

The Continuation of NT Prophecy and a Closed Canon: Revisiting Wayne Grudem's Two Levels of New Testament Prophecy

By **Dr. R. Bruce Compton**
Professor of Biblical Languages and Exposition
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

A key sticking point that continues to divide evangelicals is the question over the cessation versus the continuation of New Testament prophecy.¹ At the heart of the debate are the issues of a closed canon and the New Testament's role as the final rule for faith and practice. A number of evangelicals posit two levels of prophecy: an apostolic level that is inerrant and divinely authoritative and a non-apostolic level that is neither. These further argue that, since only the non-apostolic level continues beyond the writing of the New Testament, the canon is not threatened and remains the final rule for faith and practice.²

Wayne Grudem's *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, is commonly recognized as laying the exegetical foundation for two levels of prophecy and for the continuation of the non-apostolic level in harmony with a closed canon.³ For that reason, the

¹ The controversy surrounding NT prophecy is part of a larger debate over the cessation versus the continuation of miraculous gifts. In support of cessationism, see, for example, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Cessationist," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25–64; Myron J. Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July–September 1996): 344–56; R. Bruce Compton, "1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 97–144; John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: the Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

In support of continuationism, see, for example, C. Samuel Storms, "Third Wave," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 207–12; Desiring God, "Signs and Wonders: Then and Now," <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/by-topic/spiritual-gifts> (accessed 17 November 2013). The author, John Piper, states, "The Bible teaches that spiritual gifts, including prophecy and tongues, will continue until Jesus comes. To neglect them is to risk disobedience." See also Sovereign Grace Ministries, "What We Believe, A Statement of Faith," <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/about-us/what-we-believe.aspx> (accessed 17 November 2013). According to the website, the statement of faith affirms, "All the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first century are available today, are vital for the mission of the church, and are to be earnestly desired and practiced." Included in the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church today is the gift of prophecy.

² E.g., Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988, 2000). All subsequent references are from the 2000 revised edition.

³ *Ibid.* See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1049–82. Among those following Grudem's lead, see, for example, D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 93–100. Carson relies extensively on Grudem's arguments, drawing upon an earlier version of Grudem's *The Gift of Prophecy*.

case for the continuation of New Testament prophecy coupled with a closed canon can be said to rise or fall on the cogency of Grudem's arguments.

In light of the ongoing debate, a fresh examination of Grudem's position is in order. Grudem's definition of New Testament prophecy serves as the foundation for the discussion that follows and is presented first. After this, Grudem's exegetical proofs for two levels of New Testament prophecy represent the linchpin of his position and are examined next. This is followed by an assessment of Grudem's defense for a closed canon. Finally, a conclusion is offered on whether the debate between cessationism and continuationism is a legitimate issue that should divide evangelicals.

GRUDEM'S DEFINITION OF NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Grudem begins his defense by defining New Testament prophecy and distinguishing it from Old Testament prophecy and apostolic prophecy. He notes that the term "prophecy" along with its cognates has a range of meanings in biblical and extra-biblical texts and claims that his definition of New Testament prophecy fits within that range. He defines New Testament prophecy or what he calls ordinary or congregational prophecy as someone telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.⁴

More specifically, ordinary New Testament prophecy communicates in merely human words a fresh revelation from the Spirit.⁵ Grudem is careful to distinguish New Testament prophecy from preaching and teaching in that preaching and teaching are not based on a fresh revelation from the Spirit. Rather, preaching and teaching are simply an explanation or application of Scripture, that is, they are based on revelation that has been inscripturated in the canon.⁶

At the same time, Grudem notes the similarities between what he defines as ordinary New Testament prophecy and what the New Testament describes as Spirit illumination. In fact, he appears sympathetic to equating the two, but does not actually take that step.⁷ The difference would seem to be that illumination provides a proper assessment and application of Scripture,

⁴ Grudem states, "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" (*The Gift of Prophecy*, 18, 315, 319–20).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69, 114–16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119–21, 321–22. Contrasting NT teaching with prophecy, Grudem states, "A prophecy must be the report of a spontaneous revelation from the Holy Spirit. So the distinction is quite clear: If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in New Testament terms) a *teaching*. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a *prophecy*" (*ibid.*, 120).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 212–13. As Grudem comments, "Perhaps the Reformed idea of 'illumination' is not far from what is happening in prophecy today, and may provide a category in which it would not be seen to challenge the sufficiency of Scripture" (*ibid.*, 213).

whereas ordinary New Testament prophecy provides new or fresh revelation.⁸ The real issue with his definition is his understanding of how ordinary New Testament prophecy differs from Old Testament and apostolic prophecy.

Grudem affirms that all biblical prophecy communicates a revelation from the Spirit. The difference is that, with Old Testament and apostolic prophecy, the revelation from the Spirit is communicated in the very words of God, is inerrant, and carries divine authority. In contrast, with ordinary New Testament prophecy the Spirit's revelation is communicated in merely human words and, therefore, lacks both inerrancy and divine authority.⁹ In response, evangelicals are in essential agreement with Grudem's definition of Old Testament and apostolic prophecy.¹⁰ What must be determined is whether the New Testament supports Grudem's definition of New Testament prophecy and the implications of this for a closed canon.

A CRITIQUE OF GRUDEM'S ARGUMENTS FOR TWO LEVELS OF NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Ephesians 2:20 and Distinguishing Apostolic from Non-apostolic Prophets

Grudem's case for two levels of New Testament prophecy rests principally on three arguments. His *first argument* is that the New Testament distinguishes between apostolic prophets and non-apostolic prophets. The critical texts for this argument are Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5, with the emphasis falling on 2:20. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul refers to "the apostles and prophets" as providing the revelatory foundation for the church.¹¹

⁸ For a discussion on Spirit illumination, see Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 190–93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22, 29–33. Grudem states, "The distinction I...am attempting to make here...is only at one point: the type of authority that attaches to the words spoken in a prophecy. When the prophecy is spoken (or written) by an apostle, then the words have unique authority—absolute divine authority.... But such absolute authority simply does not apply to the words of ordinary prophets in local New Testament congregations" (*The Gift of Prophecy*, 48).

Discussing the gift of prophecy in 1 Cor 12–14, Grudem concludes, "Paul thought of prophecy at Corinth as something quite different from the prophecy we see, for instance, in Revelation or in many parts of the Old Testament. There, a divine authority of actual words is claimed by or on behalf of the prophets. But the prophecy we find in 1 Corinthians, while it may have been prompted by a 'revelation' from God, had only the authority of the merely human words in which it was spoken. The prophet could err, could misinterpret, and could be questioned or challenged at any point" (*ibid.*, 69).

¹⁰ Grudem's definition of OT prophecy and apostolic prophecy as found in the canon of Scripture reflects the doctrinal standard of the Evangelical Theological Society, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." On the use of the "prophecy" word group in biblical and extra-biblical sources, see among others, Helmut Krämer, "προφήτης," *TDNT* 6:781–96; Rolf Rendtorff, "προφήτης," *TDNT* 6:796–812; Rudolf Meyer, "προφήτης," *TDNT* 6:812–28; Gerhard Friedrich, "προφήτης," *TDNT* 6:828–61.

¹¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture citations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 updated edition.

The expression in Ephesians 2:20 “the apostles and prophets” represents a *plural* Granville Sharp construction. Here, the construction consists of two plural nouns joined by a simple conjunction and preceded by a single article.¹² Grudem is reluctant to allow for two groups in this verse, i.e., apostles *and* prophets, because those referred to are said to lay the foundation for the church, a foundation, Grudem recognizes, that culminates in the New Testament canon.

The challenge for Grudem is maintaining the inerrancy of the foundation in 2:20 while, at the same time, holding that New Testament prophets were errant. His solution is to interpret the two nouns “apostles and prophets” in this verse as having an identical referent and referring to a single group, “apostolic prophets.” By interpreting the Granville Sharp construction in this way, Grudem is able to distinguish these prophets from the ordinary, non-apostolic prophets mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Thus, according to Grudem, only apostolic prophecy was involved in laying the revelatory foundation for the church and was inerrant and divinely authoritative.¹³

The problem with Grudem’s interpretation is that nowhere else in the New Testament does the *plural* Granville Sharp construction involving two nouns clearly fit the identical category and refer to a single group. The two options that are unambiguously attested in the New Testament for plural nouns are that “apostles and prophets” refer to two distinct groups or

¹²Granville Sharp, *Remarks on the Definitive Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament: Containing Many New Proofs of the Divinity of Christ from Passages Which are Wrongly Translated in the Common English Version*, 3rd ed. (Durham, UK: Vernor and Hood, 1803), 3–19. Sharp’s first rule is that when this construction involves personal, common, *singular* substantives in the same case, the two substantives always refer to the same person (*ibid.*, 3). He further notes, however, that if the substantives are *plural*, then numerous exceptions to the rule exist (*ibid.*, 6). See also Daniel B. Wallace, “The Semantic Range of the Article-Noun-Καί-Noun Plural Construction in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 4 (Spring 1983): 59–84; *idem*, “The Article with Multiple Substantives Connected by ΚΑΙ in the New Testament: Semantics and Significance” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 136–60; *idem*, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 270–90; *idem*, *Granville Sharp’s Canon and Its Kin: Semantics and Significance*, Studies in Biblical Greek, edited by D. A. Carson (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 135–58, 211–31. See the last entry for a recent bibliography.

For a critique of the last title, see Stanley E. Porter, review of *Granville Sharp’s Canon and Its Kin: Semantics and Significance*, by Daniel B. Wallace, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53 (December 2010), 828–32. For responses and counter-responses, see Daniel B. Wallace, “Sharp’s Rule Revisited: A Response to Stanley Porter,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (March 2013): 79–91; Stanley E. Porter, “Granville Sharp’s Rule: A Response to Dan Wallace, or Why a Critical Book Review Should be Left Alone,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (March 2013): 93–100; Daniel B. Wallace, “Granville Sharp’s Rule: A Rejoinder to Stan Porter,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (March 2013): 101–6.

Wallace identifies 73 examples of the plural Granville Sharp construction in the New Testament. Of these, 17 involve two nouns, the same construction as found in Eph 2:20. Of the 17 examples with plural nouns, Wallace lists 4 as ambiguous or debated in terms of the relationship between the two nouns, Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; and Rev 11:9.

¹³Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 329–46. Grudem lists four possible translations for the phrase “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” in 2:20. The phrase could mean that the “foundation” was (1) “the apostles and the *Old Testament prophets*”; (2) “the *teaching* of the apostles and *New Testament prophets*”; (3) “the apostles and *New Testament prophets* themselves”; (4) the “*apostle-prophets* themselves (that is, the apostles who are also prophets).” He opts for the fourth, saying at the outset of his discussion, “I will argue... that Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 is [*sic*] talking not about two groups of people, apostles and prophets, but about one group, ‘apostle-prophets’” (*ibid.*, 330).

that the first, “apostles,” is a subset of the second, larger group, “prophets.” In either case, the two groups are distinguished, not equated as Grudem argues.¹⁴

To be fair, variations of the plural Granville Sharp construction involving other than two nouns are found in the New Testament that fit the identical category and refer to a single group. As well, there are a few extra-biblical examples of the Granville Sharp construction involving plural nouns that also fit the identical category and refer to a single group. So, it is possible that the construction in Ephesians 2:20 can be translated as Grudem does.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the grammatical evidence from the New Testament renders this option suspect.

As discussed above, the evidence from the New Testament with two plural nouns favors taking the expression as referring to two groups, apostles and prophets, both engaged in laying the revelatory foundation for the church that culminated in the New Testament canon. And, if that is the case, the revelation provided by “the apostles *and* prophets” would necessarily be authoritative and inerrant. In other words, if the canon is inerrant and divinely authoritative, as Grudem argues, then so must be the revelatory ministries of the apostles *and* prophets who contributed to the laying of that foundation. In short, the grammatical evidence weighs against Grudem’s translation.¹⁶

Sensing the tension with his interpretation, Grudem responds on several occasions, saying that Ephesians 2:20 is not critical to his argument.¹⁷ However, in his own words, Grudem conveys the significance of this passage for his position:

Some have argued that Ephesians 2:20 shows what all New Testament prophets were like, and, furthermore, that the unique ‘foundational’ role of the prophets in Ephesians

¹⁴Wallace identifies five possible semantic categories for this construction involving plural substantives: (1) two entirely distinct groups, though united; (2) two overlapping groups; (3) first group as a subset of the second; (4) second group as subset of the first; (5) two identical groups (“The Semantic Range of the Article-Noun-Καί-Noun Plural Construction in the New Testament,” 67–70). Although Grudem must argue that Eph 2:20 fits the fifth or identical category, Wallace states, “In both clear and ambiguous texts there were *no* noun + noun constructions belonging to the identical group” (ibid., 81). For the construction involving two plural nouns, Wallace lists two possibilities—two distinct groups or the first a subset of the second—and opts for the latter in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 (ibid., 82). See also idem, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 284–86; idem, *Granville Sharp’s Canon and Its Kin*, 135–58, 211–31.

¹⁵The closest constructions involving the identical category and referring to a single group are those with two substantival adjectives (e.g., Eph 1:1) or the combination of a substantival adjective joined with a noun (e.g., Rom 16:7). However, other than the disputed texts (Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Rev 11:9), none of the NT examples Grudem lists in support of taking the construction in Eph 2:20 as a single group involves two nouns. Although Grudem attempts to use Eph 4:11 to support his interpretation of Eph 2:20 and 3:5, his interpretation of Eph 4:11 faces the same challenges as his interpretation of Eph 2:20 and 3:5. See Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 333–46. For rebuttal, see the comments by Wallace, *Granville Sharp’s Canon and Its Kin*, 211–31.

¹⁶Responding to Grudem’s arguments on Eph 2:20, Wallace concludes, “We must refrain from entering into the larger issues of the charismata and fallible prophecy in our treatment of this text. Our point is simply that the syntactical evidence in very much against the ‘identical’ view, even though syntax has been the primary grounds used in behalf of it” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 285). Elsewhere Wallace states, “Grudem was unable to produce even one valid and undisputed example in behalf of his view” (*Granville Sharp’s Canon and Its Kin*, 219; cf. ibid., 223, 227).

¹⁷Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 13; 307–9; 344–45.

2:20 means that they could speak with authority equal to the apostles and equal to Scripture.... *This is an important question*, because if everyone with the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church did have this kind of absolute divine authority, then we would expect this gift to die out as soon as the writings of the New Testament were completed and given to the churches.¹⁸

To counter the implications of his own words, Grudem adds a disclaimer. Even if the prophets in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 are equal to the apostles in authority, he would simply postulate a third category of ordinary, congregational prophets who do not share this level of authority. In other words, Grudem would respond by saying that what Paul declares about prophets in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 would not apply to prophets elsewhere in the New Testament.¹⁹

With his counter-proposal, Grudem attempts to distinguish the prophets mentioned in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 from those in Eph 4:11 and elsewhere in the NT. He argues that only the prophets in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 were “foundational” prophets. These alone were involved in laying the revelatory foundation for the church, unveiling the mystery of the equality of Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ. As “foundational,” their prophecies necessarily were inerrant and divinely authoritative. In contrast, the prophets mentioned in Eph 4:11 and elsewhere were not “foundational.” These were ordinary congregational prophets who were neither inerrant nor divinely authoritative.

Grudem supports his counter-proposal based on grammar and context. In terms of grammar, he points to the single article in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 as linking the prophets with the apostles and the repetition of the article in Eph 4:11 as distinguishing the prophets from the apostles. In terms of context, he argues that Paul addresses the universal church in Eph 2 and 3 and discusses the role of a select number of prophets who, with the apostles, provided “foundational” revelation. Conversely, in Eph 4:11 and elsewhere, Paul addresses local congregations and discusses the role of ordinary prophets in providing “non-foundational” revelation.²⁰

In response, neither the grammar nor the context supports Grudem’s distinction. As discussed above, Paul lists two groups in Eph 2:20 and 3:5, apostles and prophets, who were instrumental in laying the revelatory foundation for the church. In Eph 4:11, Paul lists five groups, including apostles and prophets, whom God has given to local churches for instruction and edification. What must be understood is that the function of the apostles and prophets in giving special revelation to local congregations in Eph 4:11 was part of and necessary to their role in providing special revelation for the universal church in Eph 2:20 and 3:5.

¹⁸Ibid., 45–46 (emphasis added); see also 330.

¹⁹Ibid., 344–45. “If Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 talk about two distinct groups, apostles and prophets, then the “prophets” mentioned here would be those who share authority similar to the apostles—and they would therefore be *unlike* the ordinary prophets scattered throughout many early Christian congregations...” (ibid., 345).

²⁰Ibid., 47, 307–9, 330–45.

One need look no further than the NT epistles for evidence of this dual role. The NT epistles were written by and large to local congregations for instruction and edification. Yet, at the same time, they were written to provide the revelatory foundation for the church. Furthermore, if this dual role is true for the apostles, it must be true for the prophets as well. Paul lists both apostles and prophets in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 as laying the revelatory foundation for the church and in 4:11 as contributing to the edification of local churches. In other words, the ministries of the apostles and prophets to local congregations were part and parcel with their ministries to the universal church.²¹

To restate the point, Ephesians 2:20 is a critical text in this discussion and the evidence points to two distinct groups, apostles and prophets, who together lay the revelatory foundation for the church. As such, the revelatory foundation provided by both apostles *and* prophets is on an equal footing in that the entire foundation is inerrant and divinely authoritative. Furthermore, what Paul says about prophets in Ephesians 2:20 is true of the prophetic gift elsewhere in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 14:29 and Testing of New Testament Prophets

Grudem's *second argument* for two levels of prophecy in the New Testament is that the New Testament directs believers to test or evaluate the prophet's message in order to sort out the good from the bad. Such directives, Grudem insists, are in conflict with the concept of inerrant prophecy that has divine authority. Consequently, these directives calling for an evaluation of the prophet's message distinguish New Testament prophecy from both Old Testament prophecy and from apostolic prophecy.²²

Grudem acknowledges that there are passages in the New Testament requiring believers to test the prophets and that these passages are similar to passages in the Old Testament calling for national Israel to do the same. Furthermore, Grudem recognizes that the requirement in these passages is clearly levied for the purpose of discerning the true prophet from the false.²³

However, Grudem adds, there are other commands in the New Testament, not found in the Old Testament, that call for sorting through individual prophecies to separate what is of value from what is not. He concludes from this that ordinary New Testament prophecy contains a mixture of truth and error. As such, it lacks divine authority and, in that sense, is distinct from both Old Testament and apostolic prophecy.

The chief passage Grudem points to in defense of this argument is 1 Corinthians 14:29. There Paul commands, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment."

²¹ For further discussion, see R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 93–102; R. Fowler White, "Gaffin and Grudem on Eph 2:20: In Defense of Gaffin's Cessationist Exegesis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992), 303–20.

²² *Ibid.*, 54–62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24–25; 57–62. The two passages frequently mentioned regarding the testing of Old Testament prophets are Deut 13:1–5 and Deut 18:15–22.

According to Grudem, the directive “pass judgment” means that the members of the congregation in Corinth were to sift through the content of individual prophecies to distinguish what was true from what was false.²⁴

Grudem’s interpretation of this verse rests on his understanding of the context of the passage and on the verb Paul employs. The context, Grudem argues, has in view prophets who are members of the Corinthian congregation and who have already been approved by the congregation as true prophets. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 14:29, Paul is not directing the congregation to pass judgment on the credentials of these prophets. That, according to Grudem, has already taken place. Rather, Paul is prescribing a scrutiny of each prophecy to glean that which is accurate and profitable from that which is not.²⁵

In addition, the verb Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:29, according to Grudem, further supports this understanding of the verse. It is a compound form that carries the idea of “making distinctions” or “carefully evaluating,” weighing an item to distinguish the good from the bad. Grudem asserts that had Paul intended with this verse a testing of the prophets themselves to discern the true from the false the simple form of the verb meaning “to judge” would have been employed rather than the compound form Paul uses.²⁶

In response, neither the context of the passage nor the verb used by Paul incontrovertibly support Grudem’s interpretation. Grudem acknowledges that for a prophet to be accepted as a true prophet in the New Testament, his or her prophecies would first be examined—as was the case in the Old Testament. Were their prophecies found to be true, that is, nothing false or out of harmony with God’s word, that prophet would then be recognized as a true prophet.²⁷

That being the case, how is it that, once approved, a true prophet could speak that which was erroneous? In other words, if conformity to divine truth is the criterion for judging a true prophet, then, by definition, a true prophet could not prophesy that which was false and still be classified a true prophet. Grudem cannot have it both ways. He cannot have the prophets in 1 Corinthians 14:29 be true prophets and, at the same time, argue that their prophecies could contain error such that the Corinthians needed to sift the good from the bad.²⁸

²⁴The question of whether those evaluating the prophecies in 1 Cor 14:29 were (1) other prophets, (2) those with the gift of discernment, or (3) the entire congregation, does not appear critical to this discussion. Even if it were concluded that those doing the evaluating in 1 Cor 14:29 were limited to certain individuals, passages such as 1 Thess 5:20–21 clearly expand the responsibility to include the entire congregation. See the discussion in Grudem, who argues that the evaluation in 1 Cor 14:29 is the responsibility of the entire congregation (*The Gift of Prophecy*, 54–57).

²⁵Ibid., 58–59.

²⁶Ibid., 59–62. The compound form is διακρίνω; the simple form is κρίνω.

²⁷Ibid., 24–25, 58–61.

²⁸Grudem must distinguish the testing of Old Testament prophets from what he sees Paul calling for in 1 Corinthians 14:29, “So what we find in the Old Testament is that every *prophet* is judged or evaluated, but not the various parts of every *prophecy*. The people ask, ‘Is this a true prophet or not? Is he speaking God’s words or not?’ They never ask, ‘Which parts of this prophecy are true and which are false? Which parts are good and which are bad?’ For one bit of falsehood would disqualify the whole prophecy and would show the prophet to be a false prophet” (ibid., 24).

Furthermore, the verb Paul employs in 1 Corinthians 14:29 has a wider semantic range than the meaning Grudem assigns for that verse, as Grudem recognizes.²⁹ It can carry the sense that Grudem gives it in 1 Corinthians 14:29, that of examining something to sift the good from the bad. However, it can also have the sense of examining something to judge the overall value of that which is examined. Paul uses it in the latter sense in 1 Corinthians 4:7 of judging one person superior to another, and in 1 Corinthians 11:29 of a failure to judge the proper use and purpose of the Lord's Supper from an improper one.³⁰

Thus, the verb in 1 Corinthians 14:29 could easily refer to distinguishing a true prophet from a false prophet by weighing the accuracy of each prophecy. This is precisely how Paul uses the cognate noun in 1 Corinthians 12:10, where the idea is that of discerning between true and false prophets based on the content of their prophecies.³¹

Grudem points to 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, “Do not despise prophetic utterances, but examine everything *carefully*,” as the key parallel to support his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:29.³² Yet the verb used in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 is the same verb used in 1 John 4:1 where John says, “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many

As well, Grudem must also distinguish between passages that call for testing New Testament prophets to identify the true from the false with what he understands Paul is directing in 1 Cor 14:29. According to Grudem, “The other passages give warnings of strangers coming to the church *from outside* (Matt 7:15; 1 John 4:1, 3; note also *Didache* 11.5, 6) and provide criteria by which they could be tested” (ibid., 58).

In describing the nature of this criterion, however, he adds, “Elsewhere in the New Testament, the criterion for evaluation of public speech in the churches seems always to have been conformity to Scripture or received teaching (Acts 17:11; 1 Cor 14:37–38; Gal 1:8; 1 John 4:2–3, 6), and we expect that that would be the standard used here [1 Cor 14:29] as well” (ibid., 61). If the criteria for discerning a true prophet from a false prophet is conformity to Scripture or received teaching—a true prophet is one whose prophecies conform—how is it that a prophet once approved could then prophesy that which did not conform to Scripture or received teaching?

Furthermore, whatever contribution the *Didache* and others of this genre offer for understanding New Testament prophecy is mitigated by the fact that they are post-apostolic and non-canonical, and the normative nature of their teaching is contested. For discussion, see F. David Farnell, “The Current Debate about New Testament Prophecy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (July–September 1992): 284–88; idem, “Does the New Testament Teach Two Prophetic Gifts?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (January–March 1993): 66–72; Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 87–88.

²⁹ Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 59–60.

³⁰ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “διακρίνω,” by Friedrich Büchsel, 3:946–47. Commenting on its use in the New Testament, Büchsel states, “In the NT it does not occur in its original spatial sense, only in the fig. ‘To make a distinction between persons’” (3:946). In this category with the active voice, he includes Acts 11:12 (assuming the active voice is read); 15:9; 1 Cor 4:7; 11:29; and 14:29. See also Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit: Affirming the Fullness of God's Provision for Spiritual Living* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 80–81.

³¹ See the discussion in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 596–97, 693–94. Commenting on the expression “let the others pass judgment,” Fee states, “This latter item is the verb for ‘distinguishing between spirits’ in 12:10 (q.v.). As noted there, this is probably to be understood as a form of ‘testing the spirits,’ but not so much in the sense of whether ‘the prophet’ is speaking by a foreign spirit but whether the prophecy itself truly conforms to the Spirit of God, who is also indwelling the other believers” (693).

³² Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 58–59.

false prophets have gone out into the world.” Clearly the verb in 1 John 4:1 has the idea of testing the prophets to judge the true from the false, as Grudem acknowledges.³³

In light of all of this, it is difficult to see how the testing in 1 Corinthians 14:29 is any different from what is found elsewhere in the New Testament or, for that matter, from what was required of Old Testament prophets. The reason and need for these tests, whether in the Old Testament or in the New, is the presence of false prophets. The requirement to test the prophets in the Old Testament does not suggest that true prophets were fallible or lacking divine authority. It only demonstrated that there were false prophets who were claiming to be true prophets of God and who needed to be exposed. The same problem of false prophets is found in the New Testament, and the call to test the prophets by Paul or others simply confirms that fact.

Acts 21:10–11 and Errant New Testament Prophecies

The *third* argument Grudem employs in defense of two levels of New Testament prophecy is that there are instances in Acts where New Testament prophets prophesied something that was in fact not true. Central to this argument is the prophecy by Agabus recorded in Acts 21:10–11. In Acts 21:10–11 the prophet Agabus warns Paul about the dangers awaiting the apostle in Jerusalem, declaring to Paul that the words of his warning are the words of the Holy Spirit.

Commenting on this prophecy, Grudem declares, “The events of the narrative itself do not coincide with the kind of accuracy that the Old Testament requires for those who speak God’s words. In fact, by Old Testament standards, Agabus would have been condemned as a false prophet, because in Acts 21:27–35 neither of his predictions are [*sic*] fulfilled”³⁴ Specifically, Agabus says that the Jews would bind Paul and deliver him to the Gentiles, whereas, it is the Gentiles who actually bind the apostle, not the Jews. Furthermore, the Jews do not hand Paul over to the Romans; the Romans forcefully take Paul away from the Jews. Because of these discrepancies and despite the fact that Agabus attributes his words to the Holy Spirit, Grudem concludes that this prophecy must not be taken as inerrant, divinely authoritative communication.³⁵

In response, Acts 21:11 can be interpreted where no such errors are found. From the larger context, it can be seen that the Jews in Jerusalem are the ultimate cause of Paul’s incarceration by the Gentiles.³⁶ And, if that be the case, the prophecy is fully exonerated in

³³ Ibid., 58. The verb in both verses is the present imperative δοκιμάζετε.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 77–83, 286, 310. Of the examples Grudem identifies in support of this argument, he spends the majority of his time defending his point from this passage.

³⁶ Wallace categorizes the verb “bound” as a “causative active,” saying, “Paul was not, strictly speaking, *bound* by the Jews, but by the Romans because a riot was breaking out in the temple over Paul. And he was not, strictly speaking, *handed over* by the Jews to the Romans, but was in fact arrested and later protected by the Romans because of the Jewish plot to kill him. What are we to say of this prophecy? Only that because of the Jews’ *actions* Paul was bound and handed over to the Gentiles. They were the unwitting cause, but the cause nevertheless” (*Greek*

that the words of Agabus conform to the actual events that take place. In other words, according to the larger context, it is the actions of the Jews against Paul that ultimately led the Gentile authorities to incarcerate the apostle—just as Agabus had predicted.³⁷

Furthermore, this interpretation is the same one that Paul himself endorses in Acts 28:17. In explaining to the Jews in Rome the circumstances behind his arrest, Paul says, “I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.” Although Paul does not specifically identify who it was that delivered him, the larger context argues that it was the violent treatment by the Jews in Jerusalem that resulted in Paul’s being taken into custody by the Romans (cf. Acts 21:30–33; 24:6; 26:21).³⁸

Recognizing the tension with Paul’s interpretation of the events, Grudem attempts to distance Paul’s explanation of his arrest in Acts 28:17 from the prophecy by Agabus in Acts 21:10–11. Grudem argues that Paul is describing his subsequent transfer into the Roman judicial system, not his original incarceration in Jerusalem. Thus, says Grudem, Paul’s explanation and the prophecy by Agabus are not addressing the same event.³⁹

But Grudem’s explanation is difficult to square with the other accounts recorded in Acts of Paul’s initial arrest. For example, in Acts 24:5–8 the Jewish lawyer Tertullus, representing the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, describes to Felix the account of Paul’s initial arrest. Addressing Felix, Tertullus states, “For we have found this man... a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we [Jews] arrested him.”⁴⁰ Thus, Tertullus identifies the Jews as those responsible for Paul’s arrest. In addition, Paul himself reports the account of his initial arrest to Agrippa and Felix in Acts 26:21, saying, “For this reason *some* Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death.”

Assuming for the moment Grudem’s distinction between inerrant apostolic prophets and errant non-apostolic prophets, Grudem’s interpretation creates a further tension. According to Grudem’s understanding of the prophecy, Paul, an apostolic prophet, must also be in error in that his interpretation of the events essentially coincides with the prophecy by Agabus. If

Grammar Beyond the Basics, 412). See also Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 638.

³⁷See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 689.

³⁸Similarly, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 505; John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 539. See also Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, 81–83.

³⁹Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 310.

⁴⁰Following the statement in Acts 24:6a, “we arrested him,” some later (Western) mss. add, “We wanted to judge him according to our own Law, but Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ordering his accusers to come before you (24:6b–8a).” The addition is included in the text in brackets in the NASB and the CSB and in a footnote in the NIV and the ESV. For a discussion of the textual issues, see Bruce M. Metzger, ed. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 434. As to the reason for its addition, see Bock, *Acts*, 698.

Agabus is wrong, then Paul must be wrong as well. Grudem cannot argue for the one and then deny the other.

However, the evidence from the larger context and from Paul's own interpretation of the events fully supports the accuracy and the authority of the prophecy by Agabus. In addition, the formula Agabus uses to introduce his prophecy, "This is what the Holy Spirit says," is wholly consistent with this conclusion. With this formula, Agabus identifies the Holy Spirit as the author and source of his prophecy.⁴¹

Sensing the problems the formula poses for his position, Grudem offers three possible explanations in an attempt to mitigate the force of the formula attributing the words of the prophet to the Holy Spirit. He eventually opts for taking the formula to mean "not that the very words of the prophecy were from the Holy Spirit but only that the content generally had been revealed by the Spirit." Yet in taking this option, he admits, "The problem with this solution is that the phrase...is used frequently in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) to introduce the words of the Lord in the Old Testament prophets ('Thus says the Lord...')." ⁴²

Grudem then follows this admission by adding that the exact words used, "Thus says the Holy Spirit," are never used elsewhere to preface Old Testament prophetic speech. He concludes from this that the formula does not necessarily introduce the very words of God. His conclusion, based on the distinction between "thus says the Lord" and "thus says the Holy Spirit," appears motivated by other than linguistic considerations. In short, the difference Grudem defends is difficult to maintain in light of the obvious correspondence between the two formulas.

In that Agabus' prophecy in Acts 21:10–11 is Grudem's chief example of errant New Testament prophecy, he has failed to make his case. Consequently, there is no compelling evidence that New Testament prophecy is different from Old Testament prophecy or, for that matter, from apostolic prophecy. New Testament apostles and New Testament prophets prophesied on only one level. Furthermore, that one level was nothing less than fully inerrant and divinely authoritative.

AN ASSESSMENT OF GRUDEM'S ARGUMENTS FOR A CLOSED CANON

According to Grudem, the canon consists of writings God authored through individuals whom he has appointed to speak for him. To be canonical, then, a written revelation must represent the very words of God, be inerrant, and carry divine authority.⁴³ He notes that in

⁴¹Polhill, *Acts*, 435. Commenting on the use of this formula by Agabus to introduce his prophecy, Polhill states, "Just like an Old Testament prophet, he gave the interpretation of the act, introduced by the usual, 'Thus says the Lord,' here expressed in terms of revelation through the Holy Spirit." See also Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 689.

⁴²Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 82.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 242–46.

the Old Testament, those so appointed were prophets and, in the New Testament, apostles (or those closely associated with them). He further argues that with the writing of Revelation and the subsequent death of the last apostle, John, the canon was formally closed.⁴⁴ For the church, then, the canon consists of the writings God has authored and providentially preserved in the Protestant Bible.⁴⁵

There is a sense in which Grudem's understanding of New Testament prophecy allows him to have the best of two worlds. Grudem has argued that New Testament prophecy is ongoing. Those who champion the position that some, if not all, of the revelatory New Testament gifts are available today find common ground and support in Grudem's arguments. Grudem has also argued that ongoing New Testament prophecy is errant and lacks divine authority. Those committed to guarding a closed canon can rest easy in that ongoing prophecy is not a threat. Errant ongoing prophecy that lacks divine authority cannot unlock an inerrant, divinely authoritative canon.⁴⁶

However, Grudem's defense of ongoing prophecy coupled with a closed canon faces two seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The *first obstacle* is that Grudem has failed to make his case for New Testament prophecy that is errant and lacking divine authority. As has been seen, the evidence speaks unequivocally in support of the inerrancy and authority of New Testament prophecy. Thus, Grudem is faced with a conundrum. If New Testament prophecy is ongoing, then the canon cannot be closed. Or, if the canon is closed, then there can be no continuing New Testament prophecy.

Grudem recognizes the far reaching implications for his position, if in fact New Testament prophecy has divine authority. As mentioned earlier, he makes a telling comment on the interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 that takes "the apostles and prophets" as two groups, both providing divinely authoritative revelation: "If everyone with the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church did have...absolute divine authority, then we would expect this gift to die out as soon as the writings of the New Testament were completed and given to the churches."⁴⁷ Yet the divine authority of New Testament prophecy is precisely what the evidence points to from this passage and the rest of the New Testament.

The *second obstacle* Grudem faces, somewhat parallel to the first, is the disjunction his position creates between God giving special revelation to a prophet and God giving revelation that lacks divine authority. Grudem acknowledges that New Testament prophets received special revelation from God. Even assuming Grudem's own understanding that the prophet was sometimes in error when communicating that revelation, what about those occasions when the prophet got it right? Would not his prophecy have divine authority on those occasions when the prophet communicated it accurately? Unfortunately, Grudem does not address this question.

⁴⁴Ibid., 246–49

⁴⁵Ibid., 241–42.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18–19.

⁴⁷Ibid., 45–46; see also 330

Yet, this question is central to the debate. If New Testament prophets received special revelation, as Grudem argues, and the prophet communicated it accurately, as Grudem allows, in what sense would that revelation lack divine authority? Special revelation necessarily involves God's revealing or communicating truth to the prophet. Thus, by definition, special revelation from God inherently carries divine authority, an authority identical to that of the New Testament. And, if that be the case, then either New Testament prophecy ceased with the writing of the New Testament and the canon is closed or New Testament prophecy continues and the canon is open. There simply is no middle ground, Grudem's arguments notwithstanding.

CONCLUSION

The question remains whether the debate between continuationists and cessationists is legitimate grounds for dividing evangelicals. At the risk of oversimplification, the question really involves the importance of a closed canon. As argued above, there is only one level of New Testament prophecy and that level necessarily involves the communication of special revelation that is inerrant and has divine authority. Evangelicals committed to continuing New Testament prophecy, in effect, must have an open canon, whether they recognize this or not.

Perhaps the best way to answer the question on the importance of a closed canon is to reflect on the implications of an open canon. As mentioned at the outset, if New Testament prophecy continues and the canon is open, then the New Testament cannot be the final rule for faith and practice. Furthermore, if prophecy continues, then this new revelation can add to and even change the revelation that has been recorded in the New Testament. What is argued here is *not* that new revelation corrects previous revelation. Special revelation from God, by definition, is both authoritative and *inerrant*. Therefore, there can be no correcting of previous revelation by new revelation.

What is being argued, however, is that new revelation can clarify, add to, or even make changes to previous revelation. This is precisely what took place with the New Testament. Revelation recorded in the New Testament added to and clarified truth from the previous revelation recorded in the Old Testament. For example, the content of the gospel that must be believed in order to be saved became clearer and more precise with the coming of the New Testament. No longer is it sufficient to believe in God's promised redeemer. Now one must believe in Jesus of Nazareth for salvation.⁴⁸

In addition, the revelation recorded in the New Testament also made changes to the revelation recorded in the Old Testament: no longer are sacrifices offered; no longer is Saturday the day for corporate worship; no longer are the dietary restrictions valid. Thus, ongoing prophecy can have profound implications for faith and practice.

⁴⁸ In Acts 4:12, when speaking of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the apostle Peter declares, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Evangelicals committed to ongoing prophecy are brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the household of faith, and co-laborers in the gospel. As such, they are to be loved as Christ loved the church. Furthermore, individual fellowship among all believers is to be cherished and pursued in order to protect the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:1–3).

At the same time, the profound implications of continuing New Testament prophecy are such that some limitations in levels of fellowship must be acknowledged. The relationship between cessationists and continuationists in terms of fellowship is not simply an all or nothing proposition. Some restrictions involving ministry with those who hold to the continuation of New Testament prophecy must be recognized. Furthermore, warnings by cessationists over these issues must continue in order to underscore the importance of a closed canon and to guard the New Testament as the final rule for faith and practice.