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2011 Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium: "Gift of Prophecy and the Church/ A Biblical Perspective"

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April 01, 2011

2011 Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium: "Gift of Prophecy and the Church: A Biblical Perspective"

Presentation

Ranko Stefanovic, Professor for New Testament at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, traced origin, meaning, and function of the gift of prophecy in the Bible.*

The Pre-Prophecy Period. After creation, still in Eden, God attempted to have an intimate relationship with Adam and Eve with straight face-to-face communication (cf. [Gen 2:15-17](#)). Since their disobedience and the fall caused a disconnectedness between them and God ([Gen 3](#)), the result was a disrupted relationship between Him and whole humanity as well as a destruction of their intimate communication with Him—which ultimately will not be restored until sin is totally removed ([Rev 21-22](#)).

Despite the fall God continued to communicate with humankind. According to Stefanovic, two phases can be traced in the Old Testament: a) the to-each-individual-communication and b) the through-prophets-communication. The first took place during the antediluvian/pre-flood up to patriarchal times where God spoke directly to individuals via theophanies or dreams. Examples for these periods can be found in Genesis, e.g., Noah ([Gen 6:13-21](#); [7:1-4](#); [8:15-19](#); [9:1-19](#)), Abraham ([Gen 12-17](#); [22](#)), Isaac ([26:2-5](#), [24](#)), Rebekah ([25:22-23](#)), Jacob ([28:13-15](#); [31:3](#), [11-13](#); [35:9-12](#); [46:2-4](#)), and also persons who did not belong to the godly line, for example Cain ([4:6-15](#)), Hagar ([16:7-12](#); [21:17-18](#)), and Abimelech ([20:3-7](#)). This list is not exhaustive and it also can be presumed, said Stefanovic, that God spoke to many others during this period, although they are not directly mentioned in Scripture.

The Beginning of Prophecy in the Bible. The second phase, through-prophet-communication, started with Moses, with whom God communicated "mouth-to-mouth" ([Num 12:8](#), ESV) and "face-to-face" ([Deut 34:10](#)). Although Abraham was the first one whom the Bible calls "prophet" ([Gen 20:7](#)), Moses is nevertheless the pattern for all prophets to come. Beginning with him, God's communication with the people and telling them His will happened through prophets, i.e. human agents which God chose. Thus the prophet functioned as God's spokesman.

Stefanovic explained this switch of the communication-type with its coinciding with the Sinai-event where Israel became the Old Testament church of God. Since now the faithful consisted in a whole nation rather than in some individuals as before, it would have been much harder to communicate effectively with them had God retained the one-on-one communication.

The importance of the prophetic gift for believers is emphasized for example in [Proverbs 29:18](#) (unity of the faithful ones) as well as in the New Testament in [Ephesians 4:11](#) and verses [13-14](#) (for doctrinal as well as organizational unity of the church).

The Role of Prophets in the Bible. The Greek word from which our term *prophet* comes means either "to speak for [another]" or "to say prior to/beforehand, foretell". Today, the term, because of its temporal prefix, (*for* or *prior to*, *before*) is exclusively used for someone who predicts the future, but this use is one-sided, as Stefanovic pointed out, because the Hebrew Scriptures see biblical prophets as both fore-tellers and forth-tellers.

Prophets as Conveyors. The Hebrew word for *prophet* gives either the meaning "the one who speaks" or "the one who is called", depending on its origin. But both concepts reflect the role of the biblical prophet: one who is called by God to speak for Him. The 310 occurrences (excl. its cognates and synonyms) in the Hebrew Scriptures and the 150 occurrences in the New

Testament show the significance of the prophetic gift and ministry in the Bible.

According to Stefanovic, the prophetic role is best defined in Exodus 4:15-16 and 7:1: Moses is likened to God and Aaron is called his *prophet*. As Aaron was the spokesperson for Moses, so is the prophet the spokesperson for God, passing the divine messages on that he/she has received from God: "the word of God", often preceded by "The word of God came to..."

Prophecy in the Bible is what the prophet actually proclaims. It is the technical term for the divine message that is wrapped in human language. Formulas like "Thus says the Lord..." (418 times in Hebrew Bible) or "Hear the word of the Lord" (34 times in Hebrew Bible) were often used to introduce the actual rendering of the divine message.

Prophets as Visionaries. Two other words, *seer* and *visionary*, are also used for *prophet* in the Old Testament; they mean literally "the one who sees in a vision". Different aspects of meaning are suggested in 1 Chronicles 29:29 where they are used separately for three different persons. It appears, though, that these words complement the title of a prophet. The prophet is the one who is called by God to speak for him but also a person who receives divine revelation (Isaiah 30:10 [NIV]). Thus he had a special experience with God of which he could testify later. As Abraham Heschel stated that in the message/testimony of the prophet "the invisible God becomes audible" (*The Prophets*, p.22).

Visions and dreams were the two basic and main means by which the prophet received divine revelation (cf. Num 12:6; Isa 30:10) which he had to forward to the people, being just a tool used by God himself. God spoke sometimes directly to the prophet (1 Samuel 3:11-14; 1 Samuel 16:7). The latter was also called "man of God" (Deuteronomy 33:1; 2 Kings 4:7). Often the prophet was "compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected" as can be seen in Jeremiah 20:9 (Heschel, *Prophets*, p.xiii). This can be seen as another sign that the prophetic message was no invention by the prophet himself, but communication coming from God.

Continuation of Prophecy in the Bible. Male and female prophets were active in Israel throughout OT times. Although prophets served since Moses (Judges 4:4; 6:8), the prophetic order itself began with Samuel (see Acts 3:24). We can also differentiate between a) literary and b) non-literary prophets: some which left some written records which started as early as in the 8th century BC (a) and others (b) of whom we have no scriptures, although it can not be excluded that they actually wrote messages down. But nothing written was passed on. Those of the literary prophets who made it into the Hebrew biblical canon, actually "spoke to their generation, but their influence was destined to reach far beyond their own age; hence the importance of their place in the OT canonical books" (G.C.D.Howley, "Introduction to the Prophetic Books," *New International Bible Commentary*, p.101).

The last in line of the OT prophets was Malachi, after whom no prophetic ministry was recorded and documented among the Jews for four hundred years (Intertestamental Period), before the NT documents the existence of prophets during Christ's time and the early Church. Quoting MacRae, Stefanovic pointed to the fact that "the casual Bible reader is not apt to realize that the NT contains as many references to prophets and prophecy in proportion to its length as the OT does" ("Prophets and Prophecy" in *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* p.1027). Male and female *prophets* or simply *prophesying* persons are mentioned in the NT (from Anna [Luke 2:36-38], over John the Baptist [Matthew 11:9-14; 14:5], and a group of prophets in Antioch [Acts 13:1] over many more up to John the Revelator [Revelation 22:9]). At the end of this passage Stefanovic pointed to Paul's message to the Ephesians in Ephesians 2:20; 3:5 and 4:11, and the admonitions to the Christians in Thessalonica: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Paul was convinced, according to Stefanovic, that the community of the faithful ones will not be in want of any spiritual gift, including the prophetic gift.

Revelation 19:10: "the Spirit of Prophecy". **Revelation 12:17** says that the rest of the woman's offspring have the "testimony of Jesus", a phrase, which we find again in Revelation 19:10 where the angel defines the "testimony of Jesus" as "the spirit of prophecy". Stefanovic went on to explain what both phrases mean—summaries of these explanations are the following:

The Testimony of Jesus. Occuring several times in Revelation (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4) and comprising two possible

translations (testimony *by* Jesus, i.e. his testimony; or: testimony *about* or *regarding* Jesus). Stefanovic made the biblical case for the testimony that "Jesus himself bore during his earthly life and ministry and after his ascension through his prophets, who had the spirit of prophecy, much as the prophets in ancient times (cf. [1 Peter 1:11-12](#))". Exactly this is the testimony of Jesus that John the Revelator said he bore witness of in Revelation 1:2.


The Spirit of Prophecy. The key text for knowing what the testimony of Jesus is can be found in [Revelation 19:10](#): here it is equaled with the phrase "spirit of prophecy." Since this phrase occurs only here in the whole NT and is furthermore nowhere explained by John, Stefanovic suggests that it was generally understood by the recipients/readers of John's revelation that any explanation would have been superfluous. According to the evidences at hand, they understood it as the one Spirit who communicates through the prophets.

According to Jewish sources, the phrase "spirit of prophecy" was much used and well known by John's contemporaries, as can be seen in several texts in the [Targumim](#) (Aramaic translations of the Old Testament), where this phrase is equated with "Holy Spirit", "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Yahweh". Other Jewish sources testify to the same fact: that indeed the Holy Spirit is always the spirit of inspiration, a spirit that inspires and empowers the ones called by God (i.e. the prophets) to proclaim the messages which they received from God (cfr. [Luke 2:25-32](#); [2 Peter 1:21](#)). Comparing [Rev 19:10](#) ("brethren who have the testimony of Jesus") with [Rev 22:8-9](#) ("the prophets") this thought is even more affirmed.

Summary and Conclusions. From the Pentateuch up to Revelation the care for His people is expressed by God in providing a guiding by his Spirit expressed in the spirit of prophecy. John does not point to himself as the last prophet but clearly testified to the future work of the spirit of prophecy in the end time. Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally viewed that the predictions of [Rev 12:17](#) and [19:10](#) have found a fulfillment in life and ministry of [Ellen G. White](#) (1827-1915), although it must be stated that these texts in Revelation are not considered as speaking specifically about White herself but rather about the promised presence of the spirit of prophecy among God's faithful in the time of the end, said Stefanovic. White ministered during her lifetime to the community of Seventh-day Adventist Christians and still does so through her writings by instructing, leading, encouraging, counseling, and rebuking. Stefanovic closed by pointing to the fact that when Christ, the "morning star" ([Rev 22:16](#)), comes the need for prophetic guidance will be no more ([1 Cor 13:8](#), NIV) and loses its function. Until then, as the apostle Paul stated, we should not "quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" ([1 Thess 5:19-21](#), NASB). "Every idea", said Stefanovic, "of the church as a non-prophet denomination contradicts what is found in the Bible—from the Pentateuch to Revelation."

Response. Respondent [Dr. Teresa Reeve](#), Assistant Professor of New Testament Contexts at the SDA Theological Seminary, expressed her appreciation for Dr. Stefanovic's research and the "ambitious task" he approached with this study. She asked whether it was maybe too ambitious for a 40 minute paper. Among other suggestions for further study and improvement of the paper she pointed to the gap in the paper on prophecy between the NT-time and the end time. Reeve said that she sees the need to test the theory in this area in order to see whether a "valuable thesis can stand on even more solid ground."

* Please note that this and other articles on the presentations held are condensed summaries in which some lines of argumentation have been abbreviated. All papers/presentations will be published in a revised form in the Journal *Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium*, vol. 7, 2011, at the next Symposium, i.e. March or April 2012. Orders can be made to the [Center for Adventist Research](#).

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