WRITTEN PROPHECIES: A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

by Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.

A Survey of the Practice

"All modern prophecy is spurious! God's truth has come to us in a fixed and finished objective revelation. We must not accept the new 'revelations' of neo-pentecostalism."¹ Thus goes the argument of Walter Chantry, an argument which has often been echoed in Reformed, Dispensational, and Restorationist circles. The canon of Scripture, composed of sixty-six divinely inspired books has been given as the "... rule of faith and life."² This was the affirmation provided by the reformers who responded to Rome's claim to coordinate rules of faith, Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition, with their battle cry, "Sola scriptural!"

Classical pentecostals and protestant charismatics have normally made the same affirmation as the reformers did with respect to their understanding of the role of Scripture. It is a fixed, finished, and objective revelation. Indeed, pentecostals and charismatics alike have regarded the Bible as their "all sufficient rule for faith and practice."³ A few groups, while affirming the inspiration of all sixty-six books of the Bible, have affirmed the New Testament as providing "the only rule for


²The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.2.

³While wording may vary, this concept is held by the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Churches of God in Christ, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Pentecostal Free Will Baptist Churches, Open Bible Standard Churches, Pentecostal Churches of God, Pentecostal Holiness Churches, and the United Pentecostal Churches.

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government and discipline."⁴ Yet, it can be said that the majority of pentecostal and charismatic groups seem to lie within the Reformation tradition in their understanding of Scripture.

Roman Catholic charismatics, however, are still loyal to the Roman position. They hold to the inspiration of the same sixty-six books as their protestant counterparts, but they also believe in the "teaching authority of the Church."⁵ However, pentecostals as well as Protestant and Roman Catholic charismatics seem to hold to the same basic understanding of what constitutes the gift of prophecy, and how it relates to Scripture. It is not the ability to preach,⁶ although at times preaching and prophesying seem to overlap.⁷ It appears rather to be a spontaneous manifestation of God’s grace, received by revelation, (sometimes as a vision, at other times as impressions or thoughts) and spoken by the Spirit through a Christian, in the language of those intended to hear the prophetic word.⁸ It comes as a word spoken to a specific situation. Its purposes vary, but essentially it is given to the community of faith “... for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation (I Cor. 14:3).”⁹

Similarly, within pentecostal and charismatic circles there appears to be a common recognition of the relationship which exists between Scripture and the on-going prophetic tradition. The role which contemporary prophetic utterances fill is subservient to that role filled by Scripture. The contemporary gift of prophecy falls under the authority

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⁴“Twenty-nine Important Bible Truths” (Cleveland: The Church of God of Prophecy, n.d.), 2; Minutes of the 56th General Assembly of The Church of God (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1976), Supp., 6.


⁹All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.