

The Reality of Prophetic Vocation
A Response to Fritz Guy
by Charles Scriven

Fritz Guy has offered us his perspective on Adventist theological priorities for the twenty-first century. It is both insightful and courageous, although considering the source, this goes without saying. Dr. Guy has been a benchmark for insight and courage throughout his career.

Three appendices to his essay collect remarks from Ellen White on “Faith and Evidence,” on “The Continuing Quest for Truth,” and on “‘Conservative’ and ‘Conservatism’ in the Published Writings of Ellen G. White.” The collected remarks buttress his considerable reliance on Ellen White throughout the paper. For Adventists, Ellen White has prophetic authority, and this is as evident here as the blue sky at high noon. Her voice is the anchor for the paper’s basic theme: in the light of *evidence*, we must be ready to *adjust* our thinking. For an audience of Adventists, the appendices and other quoted materials seem crucial for the success of the argument.

An undeveloped irony about all this is that the most conservative Adventist writers, with whom this paper does implicit battle, also rely heavily on Ellen White. She is the linchpin of Adventist rhetoric, or so it seems. For debate among Adventists about Adventist life and thought, her authority remains strong; her words still matter most.

This raises the question I will pose here. With respect to theological priorities in Adventism, does not the *question of prophecy*—what this “gift” is about, how it functions, what it means—have an urgency equal to, or even exceeding, that of any other?

The official statement of Adventist “Fundamental Beliefs” tells us (Belief 17) that “God bestows upon all members of His church in every age spiritual gifts” meant to enhance the “common good of the church and of humanity.” These gifts include such “ministries” as healing, teaching and administration. One of the ministries is “prophecy.” The supporting passages indicate that, like the other gifts, this one comes to many in the church; it is not limited, certainly, to one, or even a very few, individuals. According to 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, God has appointed “prophets” (in the plural) to serve the body of Christ. Prophecy appears here as one of the “greater gifts,” and Paul admonishes church members precisely to “strive for the greater gifts.” You get the feeling (from these texts) that prophecy is a vocation, like teaching. You might resist prophecy, as you might resist teaching; but it’s not something that just “happens” to people whether they have a knack for it or not.

Belief 18, specifically on “The Gift of Prophecy,” follows immediately. Invoking Revelation 12:17 and 19:10, it says that the gift of prophecy is “an identifying mark” of the community called to be the remnant. It was “manifested” in the ministry of Ellen White, and it made her “a continuing and authoritative source of truth” for the church. Even if the Bible remains “the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested,” she has a claim on our deference. She is the prophet who fulfills the Bible’s prophecy about last-day prophets.

But Joel 2:29,29 and Acts 2:14-21, also cited to supported Belief 18, say that in the “last days” (the phrase Acts uses) God will pour out his “spirit” upon *all* flesh; after

Christ, all people—daughters and sons, old and young, slave and free—may receive power from the Spirit to “prophecy.” So again, you again get the feeling, from the actual text of Scripture, that prophecy is a vocation available to many.

Although Belief 18 does not explicitly say so, two of the cited supporting passages connect prophecy directly with Jesus Christ. Revelation 19:10 explicitly identifies Jesus with the prophets. His “testimony” *is* “the spirit prophecy.” Hebrews 1:1-3 declares that although God has spoken “in many and various ways” through the prophets, in “these last days” the “exact imprint” of God is the risen Jesus. Thus Jesus becomes, as you might say, the gold standard of the prophetic vocation.

In this light, the level of reliance on Ellen White that characterizes so much Adventist debate seems a little strange.

For one thing, why is there only one person with her degree of living authority in our midst? If prophecy is a defining trait of the people called to be the remnant, why do we assume that one voice is enough? And why do we not aspire, many more of us, to actually *be* prophetic—to actually *be* courageous and credible conduits for the Word of God today? Would it not be a good thing if Dr. Guy could invoke more than one Adventist authority in defense of his perspective?

For another thing, why do we not say, as unmistakably as Scripture does, that the risen Christ is the linchpin, the deciding voice, in the resolution of theological controversy? Even for the theme of Dr. Guy’s paper, you can cite a startling sentence from the Farewell Discourses of Jesus: “I still have many things to say you, but you cannot bear them now.” Not even the original disciples could claim complete understanding of the truth of Christ. But Jesus promised that through the Holy Spirit’s teaching—teaching precisely about him—they would be able to adjust their thinking toward deeper insight.¹

In “The Merchant of Venice” Antonio says: “Mark you this, Bassanio, the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”² Presumably, his point would hold for any corpus of inspired writing. The only way for Christians to deal constructively with this fact is to speak of Jesus Christ, risen and now seated at God’s right hand. It is to say, as the Letter to the Hebrews does, that Christ alone is the “exact imprint of God’s very being.”

What the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs should declare concerning the gift of prophecy is that *Christ* is “the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.” It should acknowledge that he—not Joel or Habbakuk or anyone else—is the gold standard of the prophetic vocation. Perhaps we would then have a better chance of resolving theological dissonance—what exists, after all, within the prophetic literature³ as surely as within our community today. We will never, of course, overcome this dissonance completely, but at least we would have clearer resources for achieving the degree of consensus we need for effective communal witness.

Or all this, along with my question about our dearth of prophetic voices, is what Fritz Guy’s remarks have helped me to wonder. I ask again: Does not the *question of prophecy*—what this “gift” is about, how it functions, what it means—have for Adventists today an urgency equal to, or even exceeding, that of any other?

¹ John 16:12-14.

² Act 1, scene 3, line 99.

³ Cf., e.g., Isaiah 2:1-4 and Micah 4:1-4 with Joel 3:9,10.

