2000 years of prophecy

They've been persecuted, celebrated and ignored—but the church owes its expansion in many sectors to the voice of its prophets.

by Vinson Synan

Although some see recent prophetic movements as a new phenomenon in church history, there is a rich tradition of prophetic ministry that goes back for thousands of years.

In biblical times, both the Old and New Testaments gave prominence to the office of prophet and the ministry of prophecy. Most of the Old Testament scriptures were given to us by the “major” and “minor” prophets who spoke in the words of the Lord to their own and future generations.

In the New Testament, the office of prophet was held in high esteem, since the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (see Eph. 2:20). In addition, there are many references to prophets and prophecy and even an entire book devoted to it: the book of Revelation.

A brief survey of church history indicates that the ministry of prophets has engendered controversy at best and outright persecution at worst. However, there is no indication that these offices and ministries were ever withdrawn from the church, but that they would continue until the “perfect” comes at the return of Christ (see 1 Cor. 13:8-12).

CENTURIES OF SUPPRESSION

Indeed, the records of the first generations after the Resurrection show that there were many prophets still active in the church. The numbers, however, gradually decreased as the church developed more highly organized structures under the care of local bishops. As time went on, those who claimed to be “apostles” and “prophets” were reduced to wander as traveling itinerants who were not
often welcomed by the bishops.

In the Didache, a document written in the second century, rules were enforced to control the prophets who traveled from diocese to diocese trying to find a place to minister. They were always to be welcomed at first and then closely watched thereafter.

Some of the rules stated that if a prophet stayed more than three days in one place, he would be seen as a “false prophet.” Furthermore, if he took an offering or prophesied that a meal should be served, or if he failed to practice what he taught, he also would be exiled as a false prophet.

Indeed, in that period prophets were seen as little more than wandering medicine men. With these obstacles, prophecy began to die out in the church as bishops became more entrenched in their hierarchical offices and home territories.

In the third century, there was an attempt to revive prophecy to the same level that had been seen in the days of the New Testament church. The second-century followers of a charismatic movement led by Montanus prophesied and spoke in ecstatic tongues about the second coming of Christ.

They also claimed that their prophecies should be accepted as being equal to the canon of the New Testament and held that further revelations were still being given to the church. In the end, rightly or wrongly, the church rejected Montanism along with the prophecies that were produced by the movement.

For long periods of time, the voice of the prophet was seldom heard in Christian lands. In the Roman Catholic Church, prophecy was reduced mostly to foretelling future events. Famous Catholic prophecies by such figures as St. Edward the Confessor, St. Malachy and St. John of the Cross were held in awe because they predicted future events related to the papacy and the fate of the Catholic Church.

The most famous Catholic prophet and predictor of future events was Nostradamus, a 16th-century physician and mystic from southern France. His arcane and exotic prophecies are still the subject of intense fascination to this day.

In the Protestant world, Martin Luther and John Calvin had little use for prophecies and other charismatic gifts since they felt that all revealed truth was finally captured in the sacred Scriptures.

Luther never tired of railing against the “swarming” prophets and “babbling” tongues speakers of his day. They were all “false prophets” and dangerous enemies of the Reformation. During the Peasants War, Luther recommended that such people be drawn and quartered.

Indeed, the Anabaptist “prophets” in the German city of Muenster were massacred by leaders of the Reformation. Despite these circumstances, Lutherans in later centuries experienced prophecies in the various Pietist and charismatic movements that occasionally arose in Lutheran domains.

In time, the reformed followers of John Calvin went on to develop a view of the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit called “cessationism.” This view held that the miraculous gifts and ministries of the apostolic age ceased with the apostles, and the church needed only the scriptures and the sacraments for salvation.

Despite this trend, various sons of the Reformed tradition, such as Jonathan Edwards and the later charismatics, experienced great revivals and prophetic manifestations.

For several centuries, therefore, the office of prophet and the proclamation of prophetic messages was vigorously opposed and persecuted by both Protestants and Catholics. Around 1700, a prophetic movement arose among the Protestant Huguenots in France. Because they were given to many prophecies, they earned the name “the prophets of Cevennes.”

In time, the French Catholic Church rejected the movement, and many of the prophets were martyred for their faith. Some of them escaped to England where they were known as the “French Prophets.” There they influenced John Wesley himself.

It was only in the 19th century that tongues and prophecy again appeared prominently in the church. In the 1830s in Britain, a group of aristocratic Anglicans and Presbyterians revived
prophecy under the leadership of Edward Irving and John Nelson Darby and also attempted to restore the office of apostle to the church.

After a degree of rejection by both Anglican and Presbyterian authorities, the group organized the independent "Catholic Apostolic Church" where thousands of prophecies not only were uttered, but also written down for the faithful to read.

Their basic premise was that the fivefold ministries must be restored to the church before Christ could return. Their prophecies, however, did not foresee the ultimate failure of the movement. By 1900, most of the churches had disbanded in England, although a vigorous church continued in Germany.

CHARISMATIC/ PENTECOSTAL RENEWAL

With the advent of modern Pentecostalism, the gift of prophecy exploded again among Christians who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit accompanied by the gift of tongues. The earliest Pentecostals were sure that all of the gifts of the Spirit were being restored to the church including the gift of prophecy.

Although tongues received most of the attention, Pentecostals soon began to see tongues and interpretation as being equal to prophecy (based on 1 Cor. 14: 5). Many cases of tongues, with the attendant interpretation, became directive prophecies for the thousands of missionaries and evangelists who went to the far corners of the earth in the wake of the Azusa Street revival.

When William J. Seymour sent his followers forth, they usually went with a personal prophecy from Seymour. Several major Pentecostal missions thrusts came as a result of these and other prophecies (see sidebar below).

For instance, the Pentecostal revival in Chile came partly as a result of a prophecy given by a poor night watchman to the pastor of the Valparaiso Methodist Church, W.C. Hoover. The prophecy called on the most spiritual members of the church to pray each day at the 5 p.m. teatime.

"I intend to baptize you with tongues of fire" was the burden of the prophecy. In 1909 a monumental revival broke out in the church with many cases of prophecies, dreams, visions and speaking in tongues.

After the Methodist authorities rejected the revival in a trial proceeding in September of 1909, Hoover and 37 Chilean former Methodists organized the Pentecostal Methodist Church. Today the latest government census credits the Pentecostal Methodist Church with having 2.5 million members in Chile.

The advent of the charismatic movement among Protestants in 1960 and Roman Catholics in 1967 opened the door for a new flood of prophetic utterances in the thousands of prayer meetings and conferences that mushroomed around the world in the 1970s and 1980s.

As a movement aimed at restoring all the gifts and ministries to the church, tongues, prophecies, healings and exorcisms became major attractions of many charismatic ministries. Whereas the older Pentecostals gave spontaneous and extemporaneous prophecies, many charismatics, especially Catholic ones, carefully wrote out their prophecies and read them before large and expectant audiences.

The most famous prophecy of this
period was given at the Kansas City (Missouri) Conference in 1977. There was weeping and repentance among the 50,000 people gathered in Arrowhead Stadium as the words “The body of My Son is broken” boomed over the speakers. A promise of ultimate victory brought cheers from the multitude in the stadium.

Although the gift of prophecy continued to be regularly exercised in countless Pentecostal and charismatic gatherings around the world, new prophetic teachers arose in the 1980s and 1990s to draw further attention to the prophetic gift in the church.

One of these, Bill Hamon, led a movement that included mass individual directive prophecies in large gatherings. As people lined up, the prophets gave a personal prophecy to everyone in attendance, at times numbering hundreds of people.

These prophecies put a strain on the prophets since they were asked to produce prophecies to multitudes of perfect strangers. As a result, Hamon founded a school of the prophets in Florida where students came from near and far to learn how to exercise the gift.

Another prominent prophetic movement issued from Mike Bickle’s Metro Christian Fellowship church in Kansas City, Missouri, in the 1980s. Here such prophets as Bickle, Bob Jones, Paul Cain and John Paul Jackson conducted prophecy services and conferences serving thousands who came for personal prophecies.

The most prominent of the group was Paul Cain who had been involved in the Latter Rain movement and had once traveled with healing evangelist William Branham in the 1950s. John Wimber joined in the prophetic movement in 1988 when Paul Cain visited him in California and stunned the Vineyard founder with a prophecy of two earthquakes that actually occurred on that very day.

Cain then joined forces with Wimber as a sort of “prophet in residence.” This began a period of prophetic utterances from Cain that influenced the entire Vineyard movement. For several years Wimber and his team produced a stream of books, articles and major teachings on prophecy in their periodical *Equipping the Saints.*

Some of the teachings proved to be controversial since Wimber taught that a certain percentage of prophecies could be wrong since “now we see as in a glass darkly” and “we prophesy in part.”

In 1990, after an attack on the Kansas City Prophets by local Kansas City pastors, Wimber stepped in and offered to receive Metro Christian Fellowship into his Association of Vineyard Churches. For a time Wimber, Cain and Bickle led a far-reaching campaign to restore prophecy in the Vineyard churches and in the church at large.

This period came to an end when Wimber expelled the Toronto Vineyard from the Vineyard fellowship in 1995 over the issue of “exotic manifestations.” Metro Christian Fellowship later withdrew from the Vineyard fellowship in protest.
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ENCOURAGING THE GIFT

Recent prophecy movements have raised several serious questions among church leaders and theologians. For instance, some think that mass prophesy on demand often leads to mechanical and meaningless prophecies that could actually be harmful to the recipients. Usually people seeking prophetic guidance are counseled to seek confirmation elsewhere and not base any major decision on just one prophecy.

Additionally, the idea that a prophet could be wrong on a certain percentage of predictive prophecies and improve with practice has also been questioned by many, since the overwhelming tradition, especially in the Old Testament, is that false predictions are prima facie evidence of a false prophet.

The practicing of learning to prophesy in a classroom setting seems to take a gift of the Spirit, which is given and controlled by the Holy Spirit, and places it in human hands apart from a worshipping community.

Despite these and other questions, the church should be thankful that the gift of prophecy has been abundantly manifested in this generation. Thousands of mighty ministries have been energized by words of prophecy.

A recent example is the prophecy made many years ago that Reinhard Bonnke would one day see 1 million souls converted in one service. This actually took place in his millennium crusade in Lagos, Nigeria, in 2000. On one night, 1,093,745 persons signed decision cards testifying to having accepted Christ as their Savior.

May we have many more such prophecies and many more such results.

VINSON SYNAN, PH.D., is professor of divinity and dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University. A respected church historian, Synan is the author of numerous books, including The Century of the Holy Spirit.

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