

## **Prophecy and the sufficiency of Scripture**

### **Introduction**

Here's where we've got to so far in our studies in the Doctrine of Scripture:

1. God has spoken in the Bible – the Scriptures are the very words of God, breathed out by Him.
2. He has spoken perfectly and powerfully.
3. He has spoken with clarity. The Bible isn't always easy. But we don't need special priests or experts to understand it.
4. His Word in Scripture is sufficient – it is enough to achieve God's purposes.

And it's the sufficiency of Scripture that we began to unpack in our previous session. We learned:

- God has told us all we need – through Jesus, in His Word
- God calls us NOT to receive new revelation but to remember what we have heard
- God is still speaking what he has spoken
- Implication: a new respect for Scripture

In this session we're going to ask some questions about *prophecy*: does God still speak today *outside* of the Bible? And, specifically, is there such a thing as ongoing prophecy? (Have you ever heard someone say, "I've got a Word for you?" Or, "let's hear a word of knowledge"?) We need to think and act Biblically in this area – and it's important to relate it back to the sufficiency of Scripture.

But before we turn to the Bible's teaching about prophecy I want us to learn a lesson or two from church history, as we look at some affirmations and denials of the Bible's sufficiency in the past.

### **1. Learning from church history: denials and affirmations of the sufficiency of Scripture**<sup>1</sup>

The earliest of the church fathers (i.e. the leaders of the Christian church in the first decades and centuries after the deaths of the apostles) affirmed the sufficiency of Scripture.

However, throughout the medieval period belief in the doctrine diminished sharply. Over time the church progressed through a number of succeeding stages in its rejection of Scriptural sufficiency:

- First was a growth of non-Scriptural church traditions (e.g. the sign of the cross at baptism)
- Then, Church tradition was cited to reinforce the Bible's teaching
- Then, Church tradition cited to interpret the Bible's teaching
- Then grew the belief that the Spirit spoke not through Scripture, but through the Roman church.

Thus, by the late medieval period the Roman Catholic church had effectively replaced Scripture as the Word of God. It was against this that the Protestant Reformers reacted. At the heart of the Reformation was a call to return to *sola scriptura*, scripture alone.

However, among early Protestants were numbers of groups which – perhaps oddly – had much more in common with the Roman Catholic Church than they would have realised. These were the so-called radical Protestants, perhaps best known of which were the Anabaptists. Among other heretical doctrines (e.g. faulty views on the sovereignty of God and the atonement) they held that certain individuals were especially endowed with the Spirit such that they could both speak words from God and supply definitive interpretations of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> See Timothy Ward, *Words of life: scripture as the living and active word of God*, pp108-117

As time went on they were not the only group to think in these terms. In fact several groups and movements – which on the face of it seem to be unlikely bedfellows – sought to find the voice of the Spirit *apart from God’s Word*. These included the Roman church and the Protestant radicals (which we’ve just mentioned above), plus later rationalists (like Spinoza in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century) and philosophers (like Schleiermacher in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century). In different ways all would claim to find the Spirit’s voice *either* in special individuals *or* in the whole of humanity.

The best of the Reformers found themselves having to react against both Catholic and Radical error. John Calvin, for example, lumped both Pope and Anabaptists together. He accused both of seeking the Spirit in such a way that tended “to sink and bury the word of God.”

In the Reformers’ doctrinal statements we find some of the clearest and most beautiful affirmations of the powerful sufficiency of Scripture. (See the conclusion below for extracts from the 39 Articles of Religion and the Westminster Confession of Faith).

Why is it worth looking at the story of the Bible’s sufficiency in the church over the last 2,000 years? At the very least it helps explain western thought and the wider church has got into the mess that it is in. And it shows us that there is nothing new under the sun! On the one hand, few errors are genuinely new. On the other hand, for edifying help and solid truth we would do well to let the giants of the Reformed past preach truth to us today.

Let’s turn now specifically to the question of prophecy. We will survey the Old Testament and New Testament, before drawing out some conclusions and applications.

## **2. Prophecy in the Old Testament**

- **Canonical and authoritative prophets (“thus says the Lord”) – not just predictive, but calling people back to past revelation**

When we think of Old Testament prophets our minds probably turn first to the likes of Ezekiel, Elijah, Moses, Isaiah or Jeremiah.

These were “canonical” prophets – i.e. through them the Spirit spoke, giving words that once written down became for us the “canon” of Scripture. And they were “authoritative” prophets, speaking words for God himself – hence the prophetic formula “thus says the Lord” which prefaces so many prophetic oracles.

What was the job of these prophets? It was not just predictive (i.e. indicating supernaturally the course of future events). Far more than that their task was to call God’s people back to God’s past revelation which he had already given and which they were ignoring. The prophets were God’s covenant enforcement mediators. They warned, they reminded, they exhorted, and in some cases finally passed words of judgement on those who failed to repent and believe.

But these were not the only prophets which we encounter in the Old Testament. There was a variety among OT prophets.

- **Other kinds of OT prophets**

Evidently, at different points in Israel’s history, groups of prophets existed who spoke (and sung). It is hard to discern what their exact ministry was. Sometimes there was a predictive element to it. Sometimes there was a call to repentance. For some it was only a temporary ministry (e.g. Saul, the elders in Numbers 11). As a group they seem to be distinct from the likes of Elijah, Ezekiel, *etc.* in terms of their authority. Here are two representative passages from the OT describing them<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Samuel 19:20-24, 2 Kings 2:1-17, 1 Kings 13:1-34, 1 Chronicles 25:1-7

<sup>ESV</sup> Numbers 11:24-29, So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. <sup>26</sup> Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. <sup>27</sup> And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." <sup>28</sup> And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." <sup>29</sup> But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Samuel 10:5-6, 10-12, After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying. <sup>6</sup> Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man... When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. <sup>11</sup> And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, "What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" <sup>12</sup> And a man of the place answered, "And who is their father?" Therefore it became a proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

- **The OT prophets were clear that the current practice was not the ideal – they looked forward to a different and better future**

In our reading of the OT we are probably used to the idea that the people of God were looking forward to a new and better *king* (the coming Christ or Messiah) and to a new and better *sacrificial system* (a priest and sacrifice that could deal with sin and guilt once-and-for-all-time).

We may be less aware that the OT was also looking forward to a new, better and final *prophet*. Thus in Deuteronomy chapter 18, Moses promises that God will raise up another Moses to whom the people shall listen:

<sup>ESV</sup> Deuteronomy 18:14-22, ... for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this. <sup>15</sup> "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers- it is to him you shall listen- <sup>16</sup> just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' <sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. <sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. <sup>19</sup> And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. <sup>20</sup> But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' <sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'- <sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

The NT tells us that Jesus is this Moses-like prophet (see Acts 3:17-23). He will bring a revelation from God that is as full, final and sufficient as the salvation that he works upon the Cross. When he comes God's people were to listen. (Thus, we see the three offices or tasks fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ: prophet, priest and king).

Further, the OT has both a longing for all God's people to know Him in the same way that the prophets did (see Numbers 11:29, cited above) and a clear expectation that one day this would happen:

<sup>ESV</sup> Joel 2:28-29, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. <sup>29</sup> Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

### **3. Prophecy in the New Testament**

- **The big picture (see previous session)**

In our previous session, in which we examined the sufficiency of Scripture, we set out the NT's big picture. In examining the Bible's teaching on ongoing prophecy we mustn't lose sight of this bigger picture. In particular Acts 2 and Hebrews 1:1-4 (both of which passages were discussed in the previous session) give us twin bearings which we're to keep clear sight of.

At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Spirit of God is poured out in fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel chapter 2. All believers are filled with the Spirit. All believers can prophesy, though it is probably not helpful to say that all believers in the new covenant age are actually "prophets." Here, "prophecy" is a sign of the indwelling of the Spirit and an immediate relationship with God.

In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read of the finality of the revelation of Jesus. Where God spoke in the past to our forefathers in many ways and times, he has now "spoken" definitively and finally through the person of his son. Just as there will be no new salvation event, so we expect no new salvation revelation from the mouth of God.

Having reminded ourselves of that "big picture" we turn to consider what the rest of the NT has to say about prophecy.

- **Prophecy in Acts**

Above we've noted the significance of Pentecost (Acts 2) for all Christian people. As we read on through the book of Acts we also see the ministry of certain "prophets." Thus, we read of the terrible famine which was correctly predicted by Agabus and of Paul and Barnabas' commissioning:

<sup>ESV</sup> Acts 11:27-30, Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). <sup>29</sup> So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

<sup>ESV</sup> Acts 13:1-5, Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. <sup>4</sup> So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. <sup>5</sup> When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them.

Later, certain prophets (including Agabus) twice urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (and they did so "through the Spirit"). However, Paul simply ignored them! Thus we read:

<sup>ESV</sup> Acts 21:4-15, And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed <sup>6</sup> and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. <sup>7</sup> When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. <sup>8</sup> On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. <sup>10</sup> While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" <sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." <sup>14</sup> And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." <sup>15</sup> After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

What do we learn about the ministry of the prophets in Acts? Firstly, their activity seems very specific and personal to Paul and his companions. There seems little reason to generalise a "prophetic" ministry from their example. Secondly, what they imparted was not fresh revelation from God or doctrinal in any sense; it was not strictly "necessary." Thirdly, what they said was clearly under apostolic authority and subject to weighing, not automatic obedience – hence, Paul felt justified in ignoring what was said to him in Acts 21.

- **Prophecy in 1 Corinthians**

When we think about NT prophecy it is likely that our minds turn to the book of 1 Corinthians, and in particular to chapters 12-14. We note the following:

"Prophecy" (whatever it is) can be engaged in by women as well as men. This means that it must be different from the ministry of proclamation and preaching which is reserved for duly appointed male teachers:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:5, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head- it is the same as if her head were shaven.

Prophecy is empowered by the Spirit, who gives different and diverse gifts to Christians within the body of Christ. The purpose of prophecy (as with every spiritual gift) is "the common good" and the building up of the body of Christ. It is never to be exercised for personal or selfish gain:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7, To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:10-11, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:29-31, Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The chief problem with the Corinthian church was its grievous lack of love. Paul warns, therefore, in chapter 13 (the so-called "love" chapter, which is much more a serious warning that a passage suitable for wedding sermons):

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:2, And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

He goes on in chapter 13 to note the interim and temporary nature of prophecy. When the “perfect” comes it will cease:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Prophecy is of value because it is comprehensible. Its purpose is to build up, encourage and console other Christian people in the church. It is also of value to the unbeliever or outsider, as a means to their conviction and conversion. It is to be weighed (therefore, it is different to Scripture which is authoritative). And its exercise should be orderly; it is no good a person saying that they were out of control in their prophetic speech, for Paul warns that God loves order and that the prophet is responsible for his words and conduct:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:1-4, Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup> The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:22-26, Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? <sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, <sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. <sup>26</sup> What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:29-33, Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. <sup>30</sup> If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. <sup>31</sup> For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, <sup>32</sup> and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. <sup>33</sup> For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints,

What do we learn about prophecy in 1 Corinthians? Firstly, the Corinthian church was a deeply dis-ordered church. We don't look at their example in order to learn what we *should* do! Often it provides a negative example for us. Secondly, prophecy is one of many gifts which are given for the common good of the body of Christ. Thirdly, it is interim and temporary (cf. 13:8-12), meaning *either* that it will cease with the future return of Christ *or* (as cessationists argue, probably incorrectly) that it has already ceased with the end of the apostolic age and the completion of Scripture. Fourthly, we learn the wonderful effect of prophecy – in 14:3 – which is to build up, encourage and console.

- **Prophecy in Ephesians**

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul makes reference to prophets and apostles:

Ephesians 2:20, ... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

Ephesians 3:5, ...which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

What do we learn about the prophet from these verses? There are three options as to their identity. Firstly, the “prophet” may be representative of old covenant canonical revelation while the “apostle” represents the new. In other words, “apostles and prophets” is shorthand for the books of the NT and OT. This is unlikely, as the “now” in 3:5 points to a revelation that was ongoing in the lifetime of the first century church. Secondly, the “prophets” may have been those endowed with a special gift which aided the foundation of the church and which died out with the apostles. Thirdly, this phrase may actually be describing one single group, namely the apostles *as prophets*.

- **Prophecy in 1 Thessalonians**

Lastly, we note that prophecy should not be despised, but it should be tested and weighed:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:19, Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

#### **4. Assessment and conclusion**

- **Distinguish different types of “prophet” in the Bible**

It is obvious that the words “prophecy” and “prophet” mean different things in different parts of the Bible. Remembering this will help us not to read into the word “prophecy” whatever we want it to mean.

Firstly we note the authoritative and binding Prophecy of OT canonical revelation (Elijah, Ezekiel, etc). In the NT the apostles inherit the role of the OT canonical prophet. This perfect and authoritative revelation from God has ceased to be given with the deaths of the apostles and should not be sought. Nevertheless, through the words of OT and NT God the Spirit continues to speak to his church.

Secondly, there is a sense in which all Christian can prophesy. In Acts 2 we learn that all believers in the new covenant age have the immediate knowledge of God which under the old covenant only belonged to a few (note references to young and old, men and women, etc.).

Thirdly, there is an ongoing “gift” of prophecy. It is not perfect or binding revelation from God (perhaps it is helpful to distinguish between big “P” and little “p” prophecy). It is truth-filled speech from one Christian to another which leads to personal strengthening, encouragement and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3 is the nearest we are given to a definition; strictly, we learn here only of its effects). It is to be weighed when given (1 Cor 14:29, 1 Thess 5:20-21) and is strongly encouraged.

In many ways, ongoing prophecy in the life of the church is very much like the giving of wise counsel (e.g. Proverbs) from one life to another. It’s what should be happening in Christian friendships, fellowship groups and churches as we share God’s truth and its application with one another. Earlier generations of Christians closely identified prophecy with preaching (e.g. the Puritan pastor William Perkins in 1592 wrote a famous work on preaching which he simply called “The art of prophesying”). Whether we choose to call it “prophecy” or “counsel” or “wisdom” or “speaking the truth in love” it is something our church needs to practice more and more.

- **Warning: watch out for fresh voices – and don’t make the extraordinary into the ordinary**

An important application of the sufficiency of Scripture is that the individual Christian, Church, and church leader is to be suspicious of claims to offer fresh voices from God. We don’t need and shouldn’t look for fresh words from God. Of course God *can* speak directly. He occasionally does do *extra*-ordinary things, but we shouldn’t imagine that they are ordinary or normal. His Word is more than enough.

We can put that another way. The word that God speaks to us now is the word that he first spoke through his apostles and prophets of old (Moses, Jesus, Paul etc). In order to hear God's word to us today we attend to what he spoke to them back then. We shouldn't short-circuit this process in search of direct revelation from God.

And it's worth us noting four errors that can creep into church life or personal spirituality as we think about ongoing prophecy:

*Spontaneity indicates authenticity.* Sometimes we imagine that a sudden or spontaneous word or impression is of more weight than one which is prayerfully and studiously prepared. This is an entirely false assumption.

*The OT prophetic model and authority is invoked.* Sometimes an exhortation or prediction is given with a claim to the full authority of God. This claim might be explicit ("I've got a Word from the Lord," or "God has told me that...") or implicit. This is highly dangerous. It wrongly binds people's consciences, is open to massive abuse, and can destroy true faith. No-one may speak for God in this way.

*Prophecy is the only way or the best way that God speaks today.* In practice this is sometimes assumed. It is possible to entirely neglect the Bible and Bible teaching in search of fresh words and prophecies from God. As we've observed above this is hugely dangerous. The NT clearly prioritises the Bible and the teaching of the Bible as the means for saving faith and growth in godliness.

*Prophecy is often given in a sensational manner.* Whereas, in the NT there is no hint of this. It is a low-profile encouragement ministry.

- **Helpful voices from church history**

By way of conclusion here are some helpful voices from church history.

The Puritan Richard Baxter knew the pull of "over-realised eschatology" (which is probably the chiefest error of the charismatic movement) – i.e. assuming that what will be experienced by the Christian only in heaven is actually our experience now. He wisely reminds that we are called to live by faith and not by sight:

"Insist not so much on your desires after vision, as to undervalue the lower apprehensions of faith; but love God by the way of faith... Know better the difference between thy travel and thy home; and know what is fit for passengers to expect... Thou must live, and love, and run, and fight, and conquer, and suffer by faith, if ever thou wilt come to see and to possess the crown." (Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p130)

In the *Westminster Confession* we are reminded that God "makes use of means" – that is, he has ordinary ways of doing things and particular tools which he likes to use. When it comes to hearing the voice of God we are given the Bible and Bible teachers. But, of course, when he wants to God is free to do something different:

God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure. (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.3, "Of Providence")

Much more recently Donald Gee, the charismatic Assemblies of God leader, gave this sane and balanced judgement on listening to the voice of God:

"There are grave problems raised by the habit of giving and receiving personal "messages" of guidance through the gifts of the Spirit... The Bible gives a place for such direction from the Holy



Spirit... But it must be kept in proportion. As examination of the Scriptures will show us that as a matter of fact the early Christians did not continually receive such voices from heaven. In most cases they made their decisions by the use of what we often call 'sanctified common sense' and lived quite normal lives. Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want to make the extraordinary and exceptional to be made frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for 'messages' through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as contemporaries... The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." (Cited in Kevin De Young, *Just Do Something*, pp73-74)

On the sufficiency of Scripture we would do well to listen to these ancient words:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. ("Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation," Article 6 of the *39 Articles of Religion*)

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6)

In our next session we're going to look at another question connected with the sufficiency of Scripture, namely that of *guidance*. How does God guide his people? Does he speak directly? How does he shape our lives? How does his guidance of us fit with the sufficiency of Scripture?

#### **Further reading / Bibliography**

- The transcript, handout and audio of this session is available on the Immanuel Church website.
- See also my paper entitled *Charismatic theology and practice: an assessment*, also available on the Immanuel Church website.
- Kevin De Young, *Just Do Something*
- Rupert Standring, *New Testament Prophecy – then and now* (Cornhill Training Course, Proclamation Trust; 2001)