

DOES GOD STILL GIVE REVELATION?*

John MacArthur
President and Professor of Pastoral Ministries

Strange private prophecies have been a noted characteristic of the Charismatic Movement, prophecies such as those received by Oral Roberts, Linda Fehl, Jack Hayford, Larry Lea, and Kenneth Hagin. J. Rodman Williams endorses such experiences, but Edward N. Gross correctly dismisses such special revelations as erroneous and limits such revelations to those resulting in the writing of the Bible. According to 2 Tim 3:16, inspired means that Scripture is God-breathed, i.e., God Himself speaking. Some modern theologians such as Dewey Beegel support the charismatic agenda by teaching that the canon of Scripture is not closed and that God is still giving special revelation. Such teaching of progressive revelation, supported also by J. Rodman Williams and Kenneth Copeland, creates great turmoil in the church and is tantamount to violating the scriptural injunctions not to add prophecies to what has been written in its pages. The biblical canon closed after the writing of Revelation and was popularly recognized soon after in the ancient church. Jude 3 speaks of “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” and warns repeatedly against tolerating false prophets. The early church applied tests of apostolic authorship, content, and responses by the churches to determine which books met the criteria of inspiration, resulting in a uniquely inspired and authoritative set of books.

* * * * *

“God told me . . .” has become the anthem of the Charismatic Movement. Strange private prophecies are proclaimed by all kinds of people who evidently believe God speaks to them. Surely the most infamous is Oral Roberts’ preposterous death-threat prophecy. In 1987 Roberts told his nationwide audience that God had threatened to “call him home” if he couldn’t raise eight million dollars by his

*This essay, adapted from a chapter in *Charismatic Chaos*, published by Zondervan Publishing House in 1992, is used by permission.

creditors' deadline. Whether and how that threat might have been carried out, the world will never know; Roberts received a last-minute reprieve in the form of a large check from a Florida dog-track owner.

Two years later, when Roberts was forced to close his multimillion-dollar, Tulsa-based City of Faith medical center anyway, he asked God why. Roberts maintains that God gave him an answer:

God said in my spirit, "I had you build the City of Faith large enough to capture the imagination of the entire world about the merging of My healing streams of prayer and medicine. I did not want this revelation localized in Tulsa, however. And the time has come when I want this concept of merging My healing streams to be known to all people and to go into all future generations."

As clearly in my spirit as I've ever heard Him, the Lord gave me an impression. "You and your partners have merged prayer and medicine for the entire world, for the church world and for all generations," He said. "It is done."

I then asked, "Is that why after eight years you're having us close the hospital and after 11 years the medical school?"

He said, "Yes, the mission has been accomplished in the same way that after the three years of public ministry My Son said on the cross, 'Father, it is finished.'"¹

We may gasp at Oral Roberts' hubris, but he is not the only charismatic who thinks he is receiving private revelation from God. Most Charismatics, at one time or another, feel that God speaks to them in some specific manner, either through an audible voice, an internal impression, a vision, or simply by using them as a vehicle to write a song, compose a poem, or utter a prophecy.

Linda Fehl, founder of Rapha Ranch, sells a tape with a song titled, "The Holy Ghost." She says the song was given to her by the Holy Spirit as she was being healed of cancer.² An editor for a Christian publisher once told me he receives submissions every week from charismatics who claim God inspired them to write their book, article, song, or poem.³ My editor friend noted that the manuscripts are

¹Stephen Strang, "Oral Roberts: Victory Out of Defeat," *Charisma and Christian Life* 15/5 (December 1989) 88.

²"The Tapes That Are Healing the Nations" (advertisement), *Charisma and Christian Life* (October 1988):69.

³Occasionally, one of the "inspired" books finds a publisher. David Wilkerson, *The Vision* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Spire, 1974) is one such example. The book was subtitled *A Thrilling Prophecy of the Coming of Armageddon*. "Deep in my heart I am convinced that this vision is from God, that it is true, and that it will come to pass," Wilkerson wrote (12). It didn't. Wilkerson predicted, "Nature will release its fury with increasing intensity over the next decade. There will be short periods of relief, but almost every day mankind will witness the wrath of nature somewhere in the world" (36). Wilkerson predicted a cataclysmic earthquake that would start a panic somewhere in the United States—"the biggest, most disastrous in its history" (32). He foresaw many cataclysms, including worldwide financial calamity. Perhaps most ironic of all, Wilkerson predicted a decline of the "positive thinking" doctrines (25).

I recently received another supposedly inspired book by mail. An endorsement on the book's back

often poorly written, filled with bad grammar, marred by factual and logical errors, or full of poems that either mutilate the language or attempt to rhyme but just miss.

Lest you think cranks, obscure eccentrics, or naive charismatic believers are the only ones who would make such claims, listen to Jack Hayford, internationally known author, media minister, and pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California. Hayford told the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America that God has told him a new era is coming:

Hayford then related a vision in which he had seen Jesus seated on His throne at the right hand of the Father. In Hayford's vision, Jesus began to lean forward and rise from his seat. As the anointing caught in the folds of His garments, it began to splash out and fall over the church. Jesus said, "I am beginning to rise now in preparation for my second coming. Those who will rise with Me will share in this double portion of anointing."⁴

And Larry Lea, popular charismatic author and pastor, wrote,

Recently, when I was in Chicago preparing to preach, the Lord's Spirit came upon me. He spoke in my heart: "*I'm going to tell you now the name of the strongman over this nation.*"

I listened intently.

"The spiritual strongman you are facing—the demonic strongman that has your nation under his control—is the strongman of greed."

We certainly don't have to look very long to find evidence to back up this Word of the Lord.⁵

Kenneth Hagin surely has the most unusual story of all. He says that when he was younger and still single, God led him to break off a relationship with a girl by revealing to him that she was morally unfit. How did that happen? In a most unconventional way. Hagin claims God miraculously transported him out of church one Sunday, right in the middle of the sermon. Worst of all, Hagin was the preacher delivering the sermon!

Suddenly I was gone! Right in the middle of my sermon, I found myself standing along a street in a little town fifteen miles away—and I knew it was Saturday night. I was

cover, written by Dr. T. L. Lowery, senior pastor of the National Church of God in Washington, D.C., says, "Unlike other books, I believe that the Holy Spirit has brought this writing into being for time and eternity. The experiences and the message are of utmost importance to the body of Christ. I believe that God's anointing will rest upon this book and minister to every person who reads these contents." Clearly, Pastor Lowery believes the book is on par with Scripture. But I thumbed through the 171-page book and found it to be filled with speculation, bizarre fantasy, and much teaching that is inconsistent with Scripture (Mary Kathryn Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Hell* [Washington: National Church of God, n.d.])."

⁴Jack Hayford, "Pentecostals Set Priorities," *Charisma and Christian Life* (January 1991):44.

⁵"The Strongman of Greed," *Charisma* (March 1991):40 (emphasis in original).

leaning against a building, and I saw this young lady come walking down the street. About the time she got to where I was standing, a car came down the street. The driver pulled up to the curb, sounded the horn, and she got into his car. He backed out, turned the other direction, and started out of town—and suddenly I was sitting in the back seat!

They went out in the country and committed adultery. And I watched them. I was still in the cloud. Suddenly I heard the sound of my voice, and the cloud lifted. I was standing behind my pulpit. I didn't know what to say, because I didn't know what I had been saying, so I just said, "Everyone bow your head," and we prayed. I looked at my watch, and . . . I'd been gone about fifteen minutes in the cloud.

While I was shaking hands with people as they went out the door, this young lady came by. I said, "We missed you last night." She said, "Yes, I was over in _____" (and she named the little town). I said, "Yes, I know."⁶

On the basis of that questionable experience, Hagin determined that the girl was promiscuous and assumes to this day that she was guilty of adultery. He follows that report with a similar one, where he was suddenly transported into a car where another young girl was supposedly engaged in moral compromise.⁷ Ironically, immediately after telling those two tales, he writes, "You've got to realize, friends, that there is a fine line between fanaticism and reality. Many people get off into error seeking experiences."⁸ Hagin has never drawn a truer application from his anecdotes.

Would God really transport Hagin miraculously into cars so he could witness acts of adultery? Did God talk to Oral Roberts? Did he write a song for Linda Fehl? Did Jack Hayford actually see Christ rise from His seat next to God? Was Larry Lea's prophecy really a "Word of the Lord"? Are Christians still receiving, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, direct revelation from God? Can people today—writing songs or books, preaching or teaching, or making decisions—legitimately claim that they are under divine inspiration?

Many charismatics answer a loud "Yes!" For example, J. Rodman Williams wrote:

The Bible truly has become a fellow witness to God's present activity. . . . If someone today perhaps has a vision of God, of Christ, it is good to know that it has happened before; if one has a revelation from God, to know that for the early Christians revelation also occurred in the community; if one speaks a "Thus says the Lord," and dares to address the fellowship in the first person—even going beyond the words of Scripture—that this was happening long ago. How strange and remarkable it is! If one speaks in the fellowship of the Spirit the Word of truth, it is neither his own thoughts and reflections (e.g., on some topic of the day) nor simply some exposition of Scripture, for the Spirit transcends personal observations, however interesting or profound they may

⁶Kenneth E. Hagin, *The Glory of God* (Tulsa, Okla.: Faith Library, 1987) 14-15 (emphasis added).

⁷Ibid., 15-16.

⁸Ibid., 16.

be. The Spirit as the living God moves through and beyond the records of past witness, however valuable such records are as a model for what happens today.⁹

What is Williams saying? He is alleging that the Bible is not our final source of God's revelation but simply a "witness" to additional revelation that God is giving today. Williams is declaring that Christians can add to the Bible—and that they can accept others' additions to Scripture as normal and conventional. He believes the Bible is a "model" for what the Holy Spirit is doing today to inspire believers.

That is a frighteningly relativistic view, but it is growing in popularity as the Charismatic Movement expands. Edward N. Gross, noting this deadly trend in the church today, observes:

The age of models has come. A model takes the place of a law. Models are human perceptions of truth. They are tentative and thus subject to change as new data becomes available. These models are open and constantly tested. No scientist dares claim any longer that one model is the way to explain all known phenomena for fear that some newly discovered data will prove that scientist to be a precipitous old fool. The world of science has progressed from the old approach (closed systems) to the new approach (open systems). . . .

If the Bible is a closed system of truth, with no new revelation being given through inspired prophets or apostles, then the "model approach" is an erroneous and dangerous tool in hermeneutics.

There should be no confusion in this area. The orthodox teaching of Christianity has always affirmed that God's special, saving revelation to mankind is restricted to the teachings of the Scriptures. . . .

This is the issue. If the Bible is complete, then it represents a closed system of truth. If it entails a fixed and absolute standard of truth, then the teachings of Scripture may be ascertained and dogmatically asserted. If God is still granting new revelation, then the truth of God is still being progressively revealed, and if this were the case, our duty would be to faithfully listen to today's prophets as they unravel God's truth in new and clearer representations than we find in Scripture. Few Christians really consider the subtleties of today's "prophets" as an improvement upon the sanctifying truths given in the Word. I certainly do not.¹⁰

Nor do I. Scripture *is* a closed system of truth, complete, sufficient, and not to be added to (Rev 22:18-19). It contains all the spiritual truth God intended to reveal.

What Does Inspiration Mean?

Our word *inspired* comes from a Latin root meaning, "to breathe in."

⁹J. Rodman Williams, *The Era of the Spirit* (Plainfield, N.J: Logos, 1971) 16.

¹⁰Edward N. Gross, *Miracles, Demons, & Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 150-52.

Unfortunately, that does not convey the true meaning of the Greek term used in Scripture. Actually the concept of breathing *in* is not found in 2 Tim 3:16 (“All Scripture is inspired by God”). Reading it *in* has misled many people about the meaning of *inspiration*. They have assumed that God breathed some kind of divine life into the words of those who penned the original documents of Scripture. But the Greek term for inspiration is *theopneustos*, which means “God-breathed.” Literally the verse says, “All Scripture is God-breathed”—that is, Scripture is not the words of men into which God puffed divine life. It is the very breath of God! Scripture is God Himself speaking.

That truth is one many people seem prone to misunderstand. Inspiration does not mean the Bible *contains* God’s revelation. It does not mean gems of revealed truth are *concealed* in Scripture. It does not mean men wrote God’s truth in their own words. It does not mean God merely assisted the writers. It means that the words of the Bible are the words of God Himself. Every word of Scripture was breathed *out* by God.

At the burning bush, God said to Moses, “Go, and I, even I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (Exod 4:12). Jeremiah, the weeping prophet of Judah, received this charge from God: “All that I command you, you shall speak. . . . Behold, I have put My words in your mouth” (Jer 1:7, 9). And God said to Ezekiel, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel. . . . Take into your heart all my words which I shall speak to you, and listen closely . . . and speak to them” (Ezek 3:4, 10-11).

A key passage describing how God speaks through Scripture is 2 Pet 1:21. Literally it says “No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The most important word here is “moved,” which speaks of being carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Theologian Thomas A. Thomas recalls that as a boy he would play in the little streams that ran down the mountainside near his home.

We boys liked to play what we called “boats.” Our “boat” would be any little stick which was placed in the water, and then we would run along beside it and follow it as it was washed downstream. When the water would run rapidly over some rocks the little stick would move rapidly as well. . . . In other words, that little stick which served as my boyhood “boat” was carried along, borne along, under the complete control and direction of the water. It moved as the water moved it. So it is with reference to the writers of the Scriptures. They were carried along, borne along, under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit of God. They wrote as the Spirit directed them to write. They were borne along by Him so that what they wrote was exactly that which the Holy Spirit intended should be there. What they wrote was, in a very real sense, not their words; it was the very Word of God.¹¹

¹¹Thomas A. Thomas, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972) 8-9.

Modern Views of Inspiration

What, then, is the contemporary approach to Scripture? Some modern theologians want to allow for continued inspiration or updated revelation. At least one, Dewey Beegle, believes that some of the classic anthems of the church are inspired in the same way as Scripture. He has written, “Some of the great hymns are practically on a par with the Psalms, and one can be sure that if Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, and Reginald Heber had lived in the time of David and Solomon, and been *no more inspired than they were in their own day*, some of their hymns of praise to God would have found their way into the Hebrew canon.”¹²

Beegle refers in particular to the experience of George Matheson, a blind Scottish pastor who wrote “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go” during a time of great personal distress. On the evening of his younger sister’s wedding, Matheson was reminded vividly of the agony he had suffered twenty years before when his fiancé had rejected him because she had learned he was going blind. Matheson wrote the hymn in just a few minutes, though he claimed he had no natural sense of rhythm. According to Matheson, he did no changing or correcting of “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go”; it came “like a dayspring from on high.”

Beegle believes George Matheson’s experience was

. . . the kind of inspiration of which the Psalms were made. There is no difference in kind. If there is any difference, it was a matter of degree. When the Biblical writers served as channels of God’s revelation they needed more divine help, but the inspiration was not distinct in kind from that given to all the messengers of God down through history. What distinguishes the Bible is its record of special revelation, not a distinctive kind of inspiration.¹³

Beegle believes the canon of Scripture has never been closed.¹⁴ He has written, “The revelation and inspiration of God’s Spirit continues. . . . For this reason there is no basis in considering all of the biblical writers and editors as qualitatively different from postcanonical interpreters.”¹⁵ He continues,

If the church had a more dynamic sense of God’s inspiration in the twentieth century, it would be more effective in its witness and outreach. It is well and good to protect the distinctiveness of the Bible, but to think only in terms of its inspiration as absolutely different in kind from inspiration in our time is too high a price to pay. Christians today need to have the same sense of being God-motivated and God-sent as did the biblical

¹²Dewey Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 140 (emphasis in original).

¹³Ibid., 141.

¹⁴Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 308.

¹⁵Ibid.

writers and interpreters. In a genuine sense, the difficulty of interpreting God's record of revelation to this complex age requires as much of God's inbreathing and wisdom as did the process of interpretation in the biblical periods.¹⁶

In effect, that is precisely what charismatics believe. The truth, however, is that there is no way to "protect the distinctiveness of the Bible" if God is inspiring new revelation today. If the canon is still open, and if God is still giving new prophecies, new songs, and new words of wisdom, we should be earnestly seeking to compile and study these most recent revelations along with Scripture—and maybe even more diligently, since they speak expressly to our time and culture.

Some Charismatics actually reason that way.¹⁷ But it is error of the worst kind. The canon is *not* still open. God's Word, made of the Old and New Testaments, is one unique miracle. It came together over a period of 1,500 years. More than forty men of God, prophets and apostles, wrote God's words—every jot and tittle—without error and in perfect harmony. No hymn is worthy to be compared to Scripture. No modern prophecy or word of wisdom is even in the same realm with God's eternal Word. Heaven and earth will pass away; God's Word will abide (Matt 5:18).

Progressive Revelation?

Charismatics struggle to explain how the supposed revelation they receive through tongues, prophecies, and visions fits with Scripture. J. Rodman Williams, as we have seen, claims these charismatic phenomena are simply new manifestations of what was happening in biblical times: "It is good to know . . . if one speaks a 'Thus says the Lord,' and dares to address the fellowship in the first person—even going beyond the words of Scripture—that this was happening long ago."¹⁸ His explanation of the charismata amounts to an argument for "progressive" or "continuing" revelation: "In the Spirit the present fellowship is as much the arena of God's vital presence as anything in the Biblical account. Indeed, in the light of what we may learn from this past witness, and take to heart, we may expect *new* things to occur in our day and days to come."¹⁹ Williams went on to describe just

¹⁶Ibid., 309.

¹⁷This, strangely enough, is exactly what a recent *Charisma* article recommended:

To meditate on our personal prophecies, we should record them if at all possible. If someone approaches us saying he or she has a word from God, we should ask the person to wait a moment until we can get an audio recorder, or else ask the person to write it down. If the word comes from someone on the platform during a meeting that is not being recorded, we must try to write down as much as possible, getting at least the main points (Bill Hamon, "How to Receive a Personal Prophecy," *Charisma and Christian Life* 16/9 [April 1991]:66).

¹⁸Williams, *Era of the Spirit* 16 (emphasis added).

¹⁹Ibid. (emphasis in original).

how new revelation occurs. He put great emphasis on the “gift of prophecy”:

In prophecy God speaks. It is as simple, and profound, and startling as that! What happens in the fellowship is that the Word may suddenly be spoken by anyone present, and so, variously, a “Thus says the Lord” breaks forth in the fellowship. It is usually in the first person (though not always), such as “I am with you to bless you . . .” and has the directness of an “I—Thou” encounter. It comes not in a “heavenly language,” but in the native tongue of the person speaking and with his accustomed inflections, cadences, and manners. Indeed, the speech may even be coarse and ungrammatical; it may be a mixture of “King James” and modern; it may falter as well as flow—such really does not matter. For in prophecy God uses what He finds, and through frail human instruments the Spirit speaks the Word of the Lord. . . .

All of this—to repeat—is quite surprising and startling. Most of us of course were familiar with prophetic utterance as recorded in the Bible, and willing to accept it as the Word of God. Isaiah’s or Jeremiah’s “Thus says the Lord . . .” we were accustomed to, but to hear a Tom or a Mary today, in the twentieth century, speak the same way . . . ! Many of us also had convinced ourselves that prophecy ended with the New Testament period (despite all the New Testament evidence to the contrary), until suddenly through the dynamic thrust of the Holy Spirit prophecy comes alive again. Now we wonder how we could have misread the New Testament for so long!²⁰

That is tantamount to saying that current instances of charismatic prophecy are divine revelation equal to Scripture. Such a claim is disturbing because the possibilities of fraud and error by present-day “prophets” are obvious. Williams recognized that danger and wrote:

Prophecy can by no means be taken casually. Since it is verily God’s message to His people, there must be quite serious and careful consideration given to each word spoken, and application made within the life of the fellowship. Also because of the ever present danger of prophecy being abused—the pretense of having a word from God—there is need for spiritual discernment.²¹

Though Williams admitted the risks, nowhere in his book did he spell out how “careful consideration” and “spiritual discernment” are to be employed to distinguish the false from the true.

Perhaps Williams later realized the problems he raised, because he attempted to clarify his thinking in the *Logos Journal*:

I do not intend in any way to place contemporary experience on the same level of authority as the Bible. Rather do I vigorously affirm the decisive authority of Scripture; hence, God does not speak just as authoritatively today as He spoke to the biblical authors. But *he does continue to speak* (He did not stop with the close of the New

²⁰Ibid., 27-28.

²¹Ibid., 29.

Testament canon); thus, he “moves through and beyond the records of past witness,” for he is the living God who still speaks and acts among His people.²²

That explanation fails to resolve the issue. The distinction between biblical authority and additional revelation seems to be artificial. Are some of God’s words less authoritative than others?

The fact is, Williams’s view is indistinguishable from the neoorthodox position espoused by Dewey Beegle. If evangelicalism allows that view to gain a foothold, the uniqueness of Scripture will be sacrificed, and the basis for all we believe will be compromised. That is precisely what is happening today. Because of the growing influence of charismatic teaching, much of the church may mistakenly abandon its cornerstone: *Sola Scriptura*, the principle that God’s Word is the only basis for divine authority.

Once a congregation sees Scripture as less than the final, complete, infallible authority for faith and practice, it has opened the doors to theological chaos. Anyone can claim to be speaking God’s revelation—and almost anything can be passed off as divinely revealed truth. And make no mistake, some of the best-known charismatic leaders have abused their people’s trust by claiming they are receiving new truth from God, when what they are really teaching are lies and fabrications.

Perhaps the most brazen example of that is a widely publicized “prophecy” delivered by Kenneth Copeland. He claims Jesus gave him a message “during a three-day Victory Campaign held in Dallas, Texas.”²³ Judge for yourself whether this could be a message from the Christ of Scripture:

It’s time for these things to happen, saith the Lord. It’s time for spiritual activity to increase. Oh, yes, demonic activity will increase along at the same time. But don’t let that disturb you.

Don’t be disturbed when people accuse you of thinking you’re God. Don’t be disturbed when people accuse you of a fanatical way of life. Don’t be disturbed when people put you down and speak harshly and roughly of you. They spoke that way of Me, should they not speak that way of you?

The more you get to be like Me, the more they’re going to think that way of you. They crucified me for claiming that I was God. But I didn’t claim I was God; I just claimed I walked with Him and that He was in Me. Hallelujah. That’s what you’re doing.²⁴

Copeland’s “prophecy” is clearly false. The real Jesus—the Jesus of the NT—*did*

²²J. Rodman Williams, “The Authority of Scripture and the Charismatic Movement,” *Logos Journal* (May-June 1977):35.

²³Kenneth Copeland, “Take Time to Pray,” *Believer’s Voice of Victory* (Feb. 1987):9.

²⁴Ibid.

claim He was God; using the covenant name of God, He told the Jewish leaders, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

Is Copeland genuinely a prophet, or is he one of whom Peter spoke when he warned, “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet 2:1)? The obvious answer to that question is clouded only to those who aren’t sure whether modern “prophecies” might supersede God’s Word.

Not all charismatic prophecies and visions are so clearly in conflict with Scripture. Some are merely frivolous. Larry Lea wrote,

Several years ago one of my dear pastor friends said, “Larry, when I was praying for you the other day, I had a vision. I saw you with great big ‘Mickey Mouse’ ears. Everything else about you looked normal except for those elephant-sized ears. When I asked the Lord to tell me what the vision meant, the Spirit of the Lord spoke back to me and said: ‘Larry Lea has developed his hearing. He has developed his spiritual ears.’”²⁵

Charismatics have abandoned the uniqueness of Scripture as the only Word of God, and the result is a spiritual free-for-all. A longing for something new and esoteric has replaced historic Christianity’s settled confidence in the Word of God—and that is an invitation to Satan’s counterfeit. Confusion, error, and even satanic deception are the inescapable results.

Melvin Hodges is a charismatic pastor who has admitted his strong reservations about “new” revelations:

Today, some people tend to magnify the gifts of prophecy and revelation out of their proper proportion. Instances have occurred in which a church has allowed itself to be governed by gifts of inspiration. Deacons have been appointed and pastors removed or installed by prophecy. Chaos has resulted. The cause is obvious. Prophecy was never intended to usurp the place of ministries of government or of a gift of a word of wisdom. Paul teaches us that the body is not made up of one member but of many, and if prophecy usurps the role of the word of wisdom or the word of knowledge, the whole body is dominated by one ministry, that is, prophecy. In other words, the whole body becomes ruled by the prophetic member. . . .

The idea that the voice of prophecy is infallible has confused many people. Some have felt that it is a sin to question what they consider to be the voice of the Spirit. However, in the ministry of all gifts there is a cooperation between the divine and the human.²⁶

Note that Hodges speaks of “the gifts of prophecy and revelation.” It is evident that he believes God is giving new revelation today. At the same time, he is obviously

²⁵Larry Lea, “Are You a Mousekateer?” [sic], *Charisma and Christian Life* 14/1 (August 1988):9.

²⁶Melvin L. Hodges, *Spiritual Gifts* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1964) 19-20.

well aware that so-called prophetic utterances create problems in the church. Throughout, he assiduously avoids concluding that the charismatic “gift of prophecy” is in any way less authoritative than Scripture. Yet he still wants to warn charismatics against taking modern prophecies too seriously or placing too much emphasis on them. He is seeking a way to resolve the confusion, but there is no way. When “prophetic utterance” is equated in any degree with “divine revelation,” the result is a hopeless muddle. Scripture loses its uniqueness, and all the damaging results Hodges describes are sure to occur.

Not all charismatics would agree that the problem of prophetic abuses is one of overemphasis. Some blame it on ignorant misuse of the gift. Their answer to the problem is to offer training. One group has started a “School of the Prophets.” Their appeal for students says, in part,

Perhaps you feel that you have been called to be an oracle of the Lord and have had difficulty explaining your experiences or finding someone that you could relate to and learn from. The School of the Prophets is designed to help bring grounding and clarity to the myriad of dreams and visions that are the hallmark of the prophet and seer ministries and to assist in the restoration of the prophetic ministry within the Body of Christ. There are many that have become disillusioned and disenchanted with the prophetic ministry because of abuses and ignorant usage of the gifting. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water, for if you've had the bitter experience of the counterfeit, know that there is a reality to discover. . . . Abuses and misrepresentations occur simply because of the abomination of ignorance. Come and be trained at the School of the Prophets so that you will be properly prepared to fulfill the destiny that God has chosen for you!²⁷

That strikes me as a peculiar approach to the problem of false prophecy. Can a school teach neophyte prophets how to use their “gift”? Can people be taught to give their dreams and visions “grounding and clarity”? Is the distinction between true and false prophecy simply a matter of education?

I think not. False prophecy is hardly a peccadillo. God told the Israelites, “My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord God” (Ezek 13:9).

The law prescribed a stern remedy for false prophets:

The prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And you may say in your heart, “How shall 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

²⁷“Bernard Jordan Presents the Monthly School of the Prophet” (advertisement), *Charisma and Christian Life* 16/5 (December 1990):31.

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 18:20-22; cf. 3:1-5).

No second chance was offered. A false prophet—anyone who prophesied something that did *not* come to pass—was to be put to death. It is a serious matter to claim to speak for the Lord.

Nevertheless, some charismatics believe *any* believer who wants to can get revelation from God. The same issue of *Charisma* that carried the above ad also featured one touting a cassette tape album promising to teach believers “How you can hear the voice of God.” The ad asserts, “It is the inheritance of every believer to hear God’s voice for every need and every situation.” Jerry Hester, the speaker on the tapes, features “Listening Seminars,” which he claims “instruct you how to talk with God on an intimate conversational level 24 hours a day!”²⁸

Evidently, if you want to *declare* a private revelation from God, you can go to the School of the Prophets; if you only want to *receive* private revelation from God, you can go to a Listening Seminar.

That all has the unfortunate effect of pointing Christians away from Scripture, which is trustworthy, and teaching them to seek truth through subjective means—private conversation with God, prophecies, dreams, and visions. It depreciates God’s eternal, inspired Word and causes people to look beyond the Bible for fresher, more intimate forms of revelation from God. It is perhaps the Charismatic Movement’s most unwholesome and destructive tendency, as René Pache has noted:

The excessive preeminence given to the Holy Spirit in their devotions and their preoccupation with gifts, ecstasies, and “prophecies” has tended to neglect of the Scriptures. Why be tied to a Book out of the past when one can communicate every day with the living God? But this is exactly the danger point. Apart from the constant control of the written revelation, we soon find ourselves engulfed in subjectivity; and the believer, even if he has the best intentions, can sink rapidly into deviations, illuminism or exaltation. Let each remind himself of the prohibition of taking anything away from Scripture or adding anything to it (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19). Almost every heresy and sect has originated in a supposed revelation or a new experience on the part of its founder, something outside the strictly biblical framework.²⁹

²⁸“Do Only Prophets Hear God’s Voice? No!” (advertisement), *Charisma and Christian Life* 16/5 (December 1990):112.

²⁹René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 319.

The Canon Is Closed

The truth is, there is no fresher or more intimate revelation than Scripture. God does not need to give private revelation to help us in our walk with Him. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, *equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim 3:16-17, emphasis added). Scripture is sufficient. It offers all we need for every good work.

Christians on both sides of the charismatic fence must realize a vital truth: *God's revelation is complete for now*. The canon of Scripture is closed. As the apostle John penned the final words of the last book of the NT, he recorded this warning: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev 22:18-19). Then the Holy Spirit added a doxology and closed the canon.

When the canon closed on the OT after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, there followed four hundred “silent years” when no prophet spoke God’s revelation in any form.

That silence was broken by John the Baptist as God spoke once more prior to the NT age. God then moved various men to record the books of the NT, and the last of these was Revelation, also the last book in our Bibles. By the second century A.D., the complete canon exactly as we have it today was popularly recognized. Church councils in the fourth century verified and made official what the church has universally affirmed: that the sixty-six books in our Bibles are the only true Scripture inspired by God. The canon is complete.

Just as the close of the OT canon was followed by silence, so the close of the NT has been followed by the utter absence of new revelation in any form. Since the book of Revelation was completed, no new written or verbal prophecy has ever been universally recognized by Christians as divine truth from God.

How the Biblical Canon Was Chosen and Closed

Jude 3 is a crucial passage on the completeness of our Bibles. This statement, penned by Jude before the NT was complete, nevertheless looked forward to the completion of the entire canon: “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that we should earnestly contend for the faith which was once [literally, ‘once for all’] delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). In the Greek text the definite article preceding “faith” points to the one and only faith. There is no other. Such passages as Gal 1:23 (“He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith”) and 1 Tim 4:1 (“In latter times some will fall away from the faith”) indicate this objective

use of the expression “the faith” was common in apostolic times.

Greek scholar Henry Alford wrote that the faith is “objective here: the sum of that which Christians believe.”³⁰

Note also the crucial phrase “once for all” in Jude 3 (KJV). The Greek word here is *hapax*, which refers to something done for all time, with lasting results, never needing repetition. Nothing needs to be added to *the faith* that has been delivered “once for all.”

George Lawlor, who has written an excellent work on Jude, made the following comment:

The Christian faith is unchangeable, which is not to say that men and women of every generation do not need to find it, experience it, and live it; but it does mean that every new doctrine that arises, even though its legitimacy may be plausibly asserted, is a false doctrine. All claims to convey some additional revelation to that which has been given by God in this body of truth are false claims and must be rejected.³¹

Also important in Jude 3 is the word “delivered.” In the Greek it is an aorist passive participle, which in this context indicates an act completed in the past with no continuing element. In this instance the passive voice means the faith was not discovered by men, but *given to men by God*.

And so through the Scriptures God has given us a body of teaching that is final and complete. Our Christian faith rests on historical, objective revelation. That rules out all prophecies, seers, and other forms of new revelation until God speaks again at the return of Christ (cf. Acts 2:16-21; Rev 11:1-13).

In the meantime, Scripture warns us to be wary of false prophets. Jesus said that in our age “false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24). Signs and wonders are no proof that a person speaks for God. John wrote, “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).

Ultimately, Scripture is the test of everything; it is the Christian’s standard. In fact, the word *canon* means “a rule, standard, or measuring rod.” The canon of Scripture is the measuring rod of the Christian faith, and it is complete.

Of course, throughout history spurious books have been offered as genuine Scripture. For example, the Roman Catholic Bible includes the Apocrypha. The Roman Catholic Church accepts those books as Scripture, but it is clear that they are

³⁰Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek New Testament* (London: Longmans and Company, 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 4:530.

³¹George L. Lawlor, *Translation and Exposition of the Epistle of Jude* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972) 45.

not.³² They contain errors in history, geography, and theology.

Although Jerome (345-419) clearly was a spokesman for excluding the apocryphal books, some of the early church fathers (most notably Augustine) did accept them, though not necessarily on a par with the Hebrew OT. Finally, in the sixteenth century, the Reformers affirmed *Sola Scriptura*, the truth that the Bible alone is authoritative revelation, and thus denied the Apocrypha a place among the inspired writings. The Roman church reacted against the Reformers in the Council of Trent (1545-63) by stating that all the Apocrypha was canonical. Protestants and Catholics have maintained the disparity to the present time.

The OT canon was generally agreed upon by the people of God from the time the last OT book was written. How did the Jewish people know which books were inspired? They chose the books written by those known as spokesmen for God. They studied those books carefully and found no errors in history, geography, or theology.

Christians in the early church applied similar tests to prove which NT books were authentic and which were not. A key test was *apostolic authorship*. Every NT book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate of the apostles. For example, Mark, who was not an apostle, was a companion of Peter. Luke, who was not an apostle, worked closely with the apostle Paul.

A second test used by the early church was *content*. Acts 2:42 tells us that the first time the church met, they gave themselves to prayer, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the apostles' doctrine. Later, in considering which writings were to be revered as Scripture, they asked, "Does it agree with apostolic doctrine?" This test was very important because of all the heretics that tried to worm their way into the church. But their doctrinal errors were easily spotted because they contradicted the apostles' teaching.

A third test was *the response of the churches*. If God's people accepted it, used it for worship, and made it part of their lives, and if Christians were universally being taught and blessed by the book, that was another important stamp of approval.

By A.D. 404 the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible was complete. It was the earliest known translation of all sixty-six books of the Bible. They were the same books we still have in our modern English Bibles. God spoke once for all, and His Word has been preserved through the ages.³³

From the time of the apostles until the present, the true church has always believed that the Bible is complete. God has given His revelation, and now Scripture is finished. God has spoken. What He gave is complete, efficacious, sufficient, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative. Attempts to add to the Bible, and claims of

³²For a helpful discussion of the Apocrypha, see Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) chaps. 15, 17.

³³For a more detailed treatment of the canon, see Geisler and Nix, *Introduction*; and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988).

further revelation from God have always been characteristic of heretics and cultists, not the true people of God.

Although charismatics deny that they are trying to add to Scripture, their views on prophetic utterance, gifts of prophecy, and revelation really do just that. As they add—however unwittingly—to God’s final revelation, they undermine the uniqueness and authority of the Bible. New revelation, dreams, and visions are considered as binding on the believer’s conscience as the book of Romans or the gospel of John.

Some charismatics would say that people misunderstand what they mean by prophetic utterance and new revelation. They would say that no effort is being made to change Scripture or even equal it. What is happening, they assume, is the clarifying of Scripture as it is applied or directed to a contemporary setting, such as the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11:28.³⁴

The line between clarifying Scripture and adding to it is indeed a thin one. Besides, Scripture is not clarified by listening to someone who thinks he has the gift of prophecy. Scripture is clarified as it is carefully and diligently studied. (See the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:28-35.) There are no shortcuts to interpreting God’s Word accurately (cf. Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Christians must not play fast and loose with the issues of inspiration and revelation. An accurate understanding of those doctrines is essential for distinguishing between the voice of God and the voice of man. As we have seen, men who professed to speak for God but spoke their own opinions were to be executed under the OT law (Deut 13:1-5). New Testament believers are also urged to test the spirits and judge all supposed prophecies, shunning false prophets and heretics (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor 14:29).

It has always been important to be able to separate God’s Word from that which is false. God worked through a historical process to establish the authenticity of the canon so that the whole church might have a clear standard. If we now throw out that historical standard and redefine inspiration and revelation, we undermine our own ability to receive God’s truth. If we subvert the uniqueness of the Bible, we will have no way of distinguishing God’s voice from man’s. Eventually, anyone could say anything and claim it is God’s Word, and no one would have the right to deny it. We are perilously close to that situation even now.

The Holy Spirit *is* working mightily in the church today, but not in the way most charismatics think. The Holy Spirit’s role is to empower us as we preach, teach, write, talk, witness, think, serve, and live. He *does* lead us into God’s truth and direct us into God’s will for our lives. But He does it *through* God’s Word, never apart from it. To refer to the Holy Spirit’s leading and empowering ministry as inspiration or revelation is a mistake. To use phrases such as “God spoke to me,”

³⁴It is not accurate to use Agabus or Philip’s daughters to support theories of continuing revelation, however, because they spoke while prophecies were still being given and the canon was still open.

or “This wasn’t my idea; the Lord gave it to me,” or “These aren’t my words, but a message I received from the Lord” confuses the issue of the Spirit’s direction in believers’ lives today.

Inviting that kind of confusion plays into the hands of the error that denies the uniqueness and absolute authority of Scripture. The terms and concepts of Eph 5:18-19 and 2 Pet 1:21 are not to be mixed. Being filled with the Spirit and speaking to one another in psalms and hymns is not the same as being moved by the Holy Spirit to write inspired Scripture.

Roberts maintains that God gave him an answer: God said in my spirit, "I had you build the City of Faith large enough to capture the imagination of the entire world about the merging of My healing streams of prayer and medicine. I did not want this revelation localized in Tulsa, however. And the time has come when I want this concept of merging My healing streams to be known to all people and to go into all future generations." As clearly in my spirit as I've ever heard Him, the Lord gave me an impression. "You and your partners have merged prayer and medicine for the entire world, for the chu