The Continuation of New Testament Prophecy and a Closed Canon: A Critique of Wayne Grudem’s Two Levels of New Testament Prophecy

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INTRODUCTION

A key sticking point dividing fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals is the question regarding the cessation versus the continuation of New Testament prophecy. Fundamentalists have traditionally argued for the present cessation of New Testament prophecy, whereas a growing number of conservative evangelicals argue for its present continuation. 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.

Fundamentalists argue that if prophecy continues beyond the writing of the New Testament, then the canon must be open and the New Testament cannot be the final rule for faith and practice. Conservative evangelicals often counter by positing two levels of prophecy: an apostolic level and a non-apostolic level. The apostolic level, like Old Testament prophecy, is inerrant and divinely authoritative; the non-apostolic level is neither. These conservatives

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3E.g., Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary), 1:179–80; 2:357–58. In both sections, McCune draws the parallel between a closed canon and the cessation of the revelatory gifts. The implication is that the one cannot exist without the other.

4For example, Wayne 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 in the New Testament and Today [Wheaton: Crossway, 1988,
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.⁵

When pressed for a defense of two levels of New Testament prophecy, conservative evangelicals are quick to point to Wayne Grudem’s seminal work in this area, especially The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today, now in its second edition.⁶ In fact, it is fair to say that, among conservative evangelicals, Grudem’s work 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.⁷ That being true, there is a sense in which the case for the continuation of New Testament prophecy coupled with a closed canon rises or falls on the cogency of Grudem’s arguments.

For that reason, a fresh examination of Grudem’s arguments is in order. The intent is to determine whether the exegetical evidence supports Grudem’s position. Specifically, Grudem’s arguments for two levels of New Testament prophecy represent the linchpin of his position and are examined first. This is followed by an assessment of Grudem’s defense for a closed canon. Finally, a conclusion is drawn on whether the debate between cessationism and continuationism is a legitimate issue that should continue to divide fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals.

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 text for this argument is Ephesians 2:20

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⁶See the entry in footnote 4 and Grudem’s Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 1049–82.

⁷See, for example, Carson, Showing the Spirit, pp. 93–100. Carson relies extensively on Grudem’s arguments, drawing upon an earlier version of Grudem’s The Gift of Prophecy.
where Paul refers to “the apostles and prophets” as providing the revelatory foundation for the church.

2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.

The expression in Ephesians 2:20 “the apostles and prophets” represents a plural Granville Sharp construction. This construction consists of two plural nouns joined by a simple conjunction and preceded by a single article. Grudem is reluctant to allow for two groups in 2:20, apostles and prophets, because those referred to in this verse 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 identical and as 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, it is only apostolic prophecy that is involved in laying the revelatory foundation for the church and which is inerrant and divinely authoritative. Ordinary, non-apostolic prophecy, Grudem avers, is neither inerrant nor authoritative.

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

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


Grudem, The Gift of Prophecy, pp. 329–46. Eph 3:5 is generally included in this discussion in that it has the identical construction found in 2:20. 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’” (p. 330).
a subset of the second, larger group “prophets.” In either case, the two groups are
distinguished, not equated as Grudem argues.\textsuperscript{11}

In all fairness, it must be acknowledged that 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. So, it is possible that the construction in
Ephesians 2:20 could be translated as Grudem does.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, the grammatical
evidence renders this option suspect. As mentioned 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

That being 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 that contributed to the laying of that foundation. In short, the grammatical evidence
weighs against Grudem’s translation of the plural nouns as referring to a single group and
effectively counters his argument.\textsuperscript{13}

Sensing the tension with his interpretation, Grudem protests on several occasions that
Ephesians 2:20 is not critical to his argument.\textsuperscript{14} 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
2:20 means that they could speak with authority equal to the apostles and equal to
Scripture…. \textit{This is an important question}, because if everyone with the gift of prophecy

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 (pp. 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” (p. 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 (p. 82). See also idem, \textit{Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics}, pp. 284–86, including bibliography.

\textsuperscript{12}The 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, none of the examples Grudem lists in support of taking the construction in Eph 2:20 as a single
group involves two nouns. A passage that involves two plural nouns is the expression “some pastors and teachers”
found in Eph 4:11. Although Grudem attempts to use this passage to support his interpretation of Eph 2:20, his
interpretation here faces the same challenges as his interpretation of Eph 2:20 and 3:5. See Grudem, \textit{The Gift of
Prophecy}, pp. 333–46. For rebuttal, see the comments by Wallace, \textit{Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics}, p. 284.

\textsuperscript{13}Responding 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” (\textit{Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics}, p. 285).

\textsuperscript{14}Grudem, \textit{The Gift of Prophecy}, pp. 13; 307–9; 344–45.
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.\textsuperscript{15}

To counter the implications of his own words, Grudem adds a disclaimer. Even if the prophets in Ephesians 2:20 are equal to the apostles in authority, he would simply postulate a third category of ordinary, congregational prophets who do not share in this level of authority. In other words, Grudem would respond by saying that what Paul declares about prophets in Ephesians 2:20 would not apply to prophets elsewhere in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{16}

The difficulty with Grudem’s response is that Paul is discussing the function of apostles and prophets within the context of churches generally, as even Grudem acknowledges. Thus, despite Grudem’s disclaimer, the implication is that what Paul says of the prophetic gift in Ephesians 2:20 would be true of the gift elsewhere.

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, the entire foundation being 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 carries divine authority. Consequently, these directives calling for an evaluation of the prophet’s message distinguish New Testament prophecy from Old Testament prophecy and from apostolic prophecy.\textsuperscript{17}

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. With these passages, Grudem concedes, the requirement is clearly levied for the purpose of discerning the true prophet from the false.\textsuperscript{18}

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

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 45–46 (emphasis added); see also p. 330.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 338.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 54–62.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 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.
mixture of truth and error. As such, it lacks divine authority and, in that sense, is distinct both from Old Testament prophecy and from apostolic prophecy.

The principal 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.” 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.19

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, Paul is not directing the congregation in 1 Corinthians 14:29 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.20

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. Had Paul intended with this verse a testing of the prophets themselves to discern the true from the false, Grudem asserts, the simple form of the verb meaning “to judge” would have been employed rather than the compound form Paul uses.21

In response, neither the context of the passage nor the verb used by Paul incontrovertibly supports 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.22

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 cannot prophesy that which is 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.23

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19The 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. 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, pp. 54–57).


21Ibid., pp. 59–62. The compound form is διακρίνω; the simple form is κρίνω.


23Grudem 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
Furthermore, the verb Paul employs in 1 Corinthians 14:29 has a wider semantic range than the meaning Grudem assigns for that verse, as even Grudem allows. While 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, 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.24

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.25

Additionally, Grudem points to 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, “Do not despise prophetic utterances, but examine everything carefully,” as the key parallel in support of his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:29. 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,

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., p. 24).

As well, Grudem must also distinguish between passages that call for the testing New Testament prophets to identify the true from the false with what he understands Paul is directing in 1 Cor 14:29, “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” (p. 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” (p. 61). If the criteria for discerning a true prophet from a false prophet be 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?


24Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. “ἐξάκριτοι,” 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), pp. 80–81.

25See the discussion in Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 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” (p. 693).
because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Clearly in 1 John 4:1 the verb has the idea of testing the prophets to judge the true from the false, as even Grudem acknowledges.  

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.


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 recorded in Acts 21:10–11.

21:10 As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, “This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”

In Acts 21:10–11 a prophet named 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 by Agabus, 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”

Specifically, Agabus says that the Jews would bind Paul and deliver him to the Gentiles, whereas, Grudem avers, 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.

26 The verb in both verses is the present imperative δοκίμαι· ᾀρτε.  
28 Ibid., pp. 77–83, 286, 310. Of the examples Grudem identifies in support of this argument, he spends the majority of his time developing his point from this passage.
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. And, if that be the case, the prophecy is fully exonerated in 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.29

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).30

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.31

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.”32 Thus, Tertullus identifies the Jews as those responsible for Paul’s arrest. Furthermore, 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.”

29See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Acts of the Apostles, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 689. Commenting on the voice of the verbs, Wallace states, “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 Grammar Beyond the Basics, p. 412).


32Following 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), p. 434.
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 Agabus is wrong, then Paul must be wrong as well: Grudem cannot argue for the one and 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.  

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…’).”

Grudem then follows this admission by adding that the exact words used, “Thus says the Holy Spirit,” are never elsewhere used 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 and 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

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34 Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, p. 82.
represent the very words of God, be inerrant, and carry divine authority.\textsuperscript{35} He notes that in 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.\textsuperscript{36} For the church, he concludes, the canon consists of the writings God has authored and providentially preserved in the Protestant Bible.\textsuperscript{37}

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.

However, Grudem’s defense of ongoing prophecy coupled with a closed canon faces two insurmountable obstacles. The \textit{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 simply cannot have it both ways.

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.”\textsuperscript{38} 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 \textit{second obstacle} Grudem faces, somewhat parallel to the first, is the disjunction his position creates between God giving special revelation to a prophet and the revelation God gives lacking 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 prophecy on those occasions when the prophet communicated it accurately have divine authority? Unfortunately, Grudem does not address this issue.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., pp. 242–46.  
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., pp. 246–49  
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., pp. 241–42.  
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., pp. 45–46; see also p. 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 separation. 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. Conservative 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 add to or change 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. As the apostle Peter states in Acts 4:12 when speaking of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, “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.”

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.
Conservative 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, there is a considerable amount of fellowship that can be and should be enjoyed between fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals.

Having said that, the profound implications of continuing New Testament prophecy is such that some restrictions, specifically involving cooperation in ministry, must be recognized. The relationship between the two groups in terms of fellowship or separation is not simply all or nothing. Some level of separation involving restrictions on mutual ministry must be maintained in order to underscore the importance of a closed canon and to guard the New Testament as the final rule for faith and practice.