

Text: Ac 21.10-14

Proposition: The gift of prophecy, like all supernatural sign gifts, belongs only to special periods of salvation-history; prophecy is not for the present time.

Today we are going to cover five verses in Acts 21, but I like them so much we will do it twice!

Actually, the reason for using the text twice is that the first message will deal with an “issue” surrounding this text and our afternoon message will deal with the point of the passage itself.

Some years ago, I used an illustration about a different text that applies to this one.

How many of you listen to AM radio when you drive around town?

I used to listen to talk radio all the time – this was before I discovered audio books and got my very cool pink iPod Nano...

At certain points in town, you find that high power electrical wires above the streets interfere with the radio signal – you get a lot of static that interferes with your attempt to tune in a station, especially those from some distance away, like Vancouver. You hear bits of the signal, but mostly what you get is static.

Some passages are like that. You read it and automatically start thinking about the argument that surrounds the text. The static breaks through and interferes with the signal. Some passages have so much interference, that all you “hear” is the static.

Today’s passage is like that, although it isn’t totally overwhelmed by the static. Still, if you are aware of contemporary debates at all, you likely “hear” a good bit of static with our passage.

Read Acts 21.10-14

What is the static surrounding this passage?

Static: the gift of prophecy in general; the accuracy of what Agabus prophesied concerning Paul in particular

This morning we will discuss:

The Gift of Prophecy

Proposition: The gift of prophecy, like all supernatural sign gifts, belongs only to special periods of salvation-history; prophecy is not for the present time.

I. Doctrine of the prophets

A. Definition

1. ISBE: “speaker for God”

“According to the uniform teaching of the Bible the prophet is a *speaker* of or for God. His words are not the production of his own spirit, but come from a higher source. For he is at the same time, also, a *seer*, who sees things that do not lie in the domain of natural sight, or who hears things which human ears do not ordinarily receive; cf 1 S 9:9, where *nābhī*, ‘speaker,’ and *rō’eh*, ‘seer,’ are used as synonymous terms.”¹

2. Easton’s BD: “spokesman for God”

“The ‘prophet’ proclaimed the message given to him, as the ‘seer’ beheld the vision of God. (See Num. 12:6, 8.) Thus a prophet was a spokesman for God; he spake in God’s name and by his authority (Ex. 7:1).”²

B. Discipline (or “test”)

1. The main thing: not the word of man, but the word of God

“The main thing is that he must have been able sharply to distinguish the contents of this voice from his own heart, i.e. from his personal consciousness. Only in this way is he capable of speaking to the people in the name of God and able to publish his word as that of Jeh. In this case he is the speaker of Jeh (*nābhī*), or the mouth of the Lord (cf Ezk 7:1 with 4:16).”³

¹ C. von Orelli, “Prophecy, Prophets,” James Orr et al., eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2459.

² M. G Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 562.

³ von Orelli, Orr et al., *ISBE* (1915), 2460.

2. The divine test: Dt 18.18-22

Dt 18.18-22 'I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ 'It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him. ²⁰ 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' ²¹ "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' ²² "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not 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.

- a. Absolute accuracy essential
- b. False prophecy incurs the death penalty

C. Charismatic redefinition

1. The characteristics of the charismatic movement

- a. Spectacular sign "gifts" especially tongues and healing (also prophecy)
- b. Problem: the gifts were unverifiable
 - 1) So-called "heavenly language" when real languages undiscernible
 - 2) Anecdotal and invisible healings when real healings unavailable
 - 3) Prophecies: the things prophets claimed often (almost always) failed to be true

Since false prophecies incur the death penalty, that's a problem for sincere believers.

2. The development of an alternate theology of prophecy

- a. Later developments sought legitimate scholarship, notably Wayne Grudem

b. Grudem claimed that NT prophecy is different from OT prophecy

“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”⁴

c. In other words, NT prophets didn’t have to be accurate and don’t incur the death penalty (no specific Bible revelation cited)

d. For proof, Grudem relies heavily on this prophecy by Agabus

1) Agabus:

a) The Jews will bind Paul

b) The Jews will deliver Paul over to the Romans

2) What happened at Paul’s arrest

a) The Jews tried to beat Paul to death

b) The Romans rescued him, put him in custody, and put him in chains

3) Grudem’s conclusion: Agabus erred, thus demonstrating that NT prophets can give *general impressions* that don’t have to be accurate

Commenting on 1 Cor 12-14, “Paul thought of prophecy at Corinth as something quite different from the prophecy we see, for instance, in Revelation or in many parts of the Old Testament. There, a divine authority of actual words is claimed by or on behalf of the prophets. But the prophecy we find in 1 Corinthians, while it may have been prompted by a ‘revelation’ from God, had only the authority of the merely human words in which it was spoken. The prophet could err, could misinterpret, and could be questioned or challenged at any point.”⁵

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Rev. ed (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2000), 18.

⁵ Grudem, 69.

That's enough to establish the static surrounding our passage. The whole matter is worth much study and I can refer you to good articles on the subject if you are interested. Today, we are interested in Agabus.

II. Accuracy of Agabus

A. Did Luke consider Agabus an accurate prophet?

1. Luke introduces Agabus as a prophet of God

Ac 11.27-28 ¶ Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and *began* to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the *reign* of Claudius.

Ac 21.10-11 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..."

2. If Luke didn't think Agabus was accurate, why did he include his prophecy here?

B. Paul borrows the identical language when he later describes his arrest (Ac 28.17)

Ac 21.11 ... "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.'"

Ac 28.17 ¶ After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he *began* saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was **delivered** as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

C. The verbs are *causative*: the action of the Jews caused the arrest and incarceration of Paul

“The reference to Jewish involvement in the binding here is ‘causative’ in force: the Jews will not physically bind Paul but will be responsible for his being arrested (21:27, 30, 33; Wallace 1996: 412).”⁶

Wallace: “Recently some scholars have argued that Agabus’ prophecy was not ‘right on target’ and that one could not appeal to the causative verb to support its accuracy. The argument is that causative verbs imply volition on the part of the ultimate agent. This is not necessarily so. Luke’s usage, in particular, involves unwitting causative agents.”⁷

Two other examples from Wallace

Ac 1.18 (Now this man **acquired** a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.

1 Jn 1.10 If we say that we have not sinned, we **make** Him a liar and His word is not in us.

What we are saying here is that the accusations against Agabus here are invalid, his prophecy is accurate, we see no justification for NT prophecy allowing for errors.

III. Spiritual gifts today

A. The spiritual gifts are signs

1 Cor 14.22 So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy *is for a sign*, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 638.

⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 412 n. 9.

B. The signs are particularly connected with the apostolic age

2 Cor 12.12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

C. The sign gifts have an end-point

1 Cor 13.8 ¶ Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are tongues*, they will cease; if *there is knowledge*, it will be done away.

The only debate is when this end-point will occur.

D. The history of sign-gifts

1. Miracles

- a. Moses
- b. Elijah/Elisha
- c. Jesus/apostles
- d. *None since*

2. Prophets

- a. Abraham (first one called a prophet in Bible)
- b. Moses (the archetypical prophet)
- c. None (or few) until Samuel (1 Sa 3.1ff., 9.6ff.)
- d. Schools of prophets may begin with Samuel and carry on through the period of the Kings
 - 1) Certain notable named prophets during the kings
 - 2) Notable writing prophets during the kings
- e. A few post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi ... long pause ... John the Baptist)
- f. Jesus and the apostles and certain individuals

“In the NT the terms **προφήτης**, *prophētēs*, **προφητεία**, *prophēteía*, **προφητεύω**, *prophēteúō*, signify speaking under the extraordinary influence of the Holy Ghost.”⁸

⁸ von Orelli, Orr et al., *ISBE (1915)*, 2464.

g. After the apostles... “crickets”

“But this gift ceased more and more, as the Christian church more and more developed on the historical basis of revelation as completed in Christ.”⁹

Note: von Orelli thinks that prophecy “never completely ceased” but doesn’t allow for prophets who make errors.

Conclusion:

Proposition: The gift of prophecy, like all supernatural sign gifts, belongs only to special periods of salvation-history; prophecy is not for the present time.

There will likely be true prophets in the end times, after God removes the Church by the Rapture. Some men who remain will turn to God and become spokesmen for God in the time of the end.

That time is not now.

Our attention should focus on the Bible, it is our only authoritative guide, anything that contradicts it should be ignored.

⁹ von Orelli, Orr et al., 2464.