these were the secessionist deceivers who posed so great a problem for the readers of 1 John.[46] For this reason, John proposed a testing of the spirits to determine whether they were of God.[47] They were claiming prophetic authority superior to that of John, so John said they must be put to the test.

John was coping with a growing wave of false prophecy. People of this type undermined the position and authority of genuine prophets.[48] The same problem is reflected in 2 and 3 John.[49]

The Apocalypse needs to be understood against a backdrop of competition for authority and leadership in the churches of the area, including a struggle between competing prophets. The *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which originated a few years later, reflect the growing numbers of false prophets.[50] Regarding this period, Friedrich writes that "false prophets are abroad and these undermine the authority and repute of true prophets."[51]

Evidence of prophetic conflict is present in the Apocalypse itself. John saw the behavior of Jezebel (2:20-24) and the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15) as contrary to Christian norms and therefore deserving of condemnation.[52] He also took issue with the doctrinal basis of this behavior. Mention of the teaching of the prophet Balaam in conjunction with the Nicolaitan heresy (2:14-15) commends the view that novel emphases of the movement were supported by prophetic utterances.[53] John's commendation of those in Thyatira who had not known "the deep things" (*ta bathea*) of Satan (2:24) evidences a revelatory activity whose source was devilish. These revelations were counterparts of the revelations from God to Christian

[46] R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 503.

[47] A similar test of spiritual gifts is suggested in 1 Cor 12:3 (cf. the gift of discernment through which other prophets could test an utterance of a fellow prophet [12:10; 14:29]; R. Brown, *Epistles* 503-504).

[48] Hill, *Prophecy* 191; Aune, *Prophecy* 14.

[49] The missionaries about whom John warns in 2 John were most likely claiming prophetic authority for their false teaching. The unusual injunction to inhospitality in 2 John 10-11 is explainable on this basis (R. Brown, *Epistles* 690-691; Aune, *Prophecy* 224-225). Another challenge to John's authority came in Diotrophes' refusal to receive missionaries who were propagating the truth (3 John 9-10). Diotrophes had assumed primacy and refused to recognize John's leadership (R. Brown, *Epistles* 744-745).

[50] Hill, *Prophecy* 191.

[51] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 860. In these two noncanonical works, similar to 1 John, misbehavior was the key to distinguishing false prophets from true prophets, though their misbehavior was of a different type from what is described in 1 John (Aune, *Prophecy* 209, 211, 227).

[52] Aune, *Prophecy* 218.

[53] Ibid.

prophets that enabled them to know "the deep things" (*ta bathē*) of God (1 Cor 2:10). Also the false apostles rejected by the Christian community at Ephesus (Rev 2:2) probably represented a claim to divine authority in support of the Nicolaitan teaching.[54]

Opposing ideologies had arisen, all of which supported their positions by prophetic utterances. The author of the Apocalypse represented only one of those that sought to prevail against the others.[55] His warning in 22:18 as well as the strong emphasis on his prophetic call in 1:9-20 must be seen as an attempt to settle this authority crisis once for all.

4. *The Effect of the Warning on Other Prophets*

How would the warning have affected other prophets and the willingness of the churches to hear them? To them it was not a restriction on false prophecy only. This had been tried earlier in dealing with Jezebel and the Nicolaitans. Nor was it an effort to keep other prophets from tampering with the contents of the Apocalypse. It was not change that was forbidden but addition. The warning was probably understood as prohibiting additional prophetic activity.

A slight distinction in phraseology in the warning's two parts should be noted. In 22:18 the sequence is "the words of the prophecy of this book," the greater emphasis lying on the prophecy, and in 22:19 it is "the words of the book of this prophecy," which puts more focus on the totality of the book composed of prophecies.[56] So when John[57] warned against adding to the words, the principal item in mind was additional prophecy.

It is reasonable that he was forbidding any further prophecy. Two circumstances show this: (1) John had tried unsuccessfully to deal with false prophecy by warning against it. Jezebel is a case in point. He had given her a chance to repent, and she refused (2:21). We have no way of knowing about the success of his warning against false prophecies in 1 John 4:1-6, but judging by the continuing encroachments of related false doctrines about the person of Christ in the early second century it was at best only partially successful. By the time he wrote the Apocalypse, John may well have decided that the only solution was to have no more

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid. 218-219. Aune speculates about why bishops, presbyters and deacons, who surely existed in these Asian churches, are never mentioned in the Apocalypse (ibid. 205-206). He concludes that John intentionally ignored them to bring his message to the communities at large and not just to their leaders. His egalitarian concept of all Christians sees apostles, prophets and the rest of the saints as sharing the same fundamental obligations and responsibilities as Christians (cf. 11:16; 16:6; 18:24). They all must remain faithful to the testimony of Jesus and the word of God (cf. 1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4).

[56] Space limitations prohibit a detailed discussion of the warning against taking away words of the book of this prophecy, but they probably are addressed to the listeners to ensure that the totality of the Apocalypse is read in their assemblies without any omissions. The fear that leaders might omit something that should be read recalls Paul's strong adjuration in 1 Thess 5:27.

[57] A significant issue in vv 18-19 pertains to whose words are being given, those of Jesus or those of John. A detailed resolution of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but it will be injected as a brief consideration below.

prophecy of any kind. (2) The comprehensive scope of the Apocalypse also commends the all-inclusive nature of the prohibition of 22:18. The book is comprehensive in its inclusion of both the words of encouragement and parenesis (chaps. 2-3) and the predictive elements of prophecy (chaps. 4-22). If nothing additional is allowed in these two areas, this in essence spells the end of the gift. The book is also comprehensive in what it professes to cover. Regardless of which interpretive approach is followed, it claims to span the entire period from John's time through history into eternity future, from the death and resurrection of the Lamb to the *parousia* and after.[58] Any prohibition about adding to a book of this scope is tantamount to cancellation of prophetic activity altogether.

The anticipation of this strong warning is that the book's message will be unpopular, especially with other prophets. Certainly this was true for the false prophetess Jezebel and her followers (2:20 ff.), the propagators of Nicolaitanism (2:6-7), and the Jewish slanderers in Philadelphia (3:12).[59] John did not warn about potential mistakes of judgment in interpreting the book but about deliberate distortions by others who claimed prophetic authority.[60]

Gnosticism was gathering momentum in his day. This kind of warning was needed to head off such works as the *Gospel of Thomas*, which presented the teaching of Jesus so as to make him into a gnostic. A little later, Marcion's edition of Luke depicted Jesus as not having a real body. He also promoted antinomianism. Tatian's *Diatessaron* had a heretical bias in selecting the passages to include. According to Tertullian, Valentinus perverted the text of the whole NT by additions and changes.[61]

Another indication that John saw the need to terminate prophecy is visible in his choice of the "canonization formula" of Deut 4:1 ff. as a model for Rev 22:18-19.[62] Though consistently viewed as applying primarily to the Pentateuch, these words from Deuteronomy came to be applied by extension to the OT in defense against any further additions to it. In essence, then, John claimed canonical authority for his writing.[63] In so doing, he indicated that there were to be no more inspired messages.

[58] Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets" 405. The futurist sees chaps. 2-3 as encompassing the entire period of the Church, however long that may be, and chaps. 4-19 as the period of future tribulation, and then the millennium and eternal state following. The continuous-historical school finds in chaps. 2-20 the entire scope of Church history until the second advent of Jesus Christ, and then the eternal state. The preterist who allows for a second coming of Christ is no exception. He sees the book as carrying through to the end also. The only exception to this rule is the idealist, who does not take the details of the book seriously.

[59] J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Pelican; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 319.

[60] Ladd, *Commentary* 295. Some of these might question the exhortations to patience (13:10; 14:12) or to faithfulness unto death (2:10; 3:10). There will always be those who say, "Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it" (Isa 5:19; 2 Pet 3:4). Prophecies in conflict with his are the perverting additions that John feared someone might make (W. Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," *The Holy Bible* [ed. F. C. Cook; London: John Murray, 1881], 4. 843).

[61] G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 346-347.

[62] Käsemann, "Sentences" 76.

[63] Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets" 403; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 347.

5. *The Response to the Warning*

If it is concluded tentatively that the meaning of 22:18 entailed the termination of the spiritual gift of prophecy, what was the impact upon the seven churches of Asia? History has not preserved a detailed answer to this question. The churches could have responded with complete compliance and the prophets in the churches ceased their prophesying immediately. On the other hand, in light of the difficulties that John had already encountered with these prophets, a unanimous response of this type seems unlikely. What appears more probable is that compliance with the warning was gradual, with prophetic messages diminishing slowly over a long period of time.

A survey of second-century Christian writings supports the latter response. John's words originally went directly to the seven churches of Asia and, in effect, attempted to shut off prophecy in those churches. It was not long, however, until the authority of his warning spread more widely. The Muratorian fragment records: "For John also, although in the Apocalypse he wrote to seven churches, nevertheless speaks to all."[64] The seven churches were understood as representative of all churches everywhere. Instructions given them were accepted as universally binding.

History describes the second century as a crisis period for prophetism in Christian communities.[65] Various scholars acknowledge that NT prophecy did in fact undergo a gradual decline through the course of the second century A.D. Aune notes that prophets are conspicuous in their absence from a statement in the *Shepherd of Hermas* that mentions apostles, bishops, teachers and deacons. In the same quotation apostles are a thing of the past.[66] A similar omission occurs in at least three other places in the *Shepherd.* Aune suggests that the omission may be designed to discredit the kind of prophecy with which the author was familiar.[67] He also proposes that certain characteristics of the true prophet in that work indicate that revelatory experiences described in the *Shepherd* were literary fiction and not based on actual revelatory events.[68] The *Didache* apparently implies that the number of prophets was dwindling at the time of its writing.[69] Not all Christian communities had resident prophets, indicating that a prophet was no longer essential to the life and worship of the Church.[70] Early in the third century Hippolytus, an opponent of a number of heresies including Montanism, held the apostle John to be the last of the prophets.[71]

[64] H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 94.

[65] W. C. van Unnik, "A Formula Describing Prophecy," *NTS* 9 (1962-63) 190.

[66] Aune, *Prophecy* 209.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid. 210, 303.

[69] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 859-860; Hill, *Prophecy* 187.

[70] Aune, *Prophecy* 209.

[71] S. M. Burgess, *The Spirit and the Church: Antiquity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984) 52; cf. Hippolytus, "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist," ANF 5:204-219, esp. 205, 211.

6. *Reasons for the Decline of NT Prophecy*

The Montanist movement is usually given as marking the termination of the gift.[72] Hitherto, recent suggestions unrelated to Rev 22:18 have been advanced to explain this termination. Five major reasons have been cited, three explaining the decline sociologically and two theologically:[73] (1) The presence of false prophets, which eventually undermined the authority of genuine prophets.[74] This opinion coincides with the growing problem faced by the author of the Apocalypse. Eventually the Church dealt with it by ruling out prophecy altogether. (2) The repudiation of Montanist prophecy.[75] Montanism looked upon itself as a "new prophecy." It was indeed new because it represented a total break in the significance of prophecy for early Christianity.[76] Reaction against the Montanists caused the Church to deal decisively with prophecy. This reaction cannot be the whole explanation, however, because a trend was evident before Montanism arose. (3) The increasing authority of the official ministry in an institutionalized Church.[77] Evidence indicates that the prophet, like the apostle, was never integrated into the organizational structure of the local church.[78] Intramural conflict developed between prophets and the established leadership composed of elders and deacons, and prophets were the eventual losers.[79]

[72] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 859-861; Hill, *Prophecy* 187; Aune, *Prophecy* 189, 209. Another study has sought to trace prophecy on into the third century (R. A. N. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* [Peabody: Hendrickson 1984] 4, 87), but it lacks substantial evidence to support its case.

[73] Aune, *Prophecy* 189.

[74] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 860; Hill, *Prophecy* 191; Aune, *Prophecy* 14. It is Aune's opinion that "throughout the entire second century prophecy was primarily tied to dissenting voices and movements within various phases of Christianity" (ibid 338; cf. Hill, *Prophecy* 191).

[75] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 860-861; C. Brown, "Prophet" 89.

[76] Montanism had more in common with movements of Second Temple Judaism than it did with the kind of prophetic activity that characterized Christianity during the first half of the second century (Aune, *Prophecy* 189).

[77] Friedrich, "*Prophētēs*" 860; E. Käsemann, "An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 188.

[78] The explanation for why this was true for apostles is relatively easy: Apostleship, by definition, was a temporary gift with its responsibility taking the apostle to different parts of the first-century world. A person so gifted was called upon to evangelize and lay the foundation for new Christian communities. The explanation for the failure to integrate the prophet into local church structure is not so easy, however, since in many cases early Christian prophets were permanent residents in their communities (Aune, *Prophecy* 203).

[79] Ibid. 204-205. Two additional sociological reasons that are of lesser significance may be added to the above list: (1) The increasing Hellenization of the Church and the accompanying emphasis on the rationality of the faith (ibid. 14). Such a trend was evident as second-century leaders sought to defend the Christian faith in a society that was thoroughly entrenched in its Greek philosophical background. It is doubtful, however, that this influence was more than secondary. (2) A neglect of the distinction between two types of NT prophecy, one having a divine authority of actual words and another having only an authority of general content (Grudem, *Gift* 111-112). Grudem tentatively suggests that prophets who had only the latter type of revelation mistakenly took it for the former, leading eventually to the downfall of the prophetic gift altogether. If the consensus that there was only one NT gift of prophecy is accurate, however, this could hardly have been a factor.

The presence of this conflict is undeniable, but one cannot help asking how the first-century Church handled this circumstance without a power struggle. The two realms of authority coexisted then in reasonable harmony without major confrontation. Hence this reason is too superficial to be primary.

The last two proposals are theological: (4) The proper transmission of apostolic truth.[80] Revelation that had come through the apostles was most highly regarded. Hence recent prophetic revelations were viewed with suspicion.[81] (5) The foundational nature of the prophetic gift.[82] The mention of prophets as part of the foundation of the Church in Eph 2:20 suggests that once the Church was established the gift would be discontinued.[83]

Two additional contributing influences in the decline and end of NT prophecy may be suggested: (6) The close association of the gift with that of apostleship. Prophets are repeatedly found alongside apostles in the NT (1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Rev 18:20). Apostleship was a thing of the past to second-century writers. An analogous end of its companion gift was certainly a live option. This close association of the two gifts is verified by the *Didache*, Ignatius and the Muratorian fragment.[84] The last-named work looks back to the end of prophecy by saying

[80] Hill, *Prophecy* 191; Aune, *Prophecy* 7.

[81] If the prophetic revelations did not coincide perfectly with apostolic truth already received, the prophet himself became suspect and may have even been accused of being a false prophet. For Ignatius, only inspired utterances that agreed with the values he was already teaching to his congregations were considered genuine (Aune, *Prophecy* 293). There seemed to be a growing inability on the part of prophets to transmit apostolic truth accurately, so the task had to be committed to others who were more reliable (Hill, *Prophecy* 191; Aune, *Prophecy* 14).

[82] Peisker, "Prophet" 84.

[83] In opposition to the foundational nature of prophecy, it has been suggested that Eph 2:20 refers only to prophets who were apostles and not to "church prophets" (Grudem, "Prophecy—Yes" 12-13). This explanation is grammatically possible but not probable in light of equal access to revelatory data that must be granted to church prophets as was granted to prophets who were apostles. The vocabulary of 1 Corinthians 12-14, which pertains to church prophecy, is the same as that in Ephesians 2-3 where apostolic prophecy is usually identified. The same vocabulary is found in the Apocalypse where the writer makes no claim to apostolic authority (*prophēteuō* and cognates [Rev 1:3; 10:11; 19:10; 22:6-7, 9-10, 18-19]; *mystēria* [1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7]; *apokalypsis* [1:1]; *kryptō* [2:17]; *apostolos* [2:2; 18:20; 21:14]; *sophia* [13:18; 17:9]). He claims only the authority of a prophet commissioned by Jesus Christ. Hence it is better to identify the prophets of Eph 2:20 as a group wider than the apostles and not identical with them. The prophetic gift belonged to the period of foundation, and the edifice built upon the foundation was relegated to individuals with other types of gifts (Aune, *Prophecy* 7).

[84] The *Didache* blends together apostles and prophets and emphasizes the need to distinguish between true and false prophets or apostles (D. G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986] 327). Ignatius bears the same testimony. He wrote that Christian prophets should be heard because they had "lived according to Jesus Christ" and were "inspired by his grace" (*Magn.* 8.2). He said further that Christians should love not only the gospel and the apostles but also the prophets because they had announced the advent of Christ and became his disciples (*Phld.* 5.2; Dunbar, "Canon" 325). If the end of the first century marked the end of the apostolic gift, it is probable that it marked the end of the other also. The Muratorian fragment also associates these gifts with each other as it declares the termination of apostleship and prophecy: In speaking of the *Shepherd of*

the number of prophets was complete. (7) Analogy with the end of OT prophecy. Whether or not OT prophecy ended, leaving a period without prophetic activity before the beginning of NT prophecy, is debated. Guy, Peisker and Hill say that it ended with Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.[85] Aune and Meyer question this conclusion.[86] Yet amid their questioning they admit that Judaism in the time of Jesus held that prophecy had ceased with the close of the OT canon. They also admit that prophecy, as they define it, underwent radical changes after Malachi. Aune goes so far as to speak of "a period when the canon was virtually closed and prophetic inspiration had ended."[87] Without investigating details of the debate we may conclude that a major change occurred, even if OT prophecy as some define it was not terminated, strictly speaking.

Early Christian leaders knew the opinion of Judaism on the issue. If they viewed OT prophecy as having ended, they must also have entertained the same possibility for NT prophecy.

In summary, significant factors in the decline of the spiritual gift of prophecy were, sociologically, the threat of false prophecy and, theologically, the preservation of apostolic truth, the foundational nature of the gift of prophecy, the close association of prophecy with apostleship, and the model provided by the cessation of OT prophecy.

7. *The Purpose of Rev 22:18*

The part played by the warning of Rev 22:18 in this decline and cessation should not be overlooked, however. This was perhaps the most basic reason of all. The warning must be understood in light of the prophetic focus of the times. Ample reasons existed for John to conclude that no more prophecy was needed. Over a century ago Bishop Wordsworth approximated this opinion about the warning: "Here is a prophetic protest against spurious Revelations forged by false Teachers in the name of the Apostles. . . . Here is also a Prophetic Protest against all *additions* to the words of Holy Scripture; whether these additions be made by unwritten traditions, or by Apocryphal books, as of equal authority with Holy Scripture."[88]

Heretofore this paper has approached Rev 22:18 as the words of John the prophet, which they surely were.[89] In addition, there is the basic

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Hermas it says, "It cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the prophets, whose number is complete, nor among the apostles" (Gamble, *Canon* 95).

[85] H. A. Guy, *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Epworth, 1947) 25; Peisker, "Prophet" 80; Hill, *Prophecy* 21-22, 31, 33, 49.

[86] Aune, *Prophecy* 103, 106, 189; Meyer, "*Prophētēs*," *TDNT*, 6. 813-815, 817-819.

[87] Aune, *Prophecy* 109.

[88] C. Wordsworth, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the Original Greek* (London: Rivingtons, 1870) 277 (italics his).

[89] The proposal of R. H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920, 2. 222-223) and others (J. Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5. 492-493; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 779) that these words are a later interpolation is without foundation among the manuscripts that preserve the text of Revelation.

exegetical issue of whether they are an editorial comment of the prophet or a quotation of the words of Jesus himself. Very good reasons exist to choose the latter option. Notably, the first-person subject of *martyrō*, "I testify," in 22:18 is identified in 22:20 where the participle of the same verb is used in the statement "The one who testifies these things says, Yes, I come quickly." The warning must be a direct quotation of Jesus.[90]

If this is true, the profundity of the warning's implications for the spiritual gift of prophecy is even more striking. It was not merely a human desire of John to end competition. Here is a divine proclamation terminating use of the gift. This thought is sobering, though ultimately it carries no more authority than the words of John as Christ's prophetic spokesman.

IV. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this investigation accepts the inevitability of connecting the decline and cessation of the spiritual gift of prophecy to Rev 22:18. Compliance with, indeed universal knowledge of, this warning was not immediate. Nevertheless the divine intention behind the warning necessitated that it eventually be recognized and that the body of Christ move into new phases of its growth without dependence on the foundational gift of prophecy.

[90] Additional reasons for choosing Jesus as the speaker are discussed in Swete, *Apocalypse* 311; Lee, "Revelation" 482–483; Mounce, *Revelation* 396.