

Testing Today's Prophecy

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biblical standards?

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by

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Introduction

Recently I was browsing through a book written by an internationally known author and leader in the Charismatic movement. The book was full of personal experiences in which this pastor claimed God gave him visions and specific messages. This is hardly surprising. He and his followers regularly claim to receive visions or prophetic messages from the Lord.

Throughout the book, phrases like this were used:

...the Holy Spirit confirmed in my heart...¹

...I sensed the Lord saying...²

...I sensed a spiritual sense of God speaking to me.³

Such language is typical for many Christians. Those who receive these "insights" or "confirmations" often explain their experience as a legitimate functioning of the New Testament gift of prophecy.

In recent years, the popular Charismatic view that God is still revealing Himself through prophecy today has received theological bolstering. Books by theologians like Wayne Grudem and Jack Deere defending today's prophecy have given a new level of credibility to the movement.

This flurry of supposed prophetic activity and the flood of writing on the topic has raised concern over modern-day prophecy to a fever pitch. As the pastor-teacher of Grace Fellowship I am regularly asked about this issue. The concern is understandable. If God is revealing Himself through prophecy today, then Christians ought to listen. We would not want to miss out on what God has to offer. We would not want to "despise prophetic utterances" (1 Thess 5:20).

However, evangelical Christians have traditionally believed prophecy faded out with the completion of the New Testament. And, because of the many warnings in scripture about *false* prophets, hesitancy over accepting this new wave of prophecy is understandable, even commendable.

Should Christians accept the modern prophecy movement as a new work of God's Spirit? Are its inner impressions and verbal declarations what the Bible calls *prophecy*? Those are valid questions to ask in an age of increasing religious deception.

To avoid Satanic deception or just well-meaning distraction, I believe we must test today's "prophecy" by asking the following two questions:

¹ John Wimber, *Power Healing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), p. 210.

² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

- What are the characteristics of biblical prophecy?
- How does today's prophecy measure up against those characteristics?

Those questions require careful, biblical answers. If today's prophecy meets the biblical standards, non-Charismatic Christians need to sit up and listen. If it doesn't, all such practices must be rejected.

The obligation to test the prophets

As we begin, however, someone might object to such testing. "What right do we have to question something that another Christian has received from God?" Is it necessary (or even right) to test a prophecy that someone believes they received from the Holy Spirit?

It is right to test anything that claims to be prophecy. In fact, it is obligatory. Three New Testament passages speak to this issue.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

(1 John 4:1)

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement.

(1 Cor 14:29)

Paul's commands to the Thessalonian church regarding the issue of prophecy comprise the third passage.

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

(1 Thess 5:19-22)

The commands to *examine*, *hold fast*, and *abstain from* probably had broader application than just prophecy. However, the context makes it clear that the first thing Paul wanted the Thessalonians to examine was prophetic utterances.

Apparently the Thessalonians were being tempted to despise prophecy outright due to a problem with fraudulent prophecy in the church (2 Thess 2:2). However, rather than snuff out the ministry of the Spirit, Paul commanded the Thessalonians to examine everything that claimed to be from God. That which met the biblical standards of prophecy was to be received. That which did not was to be rejected.

Based on those passages, the obligation to test that which claims to be prophecy is clear in the New Testament. It is not judgmental or divisive to do so. It is commanded. But, before we can test today's prophecy, we must discover what the Bible says prophecy is.

What is prophecy?

Today's prophecy must be tested by the objective standards of the scripture. If the practice of the modern prophecy movement does not measure up to what the Bible teaches, then it must be rejected.

First, then, we must determine what the Bible actually says about prophecy. We begin in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 18:18 described prophecy in this way:

I will raise up a prophet...and *I will put My words in his mouth*, and he shall speak to them all that I command him [emphasis added].

That's a pretty clear definition of prophetic ministry. God put His own words in the prophet's mouth. That was what made someone a prophet. Two men could stand up and speak. But only the one who was speaking the very words of God was a prophet.

That definition of prophecy is confirmed in Exodus 7. Because of Moses' fear of speaking in front of Pharaoh (Ex 4:10), God assigned his brother Aaron to be his spokesman or "prophet."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet."

(Exod 7:1)

Here was the process. God spoke His words to Moses. Moses spoke those words to Aaron. Aaron then proclaimed that message to Pharaoh. God described Aaron as Moses' "prophet" because Aaron proclaimed the very words Moses passed on to him. In a sense, Moses was the prophet of God and Aaron was the prophet of Moses.

Those two passages definitively establish what prophecy was in the Old Testament. The prophet was moved by God and spoke *the very words* of God.

The logical test

The fact that a prophet spoke God's very words had some significant implications. Direct revelation from the mind of God implied that the prophet's message was infallible and inerrant.⁴

⁴ Just as with the written Word, the message was delivered in the prophet's own language and vocabulary. But the words he spoke were the exact words God wanted him to speak.

When speaking for God, the prophet's words could not contain errors in either doctrine or prediction.

But obviously false prophets could and did arise. How could the true prophets be distinguished from those who were not? In a context where a prophet spoke *God's very words*, the test of a true prophet was simple.

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams... but that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death...

(Deut 13:1-3, 5)

I will raise up a prophet from among their country men like you [i.e. like Moses], and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him...

...You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

(Deut 18:18, 21-22)

If a prophet claimed to speak from God and spoke something that was doctrinally untrue (Deut 13:1-5)⁵ or something that did not come to pass (18:22), he was to be ignored. "Don't fear him," said God. But more than that, according to verse 20, such a "prophet" was to be put to death.

But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, ... that prophet shall die.

(Deut 18:20)

(c.f., Deut 13:5)

God is *serious* about prophecy (you might remember that stoning was the preferred method for execution). In fact, He established a standard of 100% accuracy to protect against false prophets.

Supporting evidence

A review of the Old Testament shows that the 100% accuracy standard was understood in Israel, although not always enforced. The young Saul described Samuel the prophet in this way:

⁵ Notice that a "miracle" by itself did not prove someone was sent by God. Accuracy in doctrine was the more important test. Many today would do well to give heed to the implications of Deut 13:1-5.

Behold now, there is a man of God in this city, and the man is held in honor; all that he says surely comes true.

(1 Sam 9:6)

Earlier in 1 Samuel, the author described Samuel in this manner:

Thus Samuel grew and the Lord was with him *and let none of his words fail*. All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was *confirmed* as a prophet of the Lord [emphasis added].

(1 Sam 3:19-20)

When confronting the false prophet Hananiah, Jeremiah said this:

The prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent.

(Jer 28:9)

The testimony of the Old Testament is clear. Prophecy was nothing less than God speaking His own infallible and inerrant words through a human spokesman.

Prophecy in the New Testament

Having seen the Old Testament definition of prophecy, we must now determine if that definition was changed in the New Testament. The New Testament speaks of prophets, prophecy, and the gift of prophecy. For example, Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12-14 list prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit. Those passages, however, do not define what prophecy is.

In fact, there is no New Testament passage which defines prophecy or the gift of prophecy. How then were the early Christians to know what was legitimate prophecy and what wasn't? How were they to test prophecies as they were commanded?

The answer is simple. God had already given a definition of prophecy in Deuteronomy 18. The rest of the Old Testament confirmed that definition. The fact that the New Testament did not give a new definition of prophecy suggests that no new definition was needed. The Old Testament definition of prophecy was *assumed* in the New Testament. That indicates the nature of prophecy remained unaltered from one Testament to the other.

Supporting evidence

Three New Testament passages point to the fact that the Old Testament standard of 100% accuracy was still valid in the New Testament era. The first is Luke's account of Agabus the prophet's foretelling of the famine which would severely affect believers in Jerusalem.

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.

(Acts 11:27-28)

Notice especially the last line, "and this took place in the reign of Claudius." Why did Luke add that? It was Luke's confirmation that Agabus' prophecy came true. In the reign of the Roman emperor Claudius, the prophecy was fulfilled.

Apparently Luke was well aware of the Old Testament standard of 100% accuracy for prophets. This was his way of assuring the reader that Agabus met that standard.

The knowledge that a true prophet was 100% accurate brought great confidence. In Acts 27, in the midst of a terrible storm, God revealed to Paul that both he and his shipmates would be rescued from what seemed sure death. Notice how certain Paul was that this prophetic revelation would come true.

Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out *exactly* as I have been told [emphasis added].

(Acts 27:25)

There is a third passage that also confirms prophecy (including its accuracy) remained unchanged from the Old Testament to the New. It also involved Agabus. This time, however, it was his prophecy that Paul would be bound and imprisoned when he arrived in Jerusalem.

Agabus introduced that prophecy with these important words: "This is what the Holy Spirit says..." (Acts 21:11). As a prophet, Agabus walked in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets whose favourite preamble was, "Thus saith the Lord." Agabus understood that he was speaking the words of God Himself, by implication placing himself under the standards of Deuteronomy 13 and 18.

There is, then, a continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament regarding the nature of prophecy. A prophet was called a prophet because God had put His words in the prophet's mouth. That made testing a prophet a relatively simple task. If, when he claimed to be speaking for God, his words were 100% accurate in doctrine and fulfilment, then he was a prophet of God.

But not all agree...

However, not everyone agrees with the view of prophecy we have just outlined. Everyone agrees that the Old Testament prophets and the writers of the New Testament did receive the very words of God. However, the proponents of the modern prophecy movement believe that the New Testament *gift* of prophecy is distinctly different than the prophecy spoken of in Deuteronomy 13 and 18.

Most of those who practice prophecy today do not claim to be speaking the very words of God. When they say, "I sensed the Lord saying," or "I experienced a spiritual sense of God speaking to me," they do not believe their words are actually God's words. They do not put their "prophecies" on the same level of authority as the Bible.

A different definition

For example, Wayne Grudem in his book, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, says the following:

"I am asking that the charismatics go on using the gift of prophecy, but that they stop calling it "a word from the Lord" - simply because that label makes it sound exactly like the Bible in authority..."⁶

The New Testament gift of prophecy, according to Grudem, is not receiving and delivering the very words of God Himself. Instead, it is merely "telling something God has spontaneously brought to mind."⁷ In another place, Grudem says that New Testament prophets were "simply reporting in their own words what God would bring to mind and [...] these prophecies did not have the authority of the words of the Lord."⁸

Grudem and others like him (Jack Deere, for example, in his book, *Surprised by the Voice of God*) define prophecy in this way:

...prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to Scripture in authority, but was simply a very human - and sometimes partially mistaken - report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind."⁹

That certainly doesn't sound like what we found in Deuteronomy 18. There God said, "I will put My words in your mouth." The prophet was not merely reporting something that God brought to his mind. He was speaking the exact words God intended him to speak. Therefore, the message was infallible and inerrant.

However, the proponents of modern prophecy argue that the New Testament gift of prophecy is *different* than Old Testament prophecy and the written revelation of the New Testament. In Grudem's words the gift of prophecy is a "...sometimes partially mistaken ... report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind."

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), p. 14-15.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, "Why Christians Can Still Prophecy", *Christianity Today* 32/13 (Sept 16, 1988), p. 29.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington: University Press, 1982), p. 96, quoted in F. David Farnell, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets?", *The Master's Seminary Journal*, vol. 2, #2, (Fall 1991), p. 161.

⁹ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, p. 14

It is important to note that Grudem believes that the Old Testament prophets and the apostles did receive the very words of God. However, he believes the *gift* of prophecy is different.

According to Grudem, with the gift of prophecy, one *does not* receive the very words of God. Instead, one receives mental impressions or images generated by the Spirit. Those impressions or images are 100% accurate. However, the person receiving them might misinterpret, misunderstand, or inaccurately report them. In other words, the human input to the prophecy might outweigh the divine.

Ed Traut, a prominent South African prophet also believes New Testament prophets can misinterpret God's messages.

I believe it lies in the human element to make an error, even in the greatest men of God. Anyone who flows as a New Testament prophet or in the gift of prophecy and believes he never misses it, is in error... The occasional mistake might be made by even the person renowned for accuracy on a constant basis.¹⁰

Traut proves just how untrustworthy modern prophecies are when, in a discussion on decision-making, he advises, "One should never be led by just one prophecy..."¹¹

This redefinition of prophecy as potentially errant is critical. Without it, the modern prophecy movement stands condemned. Grudem and those who share his view *have to* alter the Old Testament definition of prophecy when they come to the New Testament gift of prophecy. Why? They claim to be practising biblical prophecy, but their prophecies are often *wrong*.

In fact, even the leaders of the prophecy movement admit that their "prophecies" regularly go unfulfilled. The mental impressions or spontaneous thoughts Grudem and others call prophecy are often "partially mistaken," as he allows for in his definition. That escape clause is not a minor technicality. It is the lifeline of the prophecy movement. If 100% accuracy were enforced, the movement would disappear overnight. One after the other, their "prophets" would have to be rejected due to errors in doctrine or prediction.

Out of necessity, the modern prophecy movement has redefined the nature of prophecy to defend their fallible, error-plagued prophets. But what biblical evidence do they offer to prove prophecy changed from the Old Testament to the New? What support is there for this novel view of prophecy? Such a radical redefinition of the nature of prophecy can be accepted *only* if it is clearly taught in the New Testament.

¹⁰ Ed Traut, *The Truth about Prophecy*, (Pretoria, South Africa: Prophetic Voice Distributors, 1991), pp. 94, 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The arguments offered

Wayne Grudem is the most theologically adept spokesman of the prophecy movement. The key arguments he offers to prove fallible New Testament prophecy are as follows¹²:

1. Paul's words in Ephesians 2:20 make the apostles a unique group with a unique prophetic ministry. Therefore, it is valid to expect that those who were not apostles had a different quality of prophetic ministry.
2. Agabus, a prophet mentioned twice in Acts, was wrong in two details of his prophecy in Acts 21.
3. The fact that New Testament prophecies were to be examined indicates that New Testament prophets could occasionally be wrong.

The importance of evaluating these arguments correctly is obvious. If Grudem is right, then many Christians need to revise what they think about prophecy. If Grudem and his supporters are wrong and there is no clear evidence that New Testament prophecy was often errant, then the 100% accuracy standard of Deuteronomy 13 and 18 must still be upheld in the church today.

The missing argument

Before we actually analyse Grudem's arguments for fallible New Testament prophecy, one important issue should be noted – the argument that is missing.

If the standard of 100% accuracy was set aside in the New Testament gift of prophecy, we would naturally expect a clear indication of that in the writings of the apostles. Otherwise, you can imagine how much confusion there would have been in the early church.

The first time someone with an Old Testament heritage heard an inaccurate or unfulfilled prophecy in the church, there would have been a major scene. On the basis of Deuteronomy 13 and 18, a godly Jew would have immediately rejected the prophecy and the one giving it. To avoid such a situation, the apostles would have had to give clear instruction that the nature of prophecy had radically changed.

However, there is no New Testament statement revising the 100% accuracy tests of the Old Testament. A quick review of Grudem's three key arguments on the previous page will confirm this. Grudem cannot point to any New Testament passage which redefines prophecy as potentially fallible and errant.

¹² F. David Farnell, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/ Prophets?", *The Master's Seminary Journal*, vol. 2, #2, (Fall 1991).

This is a crippling weakness in the fallible prophecy view. It is inconceivable that the definition of the word *prophecy* could have been changed so radically without any apostolic comment on the issue.

Does Eph 2:20 prove fallible prophecy?

Having pointed out the disabling weakness in the fallible prophecy movement's position, let's analyse the three arguments they do advance to defend their practice. Grudem's first argument can be summarised as follows:

Ephesians 2:20 makes the apostles a unique group with a unique prophetic ministry. Therefore, it is valid to expect that those who were not apostles had a different quality of prophetic ministry.

The text under consideration reads as follows:

...[you] are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.

(Eph 2:19-20)

Grudem uses Ephesians 2:20 in an effort to prove the apostles were unique in their *quality* of prophetic ministry. In other words, the prophecies of the apostles were infallible, but those of other New Testament prophets were not.

Grudem attempts to prove this by pointing out that the Greek original has only one article (i.e., "the") to describe the two words, "apostles" and "prophets." Therefore, he argues, the group of men spoken of here are the apostle-prophets, with a hyphen.¹³

The terminology "apostle-prophets," argues Grudem, set the apostles apart as a group of men having a *distinct* prophetic ministry. They received and delivered infallible prophetic messages. Only those who were "apostle-prophets" received and spoke God's actual words.

According to Grudem, those who had merely the gift of prophecy received only inner impressions or mental images, not God's words. And, unlike the apostles, sometimes they misinterpreted the impressions or images they received.

Eph 2:20 - an analysis

The problems with Grudem's argument are numerous. First, the grammatical rule Grudem leans on to argue the apostles and prophets must be the same group of men (the apostle-prophets)

¹³ This interpretation is based on the Greek grammatical principle called the Granville Sharp rule.

actually applies only to singular nouns.¹⁴ Therefore, it is not at all necessary to take the plural nouns, "apostles and prophets," as one unique category.

Besides having no grammatical support, the second reason Grudem's interpretation falls flat is found in considering Ephesians 4:11.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers...

Grudem's interpretation of Eph 2:20 cannot be sustained. In Eph 4:11 we find those two categories again: apostles and prophets. This time *both* have the article (i.e., "the") in the original. Paul clearly intends two separate groups: the apostles and the prophets.

If Grudem's subtle distinctions were correct, Paul should have said "Christ gave some as *apostle-prophets*, some as prophets," and so on. The fact that Paul put the two categories side by side in 4:11 without any qualifiers makes Grudem's interpretation of 2:20 severely suspect.

However, even though his interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 has no grammatical basis or contextual support, what if Grudem were correct? Would a category in the church called "apostle-prophets" necessarily *prove* that the other prophets were often fallible? It certainly wouldn't. That conclusion would far exceed the evidence. No matter how one interprets the "apostles and prophets" of Ephesians 2:20, it is not proof that those with the gift of prophecy had a sub-standard, fallible prophetic ministry.

Agabus and his "errors"

The second argument advanced by the fallible prophecy proponents is this:

Agabus, a prophet mentioned twice in the book of Acts was wrong in some details of his prophecy in Acts 21.

Grudem argues that this proves that non-apostolic prophecies were inner impressions generated by the Holy Spirit, which could be misinterpreted. Therefore, like Agabus, those today with merely the gift of prophecy can not be expected to be infallible when prophesying

Let's consider this argument. Although not listed among the apostles, Agabus did have a prophetic ministry. We already noted his prophecy in Acts 11:27-28 regarding the famine.

¹⁴F. David Farnell, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets?", *The Master's Seminary Journal*, vol. 2, #2, (Fall 1991), p. 165.

We find Agabus mentioned a second time in Acts 21. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem carrying donations from the Gentile churches in Greece. Shortly after Paul's ship docked on the coast of Judea, he arrived in the city of Caesarea. Agabus happened to be visiting town at the time.

As we were staying there for some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will *bind* the man who owns this belt and *deliver him* into the hands of the Gentiles' [emphasis added].

(Acts 21:10-11)

Fallible prophecy proponents argue that while Agabus was generally right in this prophecy—Paul was made prisoner in Jerusalem—he was wrong in two details. The Jews did not *bind* and *deliver up* Paul. Actually, the Romans imprisoned him.

Here, they argue, is an example of a New Testament prophecy that is partially incorrect. The Holy Spirit gave Agabus a mental impression or picture of what would happen. Agabus, however, seems to have misinterpreted some of the details of his prophetic impression. This seems convincing evidence at first. However, as in Ephesians 2, a closer look reveals major problems with this view. Grudem has not considered *all* the book of Acts says about this incident.

Agabus' errors: an analysis

As we noted previously, Agabus introduced his prophecy in Acts 21:11 with these words: "This is what the Holy Spirit says..." That terminology is virtually synonymous with the Old Testament prophets', "Thus saith the Lord..." Agabus expected his audience to understand he was speaking God's very words, not a slightly errant misinterpretation of a mental image.

Although Agabus spoke the very words of the Holy Spirit, did he make a mistake as Grudem suggests? I believe there were no mistakes in Agabus' prophecy. The "errors" Grudem points to were not errors at all.

Acts 21:27 and following records the incident in the temple which Agabus predicted. Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple's inner court, a place of worship reserved only for Jews. At that point, Luke recorded that the Jews "laid hands on him... dragged him out of the temple... [and] were seeking to kill him" (21:30-31).

At first glance that does not resemble Agabus' prophecy: "[They] will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles." However, the confusion vanishes when one compares Agabus' prophecy with the more detailed courtroom account of the event recorded by Luke in Acts 24. As Paul and his accusers stood before Felix, the Roman governor, here is how the Jews described what took place that day in the Temple.

He even tried to desecrate the temple; and then *we arrested* him. [emphasis added]
(Acts 24:6)

That more precise description of the event fits perfectly with Agabus' prophecy. The Jews "arrested" Paul. Although that is surely a euphemistic description of their intent, it does imply that they bound Paul to restrain him as they dragged him out of the temple. Certainly they had to restrain and control him in some way. The fact that Acts 21:33 says the Romans bound Paul after taking him from the mob does not mean the Jews had not begun to bind Paul already. One would hardly expect the Roman soldiers to use whatever hurried means of binding the Jews had employed. Their prisoner in hand, the Romans used their own chains to bind Paul. Considering all the details recorded in Acts, we find that Agabus' first "error" was not an error at all.

The second "error" of Agabus is eliminated in the same way. When Lysias, the Roman commander, appeared with his troops, the Jews were forced to "deliver up" their prisoner into the hands of the Gentiles just as Agabus indicated would happen.¹⁵ Therefore, the second "error" is vindicated as well.

When compared, not just with Luke's initial record of the event, but with the more detailed account in Acts 24, Agabus' prophecy is seen to have no errors. The Jews must have started to *bind* Paul when they arrested him. They did *deliver* Paul into the hands of the Gentile, Roman troops.

Grudem tries too hard to read disagreement into the two passages when he says "strictly speaking, Agabus predicted two events which did not come to pass."¹⁶ When all the available evidence is considered, the prophecy of Agabus and the historical recounting of the event in the temple can be reconciled without any undue effort. In fact, I suspect that if one did not have an agenda requiring proof that New Testament prophecy can be fallible, no "errors" would ever be read into Agabus' prophecy.

So, the second argument supposedly proving that New Testament prophets often made errors fails to convince as well. The apparent discrepancies between Agabus' prophecy and its fulfillment in Acts 21 are resolved by the more complete description of Paul's arrest in chapter 24.

Trial and error

A third key argument advanced by Grudem regarding fallible prophecy is this:

¹⁵ Grudem notes that the word for *deliver up* normally represents an action of free will. However, it is an accurate way to describe the turning over of a prisoner for judgement regardless of the circumstances.

¹⁶ *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, p. 100.

The fact that New Testament prophecies were to be examined indicates that prophets were sometimes wrong. This shows that New Testament prophecy could contain errors.

Another has written that prophecy is "expected to be mixed in quality, and the wheat must be separated from the chaff."¹⁷ But does the fact that New Testament prophets were tested prove that a true prophet was expected to make errors? From what texts does Grudem draw this conclusion? Three texts in the New Testament speak of testing prophets and their messages: 1 John 4:1; 1 Corinthians 14:29; and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

The critical question to answer from these texts is this: was prophecy to be tested because *true prophecy* might sometimes contain errors, or was prophecy to be tested because *false prophets* might try to pass off their deceptions as from the Lord?

A quick look at the three texts that speak of testing prophecy will provide us an answer. First, 1 John 4:1.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; *because many false prophets have gone out into the world* [emphasis added].

"Test the spirits," said John. Why? Because true prophecy might occasionally be misinterpreted or miscommunicated by one with only the gift of prophecy? No. Prophecy was to be tested because many *false prophets* had crept into the church and were trying to pass off their words as a message from God.

The second passage is 1 Cor 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment." Here as well, the message of one who claimed to be a prophet was to be tested. Why? One will search the context in vain for any suggestion that a true prophet might occasionally garble one of God's revelations.

However, if you search the context, you will come across this:

I make it know to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed."
(1 Cor 12:3)

Apparently someone had stood up in the Corinthian church and said "Jesus is accursed." That is false teaching. That statement was from the lips of a false prophet. Therefore, Paul exhorted the Corinthians with the gift of discernment to weed out the false prophets. Only those who spoke with 100% accuracy in doctrine and prediction could be allowed to speak. The rest were to be rejected.

¹⁷ M.M.B. Turner, "Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985), p.16, as quoted in R. Fowler White, "Does God speak today apart from the Bible?", in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong editor, (Chicago: Moody, 1996), p. 89, n. 24.

Lastly, we come to 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Apparently the Thessalonian church was tempted to quench or snuff out the Holy Spirit's legitimate work in their midst by despising prophetic utterances. Paul commanded them not to do this. Instead, he told them to test everything that claims to be prophecy. They were to reject that which was "evil" and hold to that which was "good."

However, *why* did Paul say prophecies were to be examined or tested before they could be approved? As with the other two passages, one will search the context in vain for any indication that a true prophet could speak an erroneous message. But, if you consider 2 Thessalonians 2:2, you will find this:

[We request]...that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Based on this and Paul's emphatic signing of this letter in 3:17, we can conclude that someone in the Thessalonian church had counterfeited a letter from Paul. That fraudulent letter contained errant doctrine regarding the return of Christ and the Day of the Lord. Added to that initial deceit was a verbal message supposedly from Paul confirming the false doctrine of the letter.

Besides counterfeiting a letter and a verbal message from Paul, apparently these false teachers had also faked a prophecy (i.e., "spirit"¹⁸) about end times. The problem was not a true prophet who happened to misinterpret a divine message. It was a deceitful false teacher who was faking messages, letters, and even prophecies in order to lead the Thessalonians astray.

It seems likely, therefore, that this abuse of prophecy had already begun in Thessalonica when Paul wrote his first letter. That is why Paul instructed the church not do despise prophecy, but to "examine everything carefully." The wheat did have to be separated from the chaff. However, in this case (like the other two passages) the chaff was from a false prophet. Nothing in 1 or 2 Thessalonians suggests that the problem was a true prophet with occasionally fallible messages.

Summary

The third argument of the modern prophecy movement fails just as the first two did. While Grudem is correct in saying prophets were tested in the New Testament era, the reason he suggests for that testing is imposed on the texts, not drawn from them.

¹⁸ Compare 1 John 4:1 to see the word "spirit" being used to refer to prophecy.

All three New Testament passages which mention testing prophets deal with false prophets, not true prophets with occasionally fallible messages. To suggest that true prophets had to be tested to weed out small mistakes in their messages is unsupported speculation and must be rejected.

Conclusion

Careful analysis has brought us to the conclusion that the arguments used to defend today's fallible prophecy fail completely. No biblical evidence can be sustained which shows that the 100% accuracy standard of Deuteronomy 13 and 18 was overthrown in the New Testament era. Nothing in either Testament suggests that true prophecy could be intermingled with human error or misinterpretation.

The scripture contains no examples of what modern prophecy supporters describe as "a very human - and sometimes partially mistaken - report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind." The testing of prophets spoken of in the New Testament was due to the danger of false prophets infiltrating the church, not because true prophets occasionally erred.

The Old Testament demanded 100% accuracy from prophets. The fact that the New Testament contains no statement revising that requirement indicates that no revision ever took place.

Personal application

The final issue is this: what do we do with the truth we have discovered? There are two questions which need to be answered in regard to what we have learned. First, what should you do if you have previously believed that your inner impressions were divinely revealed, prophetic messages?

Let me suggest that inner impressions are...well...inner impressions. Occasionally they are right. Often they are dazzlingly wrong. Never should they be taken as a prophecy or a message from God. The scripture never tells us that such impressions should be the basis for life decisions.¹⁹ God's commands and biblical wisdom are the means by which the New Testament Christian is to live a life pleasing to God.

God, in fact, takes a pretty dim view of those who call their inner impressions prophecy.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord.

(Jer 23:16)

¹⁹ See author's booklet, *Biblical Decision-making*, for the biblical way to make decisions.

Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing.
(Ezek 13:3)

Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.
(Prov 30:6)

The second question is this: how should you respond to the claims of prophecy by many Christians today? Personally, I believe prophecy passed from the scene with the completion of the New Testament. Therefore, I regard such so-called prophecies as useless except, perhaps, as a revelation of what *that person* is thinking about something. They might even be right. But the "message" is from their mind, not God's, and should be evaluated correspondingly.²⁰

However, it would be wrong simply to label today's prophecy as useless. There is a sinister danger behind the flood of pseudo-prophecy in the church. In a context where many so-called prophets were passing off their ideas as God's, the Lord said through Jeremiah,

Thus will each of you say to his neighbor and to his brother, 'What has the Lord answered?' or, 'What has the Lord spoken?' For you will *no longer remember the oracle of the Lord*, because every man's own word will become the oracle... [emphasis added].
(Jer 23:35-36)

The prophecy movement's imaginations and impressions are not harmless. Actually they are deadly. As in Jeremiah's day, they distract God's people from His true prophetic words, the Bible.

But what if you have friends who believe they have the gift of prophecy? In that situation you can ask if their inner impressions have ever been wrong. Test the prophets as the scripture commands: 100% accuracy in doctrine and fulfillment.

This will avoid a flaming row over whether prophecy continues today. It will avoid needless accusations that you "despise" prophetic utterances. You are just doing what Paul commanded: "Examine everything carefully."

This is a gracious way of pointing out to the person that their "prophecies" don't meet the biblical standard. And you can be certain they don't. Even the leaders of the prophecy movement admit that their prophecies are often wrong. That is why they have to write books trying to prove that New Testament prophecy can be error-filled. If anyone today were maintaining 100% accuracy, such efforts would be unnecessary.

²⁰ In some cases, however, a vision, dream, or prophecy might even have a demonic source.

Once your question about absolute accuracy—and the inevitable negative answer—has proven that the biblical requirements for true prophecy are not being met, then you can tell the person you must reject that which is "evil" (1 Thess 5:22).

Having done that, perhaps you will have an opportunity to teach the person to hold fast to that which we know is good: the infallible, inerrant, word-by-word-inspired, prophetic revelation from God that we still have today, the Bible.

*Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
Psalm 119:105*