

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are & Why They Matter*. Nashville, TN: B & H, 2018. xii + 172p. Paperback.

Review by Vern S. Poythress

Dr. Thomas Schreiner has provided us with a winsome, irenic book about spiritual gifts. He brings to the task the skills of a seasoned New Testament scholar, but the book is accessible to ordinary Christians, with only a few footnotes and an admirable restraint in keeping to the main points.

Near the beginning the book focuses particularly on the charismatic movement (pp. 7-14). The next chapters deal with spiritual gifts more broadly (pp. 15-91). They include ten summary principles and many useful pastoral observations. Then the book considers the nature of prophecy and whether it has ceased (pp. 93-122, 147-162). In addition, it includes a complex, nuanced view of tongues, gifts of healing, and miracles (pp. 123-146, 162-167).

A central point of interest for many readers will be Schreiner's argument for the cessation of prophecy. The argument has two main prongs.

First, "prophecy" in the New Testament is the same as in the Old Testament. It consists in infallible verbal communication from God on the basis of "revelation" (p. 96). It differs from preaching based on "a written text" (p. 95).

Second, Eph. 2:20 shows that apostles and New Testament prophets provide the foundation for the church. Since the foundation has now been laid, there are no more prophets today (pp. 157-162).

We might add a third point, that no more infallible words from God are to be added, now that the canon is complete. The book does not fully develop this point, but it is there when the book affirms that Scripture alone is our final authoritative word. The book warns that authoritarianism and cult-like deviations arise once people think that some contemporary leader is infallible (e.g., pp. 11, 120, 158, 161).

None of these three arguments is new. But Schreiner puts forward an attractive, clear case by combining them and by sticking to the main points.

Are there weaknesses? One kind of weakness is unavoidable: in a relatively short book, Schreiner cannot go into all the details and address every aspect of the counterarguments from continuationists (those who think that prophecy continues) (p. 4).

One particular area deserves attention, namely the issue of the meaning of key terms: "prophecy," "revelation," "tongues," "preaching," and "impressions." "Sharing of *impressions*" (p. 118) is Schreiner's label for what most evangelical continuationists call modern "prophecy" (pp. 118-121). "God may speak to his people through impressions" (p. 119), but they may contain "a mixture of truth and error" (p. 118). Dealing with the other four terms is challenging. (1) We must bear in mind the word-concept distinction. Modern theological use (a "concept") usually does not match the full texture of a word from a dictionary of koine Greek ("word" meaning). (2) Building a refined sense of the meaning of a word by induction from its occurrences in the Bible is difficult, because it is easy to pour into the meaning nuances that belong to the context rather than the word. (3) Words have a range of usage. It is easy to forget this and not to notice variations in nuance, between different books and different contexts within a book. (4) Sometimes

several related words are involved, such as "prophet," "prophesy" (the verbal form), and "prophecy" (and the underlying Greek terms).

For the words related to "prophecy," we have associations with newness, with spontaneity, with a source in "revelation," and with authority (divine authority--or, as some continuationists think, a lesser authority). But do all of these features belong to every case? Consider, for example, Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36. Is this "preaching"? Is it a "prophecy"? Is it both? Where are the boundaries for these categories? Schreiner's definition of "prophecy" builds on a distinction between prophecy and preaching. "Preaching" is "from a prepared text" (p. 95). A single text? Peter uses several. And did Peter prepare? Conceivably. But it looks spontaneous. Was it new? It contains a new *combination* of various thoughts, but Peter appeals to several Old Testament passages and to the historical facts about Jesus and the phenomena of tongues. Little is completely new. Is it authoritative? Yes, because Peter is an apostle. Yet he focuses on what is publicly available, not on a new secret revelation that he has received.

Consider also Acts 2:11: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." Schreiner observes the connection with verses 17-18, and treats this communication as prophecy (p. 163). But the content was "the mighty works of God." The content was probably not absolutely new, but somewhat like historical psalms (for example, Pss. 78, 105, 106, 135, 136). Did the communication carry full divine authority, on the level of the apostles? It is impossible to say, except if we already think that all "prophecy" has divine authority.

Now consider Schreiner's category of "impressions." May we ask whether any church members in the first century had impressions that they shared? If there had been impressions, how would the church have distinguished them from "prophecies"? Those impressions that were in error clearly would be distinguishable from infallible prophecies. But Schreiner says, "Sometimes, in a most remarkable way they [impressions] might be completely right" (p. 118). This kind of thing, if present in the first century, creates a difficulty. True impressions and some instances of prophecy look alike to the casual listener. The difference is indiscernible. What would that mean for the church in Corinth? For practical purposes, would both of the two be loosely labeled as "prophecies"? But that may suggest that "prophecy" in the early church had a broader range of use than what Schreiner thinks. If so, it undermines his cessationist conclusion.

In practice, Schreiner's position is more appealing if we excise impressions from the first century. That leaves the book with a bit of tension. On the one hand, impressions "can't be of great importance because Scripture doesn't address them" (p. 120; also pp. 161-162n2). On the other hand, they are important, because every spiritual gift contributes to the body of Christ (pp. 39-40, 118, 120).

The presence of some weakness goes along with much strength. This is a worthwhile book, with many positive points. It deserves a wide reading.