



## The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada

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**Description:** The General Executive appointed a study commission to prepare a discussion paper on the subject of contemporary prophets to be presented at its November 2007 session.

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### Contemporary Prophets and Prophecy

In response to the current dialogue within The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada with respect to contemporary apostles and prophets, the General Executive appointed a Study Commission to do research, examine the various theological positions and prepare a discussion paper on the subject of contemporary apostles and prophets.

The original study group determined the two topics were too large to cover in one paper, so they focused on the issue of contemporary apostles. Their paper was discussed, revised and adopted by the General Executive in its November 2002 session. This paper examines the second half of the original topic, contemporary prophets and prophecy.

The Prophets/Prophecy Study Commission examined related books and articles, reviewed papers submitted by individual members and invited submissions from interested credential holders. A paper entitled Contemporary Prophets and Prophecy will be offered to the General Executive for its November 2007 session.

### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

1. The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada continues to believe that every spiritual gift described in the New Testament, including but not limited to those in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4, are the historical and contemporary heritage of the church. Rejecting "cessationism", we therefore recognize and encourage the operation of the manifold gifts given to Christ's Church, including the prophetic ministry gift.

2. It is recognized that the current variety of definitions and interpretations with reference to prophetic ministry have the potential not only to generate healthy debate, but also to foster confusion and uncertainty. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the question, “How do we biblically define the prophetic ministry gift, and once defined apply it to our contemporary context?”
3. It is our sincere desire to encourage healthy biblical expressions of the prophetic gift within our Fellowship and to see this function fulfill its intended purpose within the Body of Christ.

## **DEFINITIONS: PROPHET AND PROPHECY**

A prophet is one who has heard directly from the Lord and who speaks on His behalf. God said to Jeremiah, “You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you....I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:7, 9). A prophecy is the message the prophet receives from God.

Often the prophet is thought of almost exclusively in terms of one who predicts future events before they take place. Biblically speaking, however, the prophet is as much a preacher of righteousness as a prognosticator of future judgment or blessing. Prophecy, therefore, represents God’s evaluation of the actions of His people coupled with His gracious call to respond to His word. Under the new covenant, the primary emphasis shifts to edification and exhortation.

## **OLD TESTAMENT CONTEXT**

### ***Old Testament Language***

The Hebrew word *nabi* (from a root meaning “to bubble forth, as from a fountain,” hence “to utter”) is the earliest and the most generally used word for a prophet. In the time of Samuel another word, *roeh*, “seer” began to be used (1 Samuel 9:9). It occurs seven times in reference to Samuel. Later the word, *hozeh*, “seer” was also employed (2 Samuel. 24:11). In 1 Chronicles 29:29 all three words are used: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer (*roeh*), the records of Nathan the prophet (*nabi*) and the records of Gad the seer (*hozeh*).” In Joshua 13:22, Balaam is called a *kosem* or “diviner.” This word is used only of false prophets.

### ***The Nature of Old Testament Prophecy***

The prophets played a key role in the life of God’s people under the old covenant. They served as a divinely-inspired alarm system which God activated wherever the nation began to depart from His revealed ways. Their preaching focused primarily upon showing Israel her distraction and calling her back to the faithful observance of the covenant. In addition, in both their ministry and their predictive revelations, the prophets prepared the way for Christ:

The prophets ... were men whom God raised up to declare His will to the nation. They themselves were an integral part of the Old Testament economy .... In the

deepest sense, therefore, just as prophecy itself was a preparation for Christ, so also was the individual prophet in the entirety of his ministry a witness to and a type of Christ, the Prophet par excellence.<sup>1</sup>

Although Abraham was the first person called a prophet in Scripture (Genesis 20:7) the individual whose ministry exemplified and defined Old Testament prophecy was Moses. In fact, the Scriptures suggest that the only prophet greater than Moses would be Christ (Deuteronomy 18:15–19; 34:10). As a result, the prophetic ministry of Moses serves as a template for the prophet's function under the old covenant as the following comparison demonstrates:

Moses received a specific and personal call from God. The initiative in making a prophet rests with God (Exodus 3:1–4:17; cf.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4–19; Ezekiel 1–3; Hosea 1:2; Amos 7:14–15; Jonah 1:1) and it is only the false prophet who dares to take the office upon himself (Jeremiah 14:14; 23:21). The primary object and effect of the call was an introduction into God's presence, as the passages noted above show. This was the 'secret' or 'counsel' of the Lord (1 Kings 22:19; Jeremiah 23:22; Amos 3:7). The prophet stood before men, as a man who had been made to stand before God (1 Kings 17:1; 18:15).... Moses was not left to struggle for the meaning of events as or after they happened; he was forewarned of events and of their significance by the verbal communications of God. So it was with all the prophets. We also see in Moses that combination of proclamation and prediction which is found in all the prophets. It is this interlocking of proclamation and prediction which distinguishes the true prophet from the mere prognosticator.<sup>3</sup>

Moses, like many of the prophets used symbols to set forth the truth such as the serpent raised on the pole in the wilderness (Numbers 21:8; cf. Jeremiah 19:1ff; Ezekiel 4:1ff). He also modeled profound intercession for God's wayward people as did several of his successors including Jeremiah and Daniel (Exodus 32:30-35; Deuteronomy 9:18-20; cf. Jeremiah 7:16; Daniel 9:1-19).

In some cases individual prophets possessed unusual gifts such as Elisha's capacity to hear what was said in distant locations or Daniel's ability to know and interpret dreams (2 Kings 6:12; Daniel 2). Nevertheless, it is fitting that Moses, the prophet par excellence, express the longing for the universal prophetic anointing upon the people of God in his cry, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). As we shall see, this cry was answered almost a millennium later on the Day of Pentecost.

## NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT

### ***New Testament Language***

The Greek noun *prophetes* or prophet (from *pro* "forth" and *phemi*, "to speak") refers to one who speaks forth or proclaims a divinely inspired message. It is the most commonly used word, primarily in the Gospels and Acts. The verb *propheteuo*, to prophesy, means to proclaim a divinely imparted message, to foretell, bring to light something that is hidden or to teach,

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<sup>1</sup> C. F. Pfeiffer, H. F. Vos and J. Rea (eds.). *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975, p. 1413.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. stands for *confer* (Lat.), compare

<sup>3</sup> D. R. W. Wood and I. H. Marshall (eds.). *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, s.v. "Prophecy, Prophets."

admonish and comfort.<sup>4</sup> Over half of the uses of this word occur in Paul's writings. The word *propheteia*, prophecy, refers to the prophetic gift, a prophetic word or the work of the prophet.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The New Testament Restoration of Prophecy***

As noted above, centuries passed before Moses' earnest desire that God's people would be a nation of prophets was fulfilled. Following the time of Malachi in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, it was commonly held by many rabbis that God had ceased to speak to His people through genuine prophets. At the dawn of the New Testament era, the Jews found themselves once again under the heel of an occupying foreign power, the Romans.

Into this environment God restores prophecy to Israel suddenly, dramatically and unexpectedly. The prophetic ministry of John the Baptist provided a bridge between Old and New Testament eras. He is "filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). His father, Zechariah, prophesies at his birth that he will be "called the prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76). Previous to this, his mother, Elizabeth, is "filled with the Holy Spirit," and pours forth a prophetic song of praise (Luke 1:41-45). Meanwhile an angel visits a young woman in Nazareth named Mary and proclaims that she will give birth to the Son of the Most High whose reign will last forever (Luke 1:26-33). Subsequently she too utters a prophetic song of thanksgiving (Luke 1:46-55).

Following the birth of Jesus, two ordinary Jews obviously gifted prophetically named Simeon and Anna encounter the infant in the Temple and astonish his parents with their words (Luke 2:25-38).

These six individuals, John, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are the foretaste, the anticipation of the coming gift of the prophetic Spirit which will soon be poured out in answer to Moses' prayer. They represent the young men, the old men, and the bond slaves, both men and women upon whom the Lord will pour out His Spirit as predicted by the prophecy of Joel (2:28, 29).

At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus identifies himself to be a prophet (Luke 4:24), recognizing the Spirit placed upon him (Luke 3:22) anointed him for a charismatic ministry (Luke 4:18,19; Isaiah 61:1) He is acclaimed as a great prophet (Luke 7:16); aware of the fact that he will die a rejected prophet (Luke 13:33-35) and later mocked as a prophet (Luke 22:63-65). After his death he is remembered as, "...a prophet mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24:19). Clearly, from first to last, Jesus is not only conscious that he ministers as a prophet but among both friends and enemies he has the reputation of being a prophet.

Jesus is a prophet without equal or rival. But he is not a prophet without successors. Jesus, the greatest of all prophets, is also the prophet-maker.

Throughout his ministry, but most especially between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus repeatedly prepares his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit. He encourages them to pray to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). He assures them that the Holy Spirit will give them words of defense when they are put on trial (Luke 12:11,12; 21:15). Further, when they receive the Spirit they will be clothed with power (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). This means that when the recently ascended Jesus pours out the Spirit of prophecy upon the disciples (Acts

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.); Geoffrey M. Bromiley (trans.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged in one volume)*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985, s.v. *prophetes*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

2:17-21), then they will have been baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4,5). Therefore, beginning with the post-Easter day of Pentecost the disciples become a community of Spirit-baptized, Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered prophets. Consequently, this community of Spirit-baptized prophets becomes the foundation for the ever-spreading, every-growing charismatic community.

These occurrences point to a fundamental characteristic of the new covenant out of which the New Testament church arises: the resident empowerment of the prophetic within every follower of Christ, irrespective of gender, age or social status. The prophetic gift is no longer restricted to specially called individuals. All of God's people potentially share this anointing and can prophesy as Moses desired.

### ***Distinguishing Characteristics of New Testament Prophecy***

In the Old Testament, for the most part, God chose and called selected individuals to function in the *office* of a prophet (Jeremiah 1:4, 5). Under the new covenant, while all Spirit-filled believers share the actual presence of the Holy Spirit and thus have access to all of His gifts including prophecy, there are also those in the body that operate regularly and consistently in this gift. For these individuals, the exercise of this gift transcends the spontaneous expression given in a public worship gathering and becomes an ongoing ministry lifestyle. Examples include Agabus (Acts 11:27, 28), Barnabas and Silas (Acts 15:32), the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9) and those who function in the equipping gift of prophecy alongside apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). The New Testament speaks of this equipping ministry as a gifted individual whose function is to assist in maturing believers, rather than an "office," that is, an assigned position of authority, as was the case with the prophets in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar fashion, in the Old Testament, while prophetic words were ideally to be subjected to theological and historical evaluation, the word of the genuine prophet was to be understood as the very word of God. For this reason, it was recorded and given the highest level of authority, that of canonical Scripture.

New Testament prophecy is also subject to evaluation by the church community. Its authority, however, is of a different order. Contemporary prophecy is not recognized as a canonical word that operates as the norm for God's people on the same level as the Scriptures. Therefore it should not be presented in a fashion that associates every specific term or phrase to God or that demands unquestioned obedience.

Those who hear a prophetic word have a responsibility to weigh what is offered (1Thessalonians 5:21). This responsibility falls to every Christian, though the ability to discern error will vary based on the individual's spiritual maturity and experience (1Thessalonians 5:19-21). It also is the responsibility of the elders of the local church and other individuals who prophesy to judge prophetic words (1 Corinthians 14:29; 2 Timothy 4:1-3).

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<sup>6</sup> The wording of 1 Corinthians 12:28, "God has *appointed* in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues" (NASB, emphasis added) seems to suggest the appointment of individuals to the prophetic office. On this reading, however, we would be forced to acknowledge a specific "office" of miracle-workers, healings and even tongues-speakers, in contradiction to the universal availability of these gifts to all Spirit-baptized believers.

The criteria to be used in evaluating prophecy include the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16, 17), the confirmation of the Holy Spirit in the believer (1 John 2:27), the fruit the word produces (is it life-giving and encouraging?) and the fulfillment of the prophetic word (Deuteronomy 18:21, 22).

### ***The Role of the Prophetic in New Testament Ministry***

1. Prophecy is intended to strengthen, encourage and comfort the gathered body of believers in an environment of mutual love and consideration (1 Corinthians 14:1-5). Its primary purpose is corporate edification.
2. Prophecy exercised in the corporate gathering can serve to convince unbelievers that they are indeed in the presence of the living God, causing them to recognize their need for God and respond to Him appropriately (John 16:8-11; 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25).
3. Prophecy, since it entails telling forth the mind of the Lord, provides an opportunity for believers to be instructed as they are reminded of previously revealed truth that the Holy Spirit desires to emphasize to a given group on a particular occasion (Acts 15:32; 1 Corinthians 14:31).
4. Prophecy can provide insight into specific future events in the short term such as Agabus' prophetic words to Paul concerning the trials he was about to face in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10, 11). The words of the prophet were not directive in nature, although Paul's friends responded to them by trying to dissuade him from his journey (Acts 21:12). The prophecy simply served as a divinely given warning to prepare the Apostle for the struggles that lay ahead.
5. The prophetic gift functions alongside other ministry gifts in the work of equipping believers with unity, Christ-like character, doctrinal stability and balanced gift-based functionality, preparing them for effective ministry as the living embodiment of Christ in this world (Eph. 4:11-16).

### ***The Expression of the Prophetic in New Testament Ministry***

1. Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, is described as "a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people" (Luke 24:19). He is the ultimate model for all prophetic ministry (Deuteronomy 18:18, 19; Acts 3:22; 7:3). Those who function in prophetic ministry will exemplify the servant attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:1-7; 1 Peter 4:10, 11).
2. As one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the potential to speak prophetically resides in all Spirit-baptized believers (1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 14:31). This aligns with universal prophethood of the people of God under the new covenant as predicted by Joel and fulfilled by the bestowal of the Spirit in fullness on the Church on the Day of Pentecost (Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:16-18). In accordance with the example of Jesus, all Spirit-baptized men and women can minister powerfully in word and deed and are therefore encouraged to prophecy in proportion to their faith (Romans 12:6).

3. The most prominent context for the exercise of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is the corporate worship gathering (1 Corinthians 14:1-40). It is also appropriate in public instruction (Judas and Silas, Acts 15:32), public confrontation (Jesus and the Pharisees, Matthew 23:13-36) and messages directed toward specific individuals (Jesus and Peter, Matthew 26:34; Agabus and Paul, Acts 21:10, 11). The purpose of prophecy regardless of the context is to bring a word of encouragement, exhortation or information rather than specific guidance or direction (1 Corinthians 14:3).
4. As illustrated in the New Testament, prophecy may be received through verbal revelations (Agabus, Acts 21:11), visions (Zechariah, Luke 1:10-22; Ananias, Acts 9:10-16) and dreams (Joseph, Matthew 1:20, 2:22; Acts 2:17). The Old Testament abounds with similar examples.
5. Prophecy can be delivered through unpremeditated and spontaneous utterances (Zechariah, Luke 1:67-79; 1 Corinthians 14:29-31) including speaking in tongues as long as it is interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:5-13). Prophetic ministry can also come through symbolic actions (Acts 21:10-11) and preaching (Acts 15:32).
6. Prophecy is always initiated by the Holy Spirit as He speaks to and then through whomever He chooses (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Prophetic words of exhortation or instruction are always in line with previously revealed truth as the Spirit illuminates and emphasizes one or more biblical truths in the moment. In some cases the one active in prophesying may have a limited understanding of what he or she is saying through the Spirit (John 11:49-51; Acts 2:4-12, 1 Corinthians 13:9; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Such utterances never attain to the authority of the Scriptures since they are to be judged by this standard (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; Peter 1: 20, 21).
7. In Scripture prophetic ministry is offered without financial expectation on the part of the one exercising the gift (2 Corinthians 2:17). Jesus said we are to give freely what we have freely received (Matthew 10:8). The case of Simon the magician at Samaria illustrates this principle. He offered money to the apostles to give him the ability to confer the gift of the Spirit upon people by laying his hands on them. They replied, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:18-24, v. 20). In other words, it was not appropriate for the apostles to accept money in order to minister the things of the Spirit to Simon or anyone else.
8. The function of the prophetic is gender inclusive. The prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost states, "in the last days . . . I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy," as was indeed the case with the four virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 2:17. 21:9; see also 1 Corinthians 11:5).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada strongly affirms the biblical legitimacy and spiritual value of the gift of prophecy. We desire to see all the gifts of the Holy Spirit including prophecy exercised frequently and authentically within the protective boundaries of biblical accountability in all of our churches. In the words of Donald Gee, the revered teacher and counselor to the Pentecostal Movement,

The great secret for preserving this glorious spiritual gift in active exercise in the church therefore appears to be the striking, by divine grace, of a perfect balance between a sufficient *faith* in the Holy Ghost to allow of its free operation, and a sufficient *obedience* to the Scriptures to “prove all things” and only to “hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).<sup>7</sup>

We pray that with God’s help we will discover this “perfect balance” so that the prophetic gifts of Christ to His Church will find abundant expression in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada out of a sincere desire to bring encouragement and blessing to the Body of Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Gee, *Concerning Spiritual Gifts*, (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, revised edition, 1972), pp. 53-54.