
Book Reviews

The Final Word

A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today

O Palmer Robertson

Banner of Truth, 150pp, £3.95

The value of this little book is out of proportion to its size, it sets out to deal with prophecy in the contemporary church and discusses the thesis set out by Wayne Grudem in his book **THE GIFT OF PROPHECY** in the New Testament and today (Kingsway Press, 1988). Palmer Robertson in no way misrepresents Wayne Grudem and the tone of the book is such as should always characterise differences among Christians. For this reason and because of its careful examination of the relevant passages this is a book which deserves to be widely read.

Palmer Robertson begins with the **history of prophecy in the Scriptures**, and by doing so lays a good foundation for all that follows. (In fact, there is no direct reference to Grudem's book until chapter 4). "The starting point for any discussion about prophecy today should begin with the long history of the revelational character of this gift of the Spirit." His main points are these: Biblical prophecy always involves direct revelation from God. The climax of prophetic revelation is reached in Jesus Christ, in whom God speaks directly to his people without any other prophetic figure between.

When the Old Testament prophesied about New Testament prophecy, ie Joel 2:28, that prophecy is always viewed as revelational in the same sense as Old Testament prophecy.

This view of New Testament prophecy is confirmed by the writings of Peter and Paul, who always view prophecy as revelation in the fullest sense.

This leads on to a discussion of the **nature and significance of the gift of tongues in the New Testament**. Robertson's reasons for doing this is his contention that tongues are themselves a form of prophecy and are revelational. This he argues on two grounds: first, that tongues are said to declare divine 'mysteries' eg 1 Cor 14:2, "He who speaks in a tongue utters mysteries". A *mystery* according to the New Testament is something hidden from mere human wisdom and insight but which God has now revealed. Tongues were therefore "a divine instrument for communicating revelation". Second, that tongues edify in exactly the same way that prophecy does, by bringing light and understanding to the hearer. Hence Paul insists on the necessity of interpretation. Tongues not understood cannot edify, 1 Cor 14:16,17. So Robertson concludes, "If prophecy is revelational and tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then tongues also must be a form of revelation that God used in the church", and so if God's revelation is complete in Scripture then we should not expect tongues to continue. Interestingly, Robertson argues that *tongues* were foreign languages, chiefly on the basis of Acts 2, and says, "The effect of this conclusion is to place a large portion of modern tongues-speaking activity outside the realm of valid New Testament experience from the outset". Furthermore, tongues were given as a sign of judgement on unbelieving Israel and of the in-gathering of the Gentile nations. Tongues point to a universal gospel.

The question of whether revelation has ceased is often misunderstood, and so is met with a gut reaction, *What God has done in the past he can and will do today*. But this raises another question: What is the 'goal'

of God's revelation? Is it that we should be forever receiving more revelation? Surely not. "Revelation . . . is a means to an end. It is the way by which the eternal God makes himself known to sinful men who are hopelessly lost apart from his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation has as its end the making known to men of the one and only God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent". Viewed in this way, the cessation of revelation is not something to be regretted. The process went on over many centuries but has now reached its climax in the coming of God's Son (Heb 1:1). So the termination of God's revelatory activity must not be regretted as though it were some loss to us; instead we should rejoice and be thankful for the priceless treasure we have in Jesus Christ.

Robertson now develops this along two lines. First, what it means that revelation has ceased. It does not mean that God no longer speaks to his people. The heavens still declare his glory and the Holy Spirit still guides believers into the truth of God as found in Scripture, and applies it constantly to the life and conscience. This written revelation which God has given to us in Scripture contains all that is needed for life and godliness. "It is not just that the canon is closed, meaning that no more words are to be added to the Bible. The end of revelation means that all those former ways of God's making his will known to his church have now ceased."

His second point here concerns what he terms "The History of the Cessation of Revelation" in Scripture itself. God's revelation does not come in a steady flow but rather in periods or epochs. Our attention is drawn to the significance of the "Do not add ..." declarations in Deuteronomy, Numbers and Revelation. These "indicate that the idea of a cessation of revelation is not a strange concept in the process of God's working of redemption for his people. Revelation never came in an

unbroken experience." In the New Testament the gifts which are so closely related to the giving of revelation seem themselves to fade away as the era comes to an end. Hence there is no reference to prophecy or tongues in the later writings of Paul.

Robertson concludes this chapter by answering the main objections to his thesis. For example, Paul's words, "Despise not prophesyings" (1 Thess 5:20), and "Do not forbid to speak in tongues" (1 Cor 14:39) are considered. "It is a fact that cannot be denied that some divine injunctions have bound the people of God for a particular era, but have subsequently been revised, modified or even cancelled." "If it is recognised that the apostolic office has come to an end, then the possibility must be acknowledged that the foundational office of prophet also has ceased to function in the church today." The objection that the claim that *revelation has ceased* limits God is answered helpfully. Clearly we have no power to restrict God in any way. Yet what if God should place a restriction on himself? What if he has chosen to give his people a full and sufficient revelation of himself in Scripture? Surely, in that case to say that revelation has ceased is simply submitting to what God has chosen to do. The reviewer found some points in this section less convincing. The absence of reference to prophecy and tongues in Paul's later writings seemed capable of other interpretation. Is the relation between miracles and revelation so unbreakable that we must rule out miracles for the remainder of this age? In one sense that view simplifies matters for us but it does leave us, very occasionally, groping about for a natural explanation for some event which has all the appearance of a direct intervention of God.

All this brings us to Wayne Grudem's book and the possibility of some form of prophecy in the church today. As

Robertson says, “this view of prophecy has found significant acceptance in large areas of the evangelical church”, and we must add, even in churches otherwise committed to the Reformed faith. Grudem’s view is that there was in the New Testament a form of prophecy which involved revelation from God but which did not carry with it either infallibility or divine authority. Grudem calls this “ordinary congregational prophecy” and alleges that it is still to be found in the church today. Such prophecy involved divine revelation but, whereas in the case of the Old Testament prophets the Holy Spirit ensured the purity and trustworthiness of that word on their lips, no such inerrancy exists in this case. The message of New Testament prophets is flawed by the human instrument. It may be appropriate here to point out that this article is not an attempt to review both books. Those who wish to read further into the matter will find an approach generally sympathetic to Dr Grudem’s position in D A Carson’s *SHOWING THE SPIRIT* and a contrary view in Gaffin’s *PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOST*.

Grudem sees the gift of Prophecy as superior to all other gifts of the Spirit. because it is based on divine revelation, the prophet can speak to the specific needs of the moment when the congregation is assembled. Preaching is general, prophesying is specific. The things revealed might include “the secrets of people’s hearts, their worries and fears, or their refusal or hesitancy to do God’s will” (*THE GIFT OF PROPHECY*, p 153). The prophet would not always know to which person in the congregation his (or her) words applied but at least on occasions the prophet would be able to point to a particular person and deliver his message to them. That is what Grudem understands to have happened in the New Testament and what he would have us look for today: direct words from God. But these prophetic words

“should not be considered as having divine obligations” but rather as “the prophet’s own fairly accurate (but not infallible) report of something he thinks (though not with absolute certainty) has been revealed to him by God”. So if you disobey the message of the prophet, you might not be disobeying God; on the other hand, you might! We are left wondering what advantage this has over preaching. There we have a far higher authority, plus the secret application made by the preacher with the Holy Spirit’s help and a guidance, plus practical application of the word which the Holy Spirit himself makes in the hearts of the hearers. It is hard not to agree with Robertson when he says that this approach to New Testament prophecy creates instability and confusion in the hearts of God’s people. What happens when the prophet does get it wrong? And how can we be sure anyway as, except within the frame-work of Scripture, no way exists for judging objectively whether the prophetic message does actually come from God.

On what Scriptures, then does Wayne Grudem base this view of prophecy? The key text is 1 Cor 14:29, “two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said”. The question is, to what does the word *diakrino* refer?

Grudem takes it to refer to the *words* of the prophets, which must then be evaluated or sifted. Robertson understands the word to refer to the prophets *themselves* - who will speak and in what order. The words “weigh carefully what is said” do not appear in the Greek text, but are an attempt by the NIV translators to help us understand the sense. Grudem’s point is that if the prophecy referred to here were of the same character as Old Testament prophecy then the idea of weighing it carefully would be wholly inappropriate. Robertson challenges this understanding of the verse and sees it, as we have said, as a discrimination among people

and not of words or ideas. So Paul's concern in 1 Cor 14 is not with a new kind of prophecy but with an abundance of prophetic gifts that needed to be handled in the church in an orderly way. Even if the "discrimination" envisaged here did relate to the prophetic words (and Robertson denies this) "nothing in this procedure would distinguish New Covenant prophecy from the prophecy of the Old Covenant. For judgement was rendered regularly about the true or false character of words spoken by a 'prophet' in the Old Covenant (cf Deut 13:1-5, 18:21,22)." The New Testament itself contains warnings against false prophets (eg Mat 7:25; 24:11,124). In view of this, is it not more likely that 1 Cor 14 is urging discrimination between true and false prophets?

Again, Dr Grudem suggests that a lesser kind of prophecy is envisaged because Paul seems unconcerned that some of the prophets' words would be lost for ever and never heard by the church. "But this is surely to read too much into the passage. Is it not possible that some of the prophetic teaching could properly wait for another occasion?" Paul's words in 1 Cor 14:36,37 are advanced as further evidence of the lower status of New Testament prophecy, because of the way in which Paul asserts his own apostolic authority; but again, is that really a necessary inference? Other commentators have not come to this conclusion. Calvin is especially helpful and worth reading on this whole passage. Commenting on v 29 he says, "But it may seem odd that men are allowed to make judgements concerning the teaching of God, which ought to be established beyond any dispute. My answer to that is that the teaching of God is not subjected to the judgement of men, but their task is simply to judge, by the Spirit of God, whether it is his word which is declared, or whether, using this as a pretext, men are wrongly parading what they themselves have made

up..."

Dr Grudem argues at length that a distinction must be made between the authority of "apostolic prophecy" and "ordinary congregational prophecy". He sees Paul's reference to *apostles and prophets* in Ephesus 2:20 and 3:8 as describing a single office, apostles/prophets, and not two separate offices. It was this single office that came to an end once the foundations of the church had been laid. Other prophets, of the lesser kind, continued. Robertson seeks to show that in spite of Grudem's lengthy argument the case cannot be made.

One further argument is advanced in favour of this distinction, and that is Paul's statement in 1 Thess 5:19-22: "... do not treat prophesies with contempt, . . ." Grudem says that for Paul to speak in this way these prophesies could not possibly have had the authority of Old Testament prophecy. But as Robertson points out we must remember that for four hundred years the prophetic gift had not functioned. So it might not have been too easy to come to terms with the presence of prophets in the church. The exhortation to *test everything* was just what had always been taught with regard to prophetic activity. All in all, says Robertson, - and I am inclined to agree with him - the case for a new and lesser category of prophecy has not been made. Having read Grudem's chapter on *Encouraging and Regulating Prophecy in the Local Church* I was surprised to find myself identifying with some of his examples of prophetic activity, and saying, "Yes, of course that happens sometimes", and I gladly recognise the Spirit's activity, but I would not give to it the status of prophecy. Whatever uncertainties remain in our minds over the way in which New Testament prophecy functioned we have no good ground for looking for its continuance.

The issues raised in Palmer Robertson's book are important for us all. The idea of a

continuing prophetic gift in the church can appear as a panacea for many of the ills of the evangelical church. There are real weaknesses in evangelicalism, one of which is certainly a failure to cultivate holiness and its corollary, a closer loving communion with God. When such weaknesses are used to bolster the case for modern prophecy the argument seems to have force. But there is another case to be argued and that is to consider **the blessings that come from affirming the Scriptures as God's final and all-sufficient word:**

1. A concentration on Scripture as God's living word to us today, not just as a record of what God *once* said, but of what he *still* says. How much preachers and congregations need to feel that as the Scripture is opened God himself addresses us.
2. A more prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, to be to us the divine interpreter of God's word, and to clothe that word with his own power.
3. A preaching ministry that not only unfolds the great doctrines of the faith and reveals Jesus to us, but which applies that word with wisdom, insight and sharp relevance to our everyday lives. I suspect that it is, in part, the lack of such preaching that has given rise to a desire for modern prophecy.
4. An openness to light and wisdom given by the Spirit within a framework of Scripture truth, enabling us to see our way forward in dark and perplexing circumstances. Richard Gaffin says, "Often, too, what is seen as prophecy is actually a spontaneous Spirit-worked application of Scripture, a more or less sudden grasp of the bearing that biblical truth has on a particular situation or problem." (PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOST)

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The Work of Christ

Robert Letham

IVP, 1993, pb, 284 pp, £12.95

This book is a welcome addition to the CONTOURS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY series under the general editorship of Gerald Bray. The author, Robert Letham, was formerly Senior Lecturer in Christian Doctrine at London Bible College and is now minister of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, USA.

Dr Letham successfully combines historical theology with biblical theology in this book but rightly gives priority to the latter. His use of traditional, biblical models such as Prophet, Priest and King (pp 91-223) in explaining the work of Christ is competent, uncompromising and stimulating. Concluding the section on Christ as Prophet, Letham emphasises that 'The Bible does not compete with Christ. It is complementary' (p 102). 'Is there a dual object of faith?' he asks. 'Does this open the door to scholasticism and rationalism?' His answer is unambiguous. 'If the prophetic office of Christ encompasses redemptive revelation in Scripture, there is no dualism. The doctrine of Scripture is an inherent part of the gospel, not an additional extra tacked on to supplement the redemptive actions of Christ'.

Christ's work as Priest is studied biblically in some depth over at least four main chapters before assessing various theories of the Atonement (recapitulation, ransom, satisfaction/vicarious, moral influence, governmental, vicarious sympathy, etc) then examining helpfully the relationship of Atonement and Justification (pp 177-194). Numerous aspects and emphases of Letham's work on the Lord's priesthood are both welcome and stimulating. He notes, for example, that the neglect of Christ's priesthood had serious consequences for the church. The struggle over Christ's deity in the patristic period led to a focus on his

deity to the neglect of his humanity. 'The net result was that his mediation faded into the background, leaving a gap for the sinner making confession and looking for compassionate and understanding assistance. Who better to step into the breach than the kind and loving mother of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary? The development of the cult of Mary met a real need in the church. The need was created by the church itself, however, by its neglect of the human priesthood of Christ, exercised in our place and continuing at God's right hand to meet our present need for grace. The vital point to note is that Christ is utterly sufficient to meet us in our need' (pp 119-120).

Letham's treatment of Christ's sole priesthood, though brief, is useful not only in criticising the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the priesthood but also in challenging Brethren and 'open worship' advocates who reject an ordained ministry on the basis of the priesthood of all believers. 'In the first place', writes Letham, 'its preoccupation with the individual is foreign to the Bible, in which the corporate has priority. Where the Bible talks of a priesthood for the believer the primary reference is in fact to the church. It is a corporate priesthood given by Christ to his church. . . Secondly, a stress on the priesthood of all believers can often undermine the biblical focus on the exclusive priesthood of Christ' (p 122). ' . . . Christ is our great high priest to the exclusion of all others. He has no rival. . . If we place the priesthood of all believers in centre stage, Christ is displaced from his throne. His is the sacrifice, the intercession and the benediction, his the faith and worship acceptable to God. . . He represents us. We represent nobody.'

On *The Nature of the Atonement* (chapter 7, pp 125-157) Letham is again orthodox and encouraging. Concerning its necessity, he rightly favours the position of 'consequent

absolute necessity' on the grounds of divine justice and the nature of sin as an assault on God (p 127). Obedience, penal substitution, propitiation, reconciliation, redemption and conquest are major biblical categories used by Letham to describe the nature of the atonement.

His appendix on *The Intent of the Atonement* (pp 225-247) I found most rewarding. After briefly describing the historical background and the issue at stake, Letham claims that 'only effective atonement does justice to the biblical insistence that the cross was a work of penal substitution' (p 233). He then proceeds to develop and examine this doctrine of effective atonement from different theological angles, such as election, covenant doctrine, union with Christ, the unity of Christ's high-priestly work and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. On the latter, Letham writes: ' . . . universal atonement maintains that the Father chooses some (conditionally), the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to some but the Son dies for all. This is by far the most serious problem with provisional atonement. It threatens to tear apart the Holy Trinity. It introduces disorder into the doctrine of God. The Father and the Holy Spirit have different goals from the Son. The tendency is towards tritheism, and the unity of the Godhead is undermined. 'Ultimately', warns Letham, 'the doctrine of the Trinity will be blown apart (p 237).

The final section in the book examines *The Mediatorial Kingship of Christ*, both in its cosmic and corporate dimensions, particularly as creator, director and goal of the universe and as Saviour of the church. Stimulation and a greater appreciation of Christ's work should inevitably be the testimony of ministers and others who read this book carefully. It deserves to be on your bookshelf or in your church library. And, even better, on your study desk!

Editor