

Divination Versus Prophecy and Implications for Discipleship in the Vietnamese Context

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Introduction

The seeking nature of man is described adequately by Gary A. Wilburn:

Man's world is limited by its physical qualities and knowable traits. Or is it? What has always made man a unique specimen of physical life is his belief in, and search for, something beyond the visible world in which he lives. He dreams and has ideas. He investigates the realms which are outside of his sense perception. He is aware of Being or beings separate from himself who cavort and command attention of those who inhabit the earth.

He has profound interest in the stars, in witches, in magic. He wonders if spirits who have departed have not really departed.

He yearns to understand and comprehend what exists – if anything – beyond the curtain of physical death. He wants to know his future, and so he turns to tea leaves, cards, crystal balls and his own palm.

Man is a seeker.¹

Because of man's seeking nature, animism has never disappeared as some have predicted; rather, it has reshaped itself and still coexists with world religions. Major religions and belief systems such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Catholicism have come to Vietnam for many centuries, but animism continues to be prevalent.

¹Gary A Wilburn, *The Fortune Sellers* (Glendale, California: G/L Publications, 1972), 1-2.

Pentecostalism is said to share the same beliefs as animistic cultures, namely, the spirit world. Both believe in the existence of spiritual beings and their activities which influence human beings. In effect, both practice the casting out of demons, healing, and revelation or discerning the divine will (divination/prophecy). These worldview parallels have become factors contributing to the impressive growth of Pentecostalism in animistic contexts in the last decades.² Vietnam is no exception. These parallels, however, have posed some challenges for Pentecostal ministers helping new converts in animistic contexts to experience a transformation at the worldview level according to biblical teaching. During the persecution of the Vietnamese church in the past, the gift of prophecy was operated to protect the church from danger. It soon, however, veered towards abuse and misuse, turning it into predicting the future for daily life issues such as: dating, marriage, business or schooling. Therefore, in order to effectively minister in animistic contexts such as Vietnam, among these parallels I would like to examine in the following pages are the concepts of divination and prophecy. I will then present the implications of these concepts and biblical teaching for the discipleship process of new converts in the Vietnamese context.

Definition

What is Divination?

Divination, in a general sense, is the attempt to discern the divine will or gain supernatural knowledge, especially knowledge of the future, through various devices.³ Sometimes it is considered as “a pagan counterpart of prophecy.”⁴ Alternatively, divination is “the practice of consulting beings (divine, human, or departed) or things (by observing objects or actions) in the attempt to gain information about the future and such other matters as are removed from normal knowledge.”⁵ In this general definition, divination may range from obtaining wisdom for wisdom’s sake to practicing things detestable to God.

For a more specific definition, divination, which plays a critical role in folk religions, refers to “the foretelling of the future using such means as astrology, augury and auspice. In principle the future course of events

²Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 24.

³Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, D-H (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2009), 143.

⁴Merrill F. Unger, ed., *The New UNGER'S Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1957), 312.

⁵Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, D-G (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 163.

is read from patterns found in the stars, the entrails of animals and such things as the way bones or sticks fall when thrown.”⁶

What is Prophecy?

The word “prophecy” (προφητεία in Greek) derives from the verb “prophesy.” προφητεία occurs 19 times in the New Testament, has the meaning of “prophecy, prophesying; the gift of communicating and enforcing revealed truth.”⁷

The prophet is the person who performs the prophetic function. Nowadays, people tend to focus on the predictive aspect of prophetic word; a careful examination of the activities of the prophets informs that the nature of prophecy is not exclusively predictive. The prophet at times functions as God’s mediator proclaiming God’s (oral or written) words or acting God’s message; other times he functions as one whose mission is to keep watch over God’s people. In particular, apart from the Hebrew word נָבִי “*nabi*” (“prophet”), we have other alternative titles for a prophet in the Old Testament such as: seer (Samuel), man of God (Elisha), servant of God (Amos, Jesus), messenger of Yahweh (Haggai), and watchman (Habakkuk, Ezekiel).⁸ Therefore, prophecy is God’s message, not the prophet’s message or general knowledge, which is often spontaneously given to the prophets—his spokesmen—through direct revelation. In this, prophecy is distinct from a minister’s sermon or teaching. Moreover, some prophecy is preserved for the future, which the prophets may not fully understand. Prophecy reflects a personal God who desires to communicate to his people about who he is, what his will is and what he expects from men.

Historical and Biblical Background

“It is likely that through all levels of ancient society there was a brisk interest in obtaining knowledge of the immediate future,” states Harry A. Hoffner.⁹ The interest in gaining divine knowledge was prevalent in the ancient world (for both royal and non-royal people) and is prevalent still today. While the God of the Bible chooses his own methods (prophets, dreams, the Urim/Thummim-Ephod) to communicate to his

⁶Irving Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion* (Downers Gove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 65.

⁷Biblehub, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://biblehub.com/greek/4394.htm>.

⁸Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 1068.

⁹Harry A. Hoffner, “Ancient Views of Prophecy and Fulfillment: Mesopotamia and Asia Minor,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 3 (September 1987), 258.

people and for his people to discern his will, people without the God of the Bible seek supernatural secrets through divination.

Divination

Along with magic, divination was practiced in the early times of human history and plays an important role in the daily life of many cultures. In many countries in the ancient world, divination received both social and political support. The biblical writings testify to the presence of divination practices in the promised land and the Ancient Near East. Before his people possessed the land of the nations of Canaan, God warned His them of their divination: “the nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination” (Deuteronomy 18:14).

There are many occurrences of divination in the Bible, both within and outside Israel. One of the earliest instances of divination is recorded in Genesis when Laban claimed to use divination to find out why he was blessed (Genesis 30:27). Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams lifted him up to the position second to Pharaoh. Additionally, he may have learned to do divination by water with his silver cup in Egypt (Genesis 44:1-5).¹⁰ Years later in Egypt, after seeing Moses and Aaron performing miracles, the Egyptian magicians tried to imitate the miracles with their magic (Exodus 7:8-13; 8:7-18) even though they could only imitate them up until the second plague.

Deuteronomy 18:9-12 makes it clear that practices such as divination, sorcery and omen interpretation are “detestable” before God. However, there are at least three methods of divination (though the Bible does not call them divination methods) acceptable before Him, which are dreams, prophets, and the Urim/Thummim—Ephod.

The attitude against divination, sorcery, etc. was repeated in the New Testament. The girl who had “the spirit of divination,” Simon the sorcerer, and Elymas the sorcerer are antagonists (Acts 8:9-13; 13: 8; 16:16-18).

Prophecy

Prophecy in the Bible is not limited to the prophetic literature. Its root can be traced back to the beginning of God’s saving plan.¹¹ The Protevangel in Genesis 3:14-15 reveals His divine intention to bring about a Redeemer for the world. Enoch, Noah, and Moses all uttered divine messages.

¹⁰Merrill C. Tenney, Vol. 2, 164.

¹¹Merrill F. Unger, 1040.

The Israelites thought that they would die if God spoke directly to them in the wilderness. In other words, they dared not hear from God themselves (Exodus 20:19, Deuteronomy 18:16). As a result, God promised to speak to His people through the prophets whom He would raise up (Deuteronomy 18:17-22). This probably explains to some extent why prophecy is widely emphasized in the Bible. Later on, the literal form of prophecy reached its heights during the ministries of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The end of the Old Testament closes with Malachi's prophecy of the coming Elijah.

The continuation of prophecy in Israel during the first century provides a backdrop for the expectations of the coming Messiah: Jesus Christ, the greatest of all prophets. The term "prophet" was applied to Jesus in Matthew 13:57 and John 4:19. He was the spokesman of God and is God himself. His life and ministry exposed sin, bringing sinners to repentance and faith, revealing the nature of God, comforting those who came to Him, predicting future events (for example, the fall of Jerusalem, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the second coming, etc.) and assuring believers of their glorious future.

In the New Testament's new period of revelation, believers are now the children of God. The Holy Spirit, who permanently indwells in the life of the believers, testifies to this adoption of sonship (Romans 8:15) so believers do not live in fear, but in power and love (2 Timothy 1:7). Accordingly, God can speak directly to believers and believers can boldly hear from Him (Hebrews 4:16). In other words, it is possible for all believers to prophesy in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 14:1, 31). New Testament believers now operate with the gift of prophecy in the context of the church, in harmony with other gifts of the Spirit, to affirm the work of Christ on the cross, build up and edify the Body of Christ, and bring about the conversion of unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, 24-25). Consequently, prophecy does not proclaim judgment in the Old Testament manner because "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

A Comparison and Contrast of Biblical Divination and Prophecy in the Bible and in Vietnamese Culture

As shown in the definition and the background of divination and prophecy, divination and prophecy have much in common in the sense that they are means of discerning the divine will, although in having access into supernatural knowledge to provide answers and solutions to human needs they are clearly distinct.

The first distinction lies in the divine origination of prophecy. Divination in general focuses on human techniques while prophecy

focuses on God's direct revelation.¹² Those who use divination are not concerned about the source as much as about the type of knowledge they get from it and how effective the divination method is. The source of divination derives from spiritual beings in the spirit world, who are willing to reveal secret knowledge to diviners with some conditions. Prophecy in the Bible, on the other hand, has great emphasis on its source—the Lord himself. God is the one who initiates the message. God can speak through dreams, visions, and signs or through the Urim/Thummim—Ephod. God can use godly and obedient people such as Moses, Joshua, Isaiah or Jeremiah; He can also use an erroneous, disobedient or stubborn person (Balaam, Jonah, even King Saul could prophesy in 1 Samuel 10:6) to speak forth truthfully His message as in the words of Balaam: "I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth" (Numbers 22:38). Therefore, it is the source of prophecy—the Lord Himself—who authenticates prophets, the methods of communication and the entrusted messages.

Secondly, while the character of diviners is of little concern compared to the effectiveness of their skills, intermediaries between God and the people, the prophets, are notable because of their character traits and inner spirituality. Ernest B. Gentile gives five categories of the prophets' character traits, namely: devoted—loyal, committed—obedient—humble, holy—prayerful—compassionate, daring—bold—faith-filled, and studious—patriotic.¹³ Although the character of the prophets can be diverse, one common trait is that they are Spirit-filled people. In the New Testament, when believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, they prophesied. In addition, they cherished their intimate relationship with God, who established and sent them out. Distinctively, their personality and consciousness remained intact when God gave them prophetic words, be it through a dream, a vision, or an audible voice. They might feel weak and afraid (Daniel, John), or unworthy (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah) in His presence; yet, the fear was gone after God assured them. In the same way, people with the gift of prophecy are Spirit-filled and true worshippers of Jesus.

Furthermore, God can use any believer to prophesy for Him and thus prophecy is a gift at God's disposal. Diviners in Vietnam are regarded as wise and knowledgeable intermediaries, yet, they have to perform certain kinds of ritual or work themselves up to ecstatic states in order to receive an impartation of divine information. For example, fortune-tellers learn skills in reading and interpreting signs. Possession diviners are totally controlled by spirits, losing their consciousness in order to be mediums

¹²Sakenfeld, Vol. 2, 143.

¹³Ernest B. Gentile, *Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophesy: Prophetic Gifts in Ministry Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Chosen Books, 1999), 68.

through whom the spirits speak. Diviners also charge fees for their knowledge or expertise and may require sacrifices to appease spirits (as is the case of possession divination).

In addition, while diviners often claim to be all-knowing humans who know how to retrieve answers to human questions from the spiritual world, prophets never claim to understand the mind of God at any time. The Bible records incidents where prophets have made inaccurate guesses. For instance, at first Samuel did not expect David would replace Saul as King (1 Samuel 16:6-13) and Nathan supposed that David would be the builder of God's temple (2 Samuel 7:3-16).

Finally, the meaning and purpose of prophecy is not so much to give people what they want as it is to fulfill God's purpose, that is, to build up the church. During the persecution period, Vietnamese Christians experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit where the gift of prophecy was manifested through leaders and church members to protect the church. On occasion, God used the gift of prophecy to warn the church of the danger of persecution from the police and to send His people to another place before the police came to seize them. In contrast, divination is concerned about human will, giving people what they want, on many occasions, out of wrong motives.

Divination in the Vietnamese Context

While Vietnamese divination beliefs include the whole range of practices found elsewhere, the most popular divination belief and practice is a combination of astrology and heremology (divining on the basis of the calendar). For example, a Catholic may consult a diviner to make sure he/she has the opening ceremony for his shop on a proper day and hour. A Buddhist, who believes that the year of the Rooster (2017) is not a favorable year may try to do more good works to eliminate or minimize the bad luck predicted by an unfavorable year. Consequently, he may participate in some Taoist rituals. Or, an atheist may believe that his relationship with his girlfriend cannot lead to a happy marriage because of the astrological-mystical disaffinity based on their birth years. These customs and beliefs apparently hinder Vietnamese Christian converts in their process of transformation by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many Vietnamese believe that there are auspicious days/hours and un-auspicious days/hours on the lunar calendar, which was formulated based on regularly changing phases of the moon similar to Chinese calendar of "sexagenary cycle."¹⁴

¹⁴Anh Q. Tran, ed. and trans., *Gods, Heroes, And Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteen-Century Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 261.

As a result, during the New Year Festival, a Catholic Vietnamese may go to church to pray to God for a good year ahead and also go to a diviner to try to deduce what is awaiting him or her in the new year. A middle-class Buddhist may invite a Buddhist monk to conduct Taoist rituals to ward off bad luck for the whole family in the new year. Meanwhile, Vietnamese from poorer families or from an ancestor worship background buy the “book of fate” for that year for each member in the family at any Buddhist temple or bookstore. Based on what is written, they plan and undertake significant events such as travelling, moving houses or getting married. If bad luck (sickness or a financial loss) is predicted, they would consult a diviner to undertake a certain kind of ritual to “relieve a bad luck.”

In summary, these practices in the Vietnamese context reflect level two of animism where “animism has significant effect on the religions practiced.”¹⁵ Partly because of the religious syncretic background of Vietnam, Neil L. Jamieson commented: “Over many centuries, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism had become intertwined, simplified, and Vietnamized to constitute—along with vestiges of earlier animistic beliefs—a Vietnamese folk religion shared to some extent by all Vietnamese.”¹⁶

As can be seen, Vietnamese worldview has been shaped by the blending of spiritual cults of venerating “creation” (such as sun, moon, mountains, rocks, rivers, ancestors, heroes, wandering souls, etc.) and Confucian ethics, the Buddhist view of life/afterlife, and magical practices of rites and rituals in Taoism.¹⁷

The abovementioned divination practices express, at the worldview level, the belief in the influence of the natural world and the spiritual world upon human life and fate. So, for example, the deceased (in the *yin* realm) act upon the living world (the *yang* realm), stars and changes of natural elements influence human characteristics and relationships and animal characteristics mirror human characteristics. These practices reveal a desire to live in harmony with the forces of the universe in order to minimize, through performing rites and rituals, the bad luck and suffering inherent in human life.

¹⁵Philip Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, South Carolina: Impact International Foundation, 1996), 46.

¹⁶Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (London: University of California Press, 1993), 11.

¹⁷Anh Q. Tran, 2-3.

Implications for Discipleship

When the Vietnamese accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ, their view on truth is challenged because “the teaching that one religion exclusively owns the ‘truth’ is a foreign and generally unaccepted concept to the Vietnamese.”¹⁸ To the mixture of religions mentioned earlier, Vietnam has added communist ideology which holds to evolution theory. This added dimension to the traditional Vietnamese belief systems promotes the belief that there is no Supreme Being to whom human beings are accountable and must worship.

For this reason, it is possible that new Vietnamese converts may add and adapt biblical teachings into their current belief system. Specifically, a Vietnamese who had practiced divination (by astrological heremology) would give great attention to the biblical prophetic gift in the body of Christ as the answer for his or her future. Moreover, the inclination to power may prompt a new believer to focus on spiritual gifts (prophecy) rather than develop spiritual fruit (love) (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Because of the Vietnamese worldview issues for new converts outlined above, I would suggest that the process of discipling a new Vietnamese convert should highlight the theology of creation and the work of Christ as follows.

The theology of creation reveals that there is only one true God, the Supreme Being, who created angels, humans and the natural world with an order, in which human being was directly created in the image of God lower than the angels (Genesis 1:28, Psalm 8:5). God is the source of all good things; He is distinct from and yet involved in His creation.¹⁹ Thus, human beings are responsible before God as His handiwork (to worship Him) and stewards (to manage God’s work). These responsibilities shape human destiny, not natural forces of the universe at the time of birth. Even the spirits (who are in fact, fallen angels) were created. Though higher than human beings (Psalms 8:5), they have limited power and will face judgment one day (1 Corinthians 6:3).²⁰ Moreover, after the Fall, the human race has stood condemned before God, except those who are redeemed by Christ. Vietnamese believers should no longer try to live in harmony with natural forces as a means to attract good luck and fortune. Instead, they need to be united with Christ, who is the reconciler between

¹⁸Victor L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1976), 25.

¹⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 267-271.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 412-415.

God and man and between man and man, who is the source of all blessings (Ephesians 1:3).

Now, believers have a new life and position in Christ, as children of God—the object of God’s love, not His wrath, since the Holy Spirit continually testifies to this adoption of sonship (Romans 8:15). This new life includes “the transfer of dominions,” “incorporation into Christ,” “access to divine power,” “living an ethical life” and “mission.”²¹

Being transferred to a new dominion, the Kingdom of God, believers are now under the rule and reign of Christ—the King who appeared “to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8) while in the kingdom of the world, Satan has blinded people’s minds (Ephesians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Believers must choose which side they belong to. If believers accept Christ’s reign and rule, they have to acknowledge His supremacy in all things, even their lives, and live accordingly. Believers no longer try to manipulate the divine to serve human needs as in their old animistic practices. They are not expected to know everything in the future, but to know Christ, who holds their future and trust His plan for their lives. It is true that sometimes God chooses to reveal to believers a glimpse into the future through the gift of prophecy. His total dealings with the believers’ life not only works through prophecy because all prophecy “reveals only part of the whole picture” (1 Corinthians 13:9). Chasing after prophecy for guidance or looking to a prophet more than focusing on the Bible are signs of divination. Saul’s mistake should be a solemn warning for such practice (1 Samuel 28: 3-25).

Moreover, although believers have access to the power of the Holy Spirit, the new life in Christ calls believers to live a life of righteousness, imitating Christ and remaining in Him since they are held accountable before God for their thoughts/deeds and for what has been entrusted to them. This responsibility in handling spiritual gifts (especially the gift of prophecy) needs to be emphasized in the Vietnamese context in order to build up others and the church as a whole (1 Corinthians 14:12). Spiritual gifts should not be abused: “anything God has placed at man’s disposal is subject to misuse.”²² The purpose of the Holy Spirit’s power is to both empower Christian service and bring about “internal transformation” in the lives of believers.²³ In other words, the power encounter must be

²¹Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concepts of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 134-145.

²²Glenn Foster, *The Purpose and Use of Prophecy: A New Testament Perspective* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988), 77.

²³Wonsuk Ma, “Tragedy of Spirit-Empowered Heroes: A Close Look at Samson and Saul,” *Spiritus* 2 (2017), 23, accessed November 03, 2017, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=spiritus>.

followed by encounters of truth and love for Vietnamese believers to give full allegiance to Christ.²⁴

Furthermore, Buddhism, which points to the reality of human suffering, has no clear explanation or solution for it. In order to minimize their suffering, Vietnamese people accumulate good deeds and practice divination to control their future. Believers with a new life in Christ need to have a new perspective on suffering. The Bible explains human suffering and death as consequences of sin and lack of “the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The work of Christ does not eliminate suffering from human life in this age; this will happen in Christ’s second coming. Rather, the work of Christ has given suffering a new meaning and purpose: “if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” and “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:17, 28). Vietnamese believers need not to be afraid of suffering but look at it as an opportunity to identify with Christ and live a triumphant life. As Paul says:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.²⁵

Conclusion

In summary, the Great Commission calls for Christ’s witnesses at the worldview level, not just at the behavioral level. A Vietnamese may attend church regularly, praying and reading the Bible every day and yet consult diviners at the New Year festival. A true conversion must take place at the three levels of culture: “behavior and rituals, beliefs, and worldview.”²⁶ Pentecostal ministers must aim at bringing people back to the embrace of Jesus, witnessing their transformation by the Spirit and the Word at the worldview level.

²⁴Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 176.

²⁵Romans 8:31-32, 37-39.

²⁶Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 315.

Vietnam is an animistic culture, where Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism are being practiced on the foundation of animistic beliefs. In order for Pentecostalism to win over the heart and mind of the Vietnamese, instead of being another “veneer” coming to terms with animistic thinking,²⁷ the discipleship process should be designed in ways that deal with worldview issues. In particular, while encouraging believers to desire and practice the gift of prophecy (and other spiritual gifts), Pentecostal ministers should give room for error and address misuses and abuses in a manner that does not deter people to practice.

This means that given their animistic background, new Vietnamese believers may be open and eager to practice spiritual gifts, but they may manipulate them rather than use them for the edification and exhortation of the church. This highlights the importance of new converts experiencing an encounter of God’s truth and love after a power encounter. Only when people are transformed at the worldview level do they give their full allegiance to God and, in turn, become the transforming agents in their communities and beyond for the implementation of the Great Commission.

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²⁷Huu Ngoc, *Wandering through Vietnamese Culture* (Ha Noi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006), 948.

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