

An Alliance Perspective on Prophetic Ministry

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Historical Background

The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) is an evangelical denomination founded by Albert Benjamin Simpson. According to Alliance historian Bernie Van De Walle, the movement's roots go back as far as 1882 when Simpson founded his first Gospel Tabernacle which housed "informal missionary training classes,¹" that paved the way for the Missionary Training Institute (now Nyack College).

By 1887 this fledgling movement had produced two distinct, but like-minded societies, "The Christian Alliance" and the "Evangelical Missionary Alliance." The former emphasizing the deeper life in Christ and the latter emphasizing the necessity of world missions and participation in the Great Commission. Within 10 years these distinct societies would merge to become "The Christian and Missionary Alliance." The movement formally became a denomination in the United States in 1974.²

Perhaps some of the most formative aspects of the historical development of the Alliance is its navigating of both the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements of the 20th Century in the United States. While the Alliance preceded the Pentecostal movement, it was still in its early developmental stages when the Pentecostal movement began under William Seymour in 1906. It has been well documented by Alliance theological historians Dr. Paul L. King, Dr. Ron Walborn, Dr. Bernie Van De Walle, Dr. Charles Neinkirchen as well as others that the early Alliance and the early Pentecostal movement had extremely close ties.

The two movements eventually distinguished themselves from one another, primarily over the necessity of tongues as the evidence of the baptism/filling of the Holy Spirit. The Alliance held the view that while speaking in tongues may be an evidence, it is not the sole or necessary evidence of the baptism/filling of the Holy Spirit. Since that day, much has been written about the interactions between the Alliance and the early-Pentecostals. For further study see; *A.B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement* by Charles W. Neinkirchen, *A.B.* by David Jones and *Genuine Gold* by Paul L. King, among other resources.

More than a half century after the birth of the Pentecostal movement was the emergence of the Charismatic movement in the 1960's. Much like with the Pentecostal movement, Alliance leaders were forced to navigate a Biblical approach to trends in the American church. Some were more accepting of charismatic teaching, others rejected it totally. Once again, the role of spiritual gifts, particularly the practice of speaking in tongues, was at issue.

It was in the context of discerning the Charismatic movement that the Alliance formalized a position on the gift of tongues. This position is best known as "Seek Not, Forbid Not" and was

¹ Van De Walle, *"The Life and Times of Albert Benjamin Simpson"*

² Niklaus, Sawin and Stoesz, *All for Jesus*, 229

articulated the Board of Managers/Directors in 1963 and reaffirmed in 1999³. Practically, the “Seek Not, Forbid Not” position encouraged an openness (albeit reluctant) to speaking in tongues, but undoubtedly it also led to passivity. The “Seek Not” portion of the statement also seemed to conflict with Paul’s encouragement to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts” in 1 Corinthians 14:1. Whatever the intent, the result was that the use of tongues became more of a private matter and its use in public gatherings faded away.

In contrast to the challenges that the Alliance faced as it sought to understand the role of speaking in tongues, the Alliance appears to have dedicated relatively little time to formalizing a view on the gift of prophecy. That is not to say that there have never been discussions, teaching, conflicts or controversies over the practice of the prophetic, or that there has been a perfectly uniform view, but simply to say that the disagreements have been less public and less consequential.

This paper will therefore explore and further develop an Alliance perspective on prophetic ministry. Undoubtedly there are a variety of perspectives on the role of the prophetic within the Alliance. Probably thousands of sermons by hundreds of Alliance pastors and teachers have addressed this topic. However, for the purpose of this paper attention will be given primarily to official publications of the denomination or statements made by significant figures or officers of the denomination.

Furthermore, this paper will not be addressing Alliance perspectives on the fulfillment of certain eschatological prophecies. The purview of this paper is limited to the practice, gift and role of the prophetic as referenced in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, Romans 12 and other relevant passages on spiritual gifts.

Simpson’s Understanding of the Prophetic

It is not clear that the Alliance has ever had a uniform understanding or definition of the New Testament prophetic gift or office. In fact, it is unlikely that something like that was ever established. In the absence of a shared understanding it may be helpful to first look at the convictions and attitudes of the founder, A.B. Simpson.

It seems clear from his writings that Simpson’s understanding or working definition of the prophetic was directly informed by 1 Cor. 14:3; “But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” About this passage, Simpson wrote;

Now this gift is very clearly defined in [verse 3]. It is not merely or mainly the power which foretells future events, nor is it at all the mission of receiving inspired revelations and adding to the already finished Word of God, but it is a simple and practical ministry of help to men.

[Paul] defines it by three terms: ‘But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their

³ Seek Not, Forbid Not, 3

strengthening, encouragement and comfort' (14.3). In a word, the prophet's business is to build up men, to stir up men and to cheer up sorrowing and troubled hearts.⁴ (Italics mine)

In his comments on the manifestation gifts of 1 Cor. 12, Simpson continues;

We have the gift of prophecy specially denoting the ministry which gives men the direct messages of God. It is not always the power to foretell future events. A prophet is rather a divine messenger, the man who catches the mind of his Master, and gives it out to his fellowmen at the divine direction. He is not so much a teacher of the written Word as a messenger of the very thing that God would say at the time to the generation to which he speaks or the community to whom he bears witness. *The definition of a prophet given by the apostle in the 14th chapter of First Corinthians is very satisfactory. 'But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort' (14.3).* The prophet, therefore, while including the office of teacher in this chapter, more especially carries with it, we believe, the idea of specially witnessing, in the immediate power and unction of the Holy Spirit, the messages of God to men.⁵

In these statements Simpson is clear to point out that he does not equate prophetic ministry with the mere foretelling of future events. Rather, Simpson would say that the ability to foretell future events is only one function of the prophetic, which also includes strengthening, encouragement and comfort of the church.

Alliance pastor and author, A.W. Tozer, held a similar view; "The New Testament gift of prophecy was not to predict - but to tell forth what God has to say and to proclaim God's truth for the present age."⁶ Whilst that can include the foretelling of the future such as we see with Agabus in Acts 21:7-14, it is not limited to it.

Simpson identified Paul's description of the prophetic ministry in 1 Cor. 14.3 as the definitive, tri-partite understanding of the New Testament prophetic ministry. Prophecy, in Simpson's mind, was to "strengthen, encourage and comfort." In Simpson's paraphrase it was; "specially witnessing, in the immediate power and unction of the Holy Spirit, the messages of God to men." Simpson seemed convinced that timing and immediacy were core components of prophetic ministry.⁷

Furthermore, in his book, *Gifts and Graces*, Simpson describes prophecy as; "A divine inspiration enabling the possessor to speak direct messages of the Holy Spirit for the spiritual profit of

⁴ Simpson, *Christ in the Bible Vol. V*, 232

⁵ Simpson, *Christ in the Bible Vol. V*, 217. Italics mine.

⁶ Tozer, *Tragedy in the Church*, 25

⁷ In addition to Simpson, Alliance Pastor and Alliance Theological Seminary Professor Dr. Rob Reimer have identified the purpose of prophetic ministry as to "strengthen, encourage and comfort." (Reimer, *River Dwellers*, 74)

the hearer...The prophetic message has more immediate reference to the particular condition of the hearer and the need of immediate spiritual help.”⁸

Simpson also described the power of the prophetic; “Prophecy is the power to receive and give forth special messages of the Holy Spirit for edification, exhortation and comfort of His people. It is not so much the ministry of teaching as the special testimony from time to time along the line which the prophet describes as the ‘word in season to him that is weary.’”⁹

It seems as if Simpson had almost internalized the phrase “direct messages” or “special messages” to describe the prophetic, as he uses these phrases frequently when discussing the topic. What we can conclude from these selections is that Simpson’s view of prophecy focuses on *special and direct messages that meet an immediate and specific need to strengthen, exhort and comfort.*¹⁰

An Alliance Perspective on Prophetic Ministry

Starting with Simpson and continuing to modern day, there have been at least three clear and recurring themes in the attitudes of Alliance leaders toward the prophetic. These three themes address many of the modern questions and concerns regarding the prophetic ministry today. These three themes are;

- 1) The Prophetic has continued.
- 2) The Prophetic is beneficial and necessary.
- 3) The Prophetic should be tested.

The Prophetic has continued

As the following evidence suggests, the Alliance has always held that the prophetic gift and ministry have continued. While there may be varying opinions on how Old and New Testament prophecy and prophets may differ, and how modern prophets may differ more still, the idea that the gift and ministry have ceased has never gained wide acceptance within the U.S. Alliance. While there may be some that currently hold to the cessationist perspective that certain supernatural gifts have ceased, this view does not align with the Alliance’s overall historical perspective on the prophetic.

Perhaps nothing could make this clearer than the fact that both A.B. Simpson and A.W. Tozer were identified and recognized as reliable prophetic voices in their generation by Alliance leadership.

Within a year of Simpson’s death, A.E. Thompson, a close friend and associate penned the first biography of Simpson; *A.B. Simpson, His Life and Work* (1920). In Thompson’s biography an

⁸ Simpson, *Gifts and Graces*, 303

⁹ Simpson, *Ministry of the Spirit*, 337

¹⁰ Other significant Alliance voices have described the prophetic as “speaking for God under the inspiration of the Spirit, preaching in the Holy Spirit” (Alliance Weekly, Nov. 3rd, 1934) and “a specific message for a special occasion” (Thompson, *A.B. Simpson*, 195) and “The supernatural ability to both hear and speak on God’s behalf.” (Hartley, *Fulfilling Our Calling*, 12)

entire chapter is dedicated to Simpson's role as "A Modern Prophet." In that chapter, Thompson writes at length about the "prophetic office"¹¹ that Simpson was called to and refers to Simpson as a "Prophet to the prophets."¹²

Simpson is not alone in being recognized as a prophet by the Alliance. For its centennial celebration in 1986, the U.S. Alliance published an official history called *All for Jesus*. The book chronicles the historical and international development of the Alliance over its first 100 years. In this history book, published by the denomination itself, A.W. Tozer is referred to as a "very human prophet".¹³

Tozer apparently knew himself to have a prophetic call early in his ministry, as he titled the prayer that he offered at his ordination, *The Prayer of a Minor Prophet*.¹⁴

Like Simpson, a biography of Tozer was published only a year after his death. This biography, written by David J. Fant and published by Christian Publications (the Alliance's publishing arm) was called; *A.W. Tozer: A Twentieth Century Prophet*.¹⁵

In 2014 James L. Snyder released a never before published collection of Tozer's sermons on the prophetic, called *Voice of a Prophet*. In the book Tozer spends significant time using Biblical prophets as models for how modern prophets should operate. Therefore, regarding Simpson and Tozer, the conclusion seems clear; the Alliance has publicly recognized them as prophets.

Aside from biographical treatments of exceptional characters like Simpson and Tozer, what has been the attitude and perspective of the Alliance toward the continuation of the prophetic gift, ministry and office?

Simpson himself stated that; "True prophecy is a perpetual ministry in the New Testament church"¹⁶ and "In the public meetings, the church is to welcome all manifestations of the Spirit, including prophecy and tongues, provided that the 'order...reverence and decorum due to the house of God' were not violated."¹⁷

That the Alliance saw these gifts going beyond the New Testament era is made clear by A.E. Thompson, who writes; "The [Prophetic] office continued in the New Testament dispensation. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that when Christ ascended on high, He gave gifts unto men...Until the Body, the Church, is complete, *these gifts will continue*."¹⁸

¹¹ Thompson, *A.B. Simpson*, 195

¹² Ibid, 199

¹³ Niklaus, Sawin and Stoesz, *All for Jesus*, 221

¹⁴ Tozer, *Voice of a Prophet*, 7

¹⁵ Fant, *Twentieth Century Prophet*

¹⁶ Simpson, *Anointing*, 130

¹⁷ Bertone, *A.B. Simpson*

¹⁸ Thompson, *A.B. Simpson*, 195. Italics mine.

In 2014, the Alliance in the United States released an updated position on spiritual gifts called *Expectation without Agenda*. In direct response to the question; “Have some spiritual gifts ceased to exist?” the Alliance perspective is clear:

No. Because spiritual gifts were given to build up the church, the body of Christ, as long as the church is under construction, spiritual gifts are needed. A day will come when spiritual gifts will no longer be needed (1 Corinthians 13:8). However, we do not believe that this day has yet come. It will come when perfection comes (1 Corinthians 13:10). Some interpret this “perfection” to be the completion of the canon of Scripture (the Apostolic Age). However, this is not a good rendering of the Greek text. We believe that this refers to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the church, the bride of Christ is complete and perfect, that is when spiritual gifts will no longer be necessary.¹⁹

It seems evident that while there may be some in the Alliance that deny the continuation of the prophetic, the overwhelming majority of early and contemporary Alliance sources affirm its continuation.

The Prophetic is beneficial and necessary

Dr. Paul L. King has done an incredible favor to the Alliance by collecting story upon story of supernatural manifestations in the early Alliance. In addition to chronicling stories and testimonies King has provided an anthology of statements and quotes from early Alliance leaders regarding the supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit. In *Nuggets of Genuine Gold*, King recounts the following; “[Prophecies and visions] occurred in the early Christian and Missionary Alliance as well. In fact, the missions emphasis of the Christian and Missionary Alliance was established on Simpson’s response to a vivid dream in which he awoke trembling.”²⁰ King goes on to recount the impact of prophetic dreams on early Alliance leaders like John Cookman, Robert Jaffray, C.H. Gootee and Carrie Judd Montgomery.

In a sermon entitled; *Fit or Misfit: The Gift of Prophecy*, Alliance Pastor and itinerant preacher Rev. Richard Siple teaches that both men and women may prophesy. Siple describes the plight of the prophet; “Prophets are people who start revivals or riots. They get crowned or crucified. They are gifted with vision and voice. They can see and say.”²¹

A.B. Simpson evidently did not view prophecy or the prophetic as inconsequential or unimportant. While commenting on the preaching ministry of Jesus, Simpson suggested the following application for aspiring preachers and evangelists; “Every Christian worker and minister should have

¹⁹ Walborn, *Expectation without Agenda*

²⁰ King, *Alliance Academic Review*, 115

²¹ Siple, *Fit or Misfit*

in a very real way a prophetic message, a message not obtained from books and scribes, but warm from the mouth of God, and fresh from the Holy Spirit.”²²

A.W. Tozer, known as a prophet, never missed an opportunity to decry the lack of prophetic influence in the American and Canadian church. He states; “I have always said prophets are never comfortable to have around, but they are indispensable if we are not going to rot.”²³

A.B. Simpson’s missionary impulse was the result of a prophetic dream. Early Alliance meetings were marked with prophetic encounters. Alliance leaders have been calling for more prophetic influence since the founding of the movement. Modern Alliance leaders are providing instruction and development opportunities in the prophetic. Clearly those in leadership in the Alliance see the prophetic as not only continuing, but something that is beneficial, necessary and worth developing.

The Prophetic should be tested

If the prophetic has continued and it is seen to be beneficial, how should it be practiced and implemented? Alliance leaders have not been silent on how to wisely and pastorally implement and test the prophetic in local church settings as well as other public settings.

Some may question, “Why is it necessary to test the prophetic? Why would we test God’s voice?” If one begins with the premise that God is being tested, this question is valid. However, if one begins with the premise that what is being tested are the imperfect messengers of God, then a test becomes absolutely necessary. While God and His word are reliable, imperfect human messengers still need to be evaluated and assessed. As John MacMillan has said; “Knowledge and prophecy in this present life are imperfect owing to our own imperfection...We prophesy in part. All here is imperfect, and our knowledge as yet merely covers the imperfect, and that imperfectly...partial revelations.”²⁴

Obviously, the primary test of any modern prophetic utterance is its relationship to the canon of scripture. Of this, Alliance leaders have much to say, but before addressing how prophetic ministry relates to scripture, Alliance Pastor and Alliance Theological Seminary Professor Dr. Rob Reimer encourages us to consider our own attitudes when testing the prophetic: “I won’t test [prophetic] words with someone who treats prophecy with contempt. They won’t be able to help me. I will test words with someone who honors prophecy, and walks in humility, and has displayed discernment.”²⁵

Not only are we to subject prophetic revelations to scripture, but we are to subject our attitude toward the prophetic to scripture. Alliance theologian K. Neill Foster, in response to the question; “Are

²² Simpson, *Christ in the Bible Vol. IV*, 190

²³ Tozer, *Living as a Christian*

²⁴ MacMillan, *Full Gospel*, 28

²⁵ Reimer, *River Dwellers*, 69

all spirit-manifestations to be tested, or just some? Is this to be an occasional or a regular procedure?" provided the following response:

My answer here is to cite the Scripture, 'Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything, hold on to the good' (1 Thess. 5.19-21). And to offer the [my] paraphrase, "The Holy Spirit stop quenching. Prophecies stop depreciating. Absolutely all utterances are to be tested and verified, so that you will be able to isolate and seize the good."²⁶

Once we have submitted our attitudes toward the prophetic to scripture, we can now submit the content of the prophetic utterances to scripture themselves.

Alliance Pastor and teacher John A. MacMillan was a forerunner and pioneer in the area of spiritual warfare, particularly in the Alliance. His understanding of supernatural manifestations and how to discern and test them was reliable and exemplary. Regarding the testing of the prophetic, he makes a clear and plain statement: "All so called revelations since [The closing of the New Testament Canon] must be submitted to the test of the written Word."²⁷ This is an essential starting point for those that hope to practice the prophetic in a way that fulfills its purpose of strengthening, encouraging and comforting.

MacMillan goes on to say:

The leaders of the early church recognized the need of giving full liberty for the ministry of the Spirit through its members, but they also reserved the right to pass judgement upon prophetic utterances, as the apostle instructed them: 'Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things, hold fast to what is good' (1 Thess. 5.19-21)...'blow away the chaff, but retain the wheat.'²⁸

The necessity of testing the prophetic is not to be undermined by the zeal of the person delivering the message. Even the most sincere and passionate delivery of a message has no impact on the final authority of the Word of God in scripture. A.B. Simpson reminds us; "No word from any human lips, no matter how strongly it may seem to be authenticated by blessing on the speaker, should have the slightest weight as affecting the infallible Word of God."²⁹

²⁶ Foster, *Glossolalia*, 165

²⁷ MacMillan, *Inquirer's Corner*, 523

²⁸ MacMillan, *Discrimination*, 163

²⁹ Simpson, *Editorial*, 82

Conclusion

Early in his presidency, U.S. Alliance President John Stumbo challenged lead pastors and local church leaders to listen to the “speaking voice of God.” In a video blog that clearly affirms the idea that God still speaks, Stumbo implores; “We have nothing to say unless we have first heard...Obviously God would never speak to us in a manner that contradicts what He’s already said to us in the inspired Word of God...but the speaking voice of God continues to speak.”³⁰

President Stumbo’s challenge perfectly demonstrates the historical Alliance perspective on prophecy suggested in this paper. When Stumbo says that “the speaking voice of God continues to speak,” it is implied that the prophetic gift and role have continued in some regard. When Stumbo states “we have nothing to say unless we have first heard” he acknowledges the absolute necessity and subsequent benefit of what Simpson referred to as “direct messages” from God. Finally, when Stumbo reminds; “God would never speak to us in a manner that contradicts what He has already said to us in the inspired Word of God,” he encourages us to submit all prophetic impressions to scripture for testing.

The Alliance has a rich history in the deeper life in Christ. An expression of the deeper life in Christ is the desire and ability to hear His voice. Revelation 19.10 states that the “testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” If the Alliance is still interested in the testimony of Jesus and sees it as beneficial and coherent, it will benefit from both celebrating and further developing its perspective and practices regarding prophetic ministry.

³⁰ Stumbo, *Video Blog No. 2*

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