

Prophecy in the New Testament

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and 27-31 & 1 Corinthians 14

Last week we began to explore prophecy and prophets by looking at the OT view of prophecy and we came to some conclusions:

1. Anyone who the Lord called and the Spirit moved could be a prophet
2. There was no shortage of prophets in Israel – but some were more important than others as God moved them.
3. Quality varied, particularly where they became compromised by their lifestyle in relation to other gods and often genuine prophets needed to be raised up because the majority had become dodgy
4. Prophets spoke out God's message for the people then – often judgement
5. Prophets brought messages of future hope and that applies as much to us now as then.
6. True prophets spoke in God's name based on His already revealed and authoritative word. The effectiveness of prophecy should be judged on this, not how miraculous the outcome.

This last factor was important because prophets would actually speak of things in the future, or miraculous things would be associated with them e.g. Elijah and Elisha. How did the people know that they were not acting in the flesh or drawing from the demonic? Because the authority with which they spoke endorsed them, what they said was in accordance otherwise with the already known and revealed word of God and what happened as a result glorified God.

You'll not be surprised to find that these principles transferred quite smoothly over to the NT. There is always a danger of thinking that all supernatural activity by God stopped after the Exile, prophecy disappeared and nothing much happened between the testaments. But not so. There was a real golden age of Judaism between the testaments that produced much literature. Read through the OT Apocrypha and you'll see what I mean. Most of the OT Apocrypha you'll find published is actually part of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the scriptures that Jesus and Paul used. All of the OT apocryphal books were written in Greek and one of the main reasons for not including them in the canon of scripture was that there was no consensus about their authority in the way that there has been with the Hebrew (and Chaldee) books. That said, the RC and Orthodox churches consider them part of the Canon of Scripture whilst Protestants and Jews have never thought of them in that way. In fact, none of the NT writers quote the OT apocryphal canon even though there are references to much more more "off the shelf" writings in the NT.

So what should they be for us? They are books that are there for our instruction but don't hold the same authority as inspired scripture. And what they give us are a set of prophetic writings and histories of inter-testamental Jews. They have the same types of prophetic words and exciting stories of the delivering power of God. What they tell us is that God never stopped working amongst His people. Inspired Scripture may have stopped but there was plenty of religious output from the Jews that tell us of both the faithfulness of many, but the rank unfaithfulness of others and the perversion of Judaism which gave rise to the Judaism that Jesus faced. God was very active and certainly not silent.

In that period prophecy still existed so by the time of the NT what we find is that God is actively giving prophetic words to people about the Messiah. We even read of a recognised prophetess, Anna, in the Temple at Jesus' circumcision. All this was followed by the greatest of the prophets – John the Baptist – that's how Jesus described him. *For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.* **Luke 7:28** Wow! We're the people in Jesus' kingdom! What the NT writers also give us is those quotes of the OT that demonstrated that the outpouring of the prophetic was of God. John the Baptist used scripture, and the gospel writers made sure that it was clear that all that was being done had been foretold long ago.

So what of prophecy in the NT? The word prophecy is one of those great untranslated words like "apostle" and "baptism". We've given prophecy and prophets this air of mystic-ness by not translating the words into our language! In Greek prophecy is propheteia and prophet is prophetes. I said last week that in Hebrew three words are used for prophets but the translators of the OT into the Septuagint just used prophetes. In

Greek civilisation the prophet was always one that brought oracles from the gods and that's exactly the way that it is used in the Septuagint and the NT in relation to the true and living God. Grimm & Thayer: *a discourse emanating from divine inspiration and declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproof and admonishing the wicked, or comforting the afflicted, or revealing things hidden; especially the foretelling of future events* (p552 *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*). A W Tozer once said *Prophecy must alarm, arouse, challenge. It's God's present voice to particular people!*

So what is the difference between OT and NT prophecy. W E Vine says *"in the case of the OT prophets their messages were very largely the proclamation of the Divine purposes of salvation and glory to be accomplished in the future; the prophesying of the NT prophets was both a preaching of the divine counsels of grace already accomplished and the foretelling of the purposes of God in the future.* In short, what has made the difference has been Jesus. As Paul says in Eph 1:8-9 God has revealed mysteries about Himself in Christ which had hitherto been kept secret. *In all his wisdom and insight 9 God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. 10 This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.* Therefore NT prophets speak from the perspective of a revealed Messiah whilst the OT prophets spoke from a yet to be revealed Messiah. Otherwise the principles we find are pretty much the same.

So what of prophecy in the NT. We have seen the continuity with the OT: the coming of Christ changing the dynamic of prophecy whilst fulfilling the OT prophecies at the same time – well some of them anyway.

What else has changed? Most importantly we find that prophecy is a gift of God to the church. It's true as in the OT, prior to the death of Jesus, the Holy Spirit could use anyone to serve the purposes of God, not just people who were thought of as holy men and women – the magi, Caiaphas.

However after the foundation of the church we find prophecy is the gift of God to the church – and we understand it in a Trinitarian sense too:

Prophecy is a gift of God the Father as a functional gift to individuals within the church to act as prophets alongside those who do service, teaching, encouraging, generosity and leadership. Romans 12:6-8 *6 So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us. If our gift is to speak God's message, we should do it according to the faith that we have; 7 if it is to serve, we should serve; if it is to teach, we should teach; 8 if it is to encourage others, we should do so. Whoever shares with others should do it generously; whoever has authority should work hard; whoever shows kindness to others should do it cheerfully.* Paul says much the same in the latter part of 1 Corinthians 12

Prophecy is a gift of the Son. *Eph 4:11-12 11 It was he (Jesus) who "gave gifts"; he appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. 12 He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ.*

These are a little different to the ones above because they are all leadership gifts according to what we are being told in verse 12. All these are given to us to make the God's people grow. Note: don't confuse office and function. All churches have leaders but leaders vary in their abilities to perform functions of leadership. Leadership in the NT was always plural because churches had available to them people with these functions. All skills in growing church are never found in one leader. Because such a person would have a large S on their blue T-Shirt and wear red pants over their trousers!

Prophecy is a gift of the Spirit. If we look in the early part of I Corinthians 12 we see quite a different list of manifestations of the Spirit: *7 The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all. 8 The Spirit gives one person a message full of wisdom, while to another person the same Spirit gives a message full of knowledge. 9 One and the same Spirit gives faith to one person, while to another person he gives the power to heal. 10 The Spirit gives one person the power to work miracles; to another, the gift of speaking God's message; and to yet another, the ability to tell the difference between gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not. To one person he gives the ability to speak in strange tongues, and to another he gives the ability to explain what is said. 11 But it is one and the same Spirit who does all this; as he wishes, he gives a different gift to each person.*

They are similar to the other gift list but these are all definitely supernatural in nature – no natural talent could be inferred into them – and are all given by the Spirit. It's a reminder that whatever the rationalist arguments of some are, we have a supernatural faith where we function because the Spirit gives insights and abilities beyond normal human function, in order to do the work of God. Prophecy falls fully into this category. Of course there are the cessationists who believe sign gifts have gone – but you can't cherry pick the ones you don't think don't happen any more. The evidence of the centuries is that we have a God who

works in power according to His own will and purposes and He uses His people to do it. And of course, by implication, the Spirit can use any one He pleases and whenever. In practice, it's generally the same people who prophesy as part of the life of the church in my experience, but it's a gift that can appear in almost anyone if they are open to God's Spirit because God speaks to us individually, and not necessarily about ourselves.

Our God is not a random user of sovereign power, but has clear will and purpose. How does He communicate this? By prophecy of course. That's how we discern God's will and way and we find it in absolutely every gift list in the NT – it's the only one that is in each as far as I can see: which tells you and me that prophecy is important in leadership, important for the body of Christ and is important for the functioning of worship.

So, it's that the Spirit who determines who prophesies and when – it is all part of the grace workings of God. To illustrate that point, here's an interesting passage for you: Acts 21:8 *Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. 9 He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. 10 After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"* Agabus was quite a senior prophet: he had been around a while - see Acts 11 – and he comes to Caesarea to deliver a message for Paul. It's all good prophetic stuff – dramatic and clear. He was a prophet of proven performance and soundness. But Paul was staying in a house with four daughters who prophesied. What about them? Why didn't they have the word? Because Agabus was the chosen messenger. As in the OT, there were people with prophetic gift, but the Holy Spirit used Agabus. Why? We don't know; other than the Spirit has His ways. Perhaps He knew that Paul would take Agabus seriously as they knew one another of old.

Where I want to go is to explore a phrase from 1 Cor 12:31 we see that prophecy is a gift that can be asked for. Yes, asked for. Of course, whether we get them or not is according to grace, but this verse suggests that God is more generous than we often dare to ask for.

So, Paul says *"eagerly desire the greater gifts"*. What are the greater gifts? The spectacular ones – tongues, miracles, healings? As someone who has come from a background of churches where tongues and prophecy for that matter, have been practised, I can see how spot-on Paul is with this passage. It's so timeless in its understanding of how Christians misuse these gifts even when the Bible has an exceedingly clear passage on best practice on the subject!

You see, it's rather like having a Ferrari. It looks impressive, sounds even more impressive but actually has very limited usefulness in comparison to an average family car. Ferraris are expensive to run, don't like speed bumps and rough roads, are useless for shopping and luggage, don't fit people well into the back if at all and the rest of it. It's why people find ordinary cars more useful. Paul says *"eagerly desire the greater gifts"*. In actuality he's talking about useful gifts like prophecy which edify the church and at the same time, to cultivate and value love even more highly. One can practice gifts but without love one can easily move outside the Spirit, into the flesh and do all sorts of strange stuff. And people do – and usually wreak havoc in the process.

1 Corinthians 14 gives us an example of what "greater gifts" is all about. One remarkable thing about this passage and about what I've realised in practice is that being able to use spiritual gifts, even sign gifts, is not a sign of spiritual depth. Even the most immature Christian can have a sign gift, but like a Ferrari, the holder does not necessarily have the ability to use the gift effectively.

What makes us use gifts effectively is not the fact of having them, but being able to use them according to God's own principles of behaviour – the greater way of love which Paul talks about in Chapter 13. The ability to love as God loves, is something that is part of what we get as Christians and something that will remain when gifts are long gone. It was without love that the Corinthians were practising gifts. And without love gifts become dysfunctional in a church.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that the more sign gifts you have, the more spiritual you are. That's stupid. As we'll find here, Paul rates gifts according to their usefulness in building up the church. And of course, shallow folks always want to speak in tongues – and for many speaking in tongues is a sign of being very spiritual (which of course isn't the case) – and you'll be surprised how that causes exactly the same problem today as in Corinth. 1 Cor 14 was written to blast that out of the water – and shows that prophecy, which they clearly maligned, was far more preferable to ask the Holy Spirit for. It wasn't that Paul didn't want them to speak tongues – it was just that prophecy is more useful and edifying: *5 I would like all of you to*

Speak in strange tongues; but I would rather that you had the gift of proclaiming God's message. For the person who proclaims God's message is of greater value than the one who speaks in strange tongues — unless there is someone present who can explain what is said, so that the whole church may be helped. 6 So when I come to you, my brothers and sisters, what use will I be to you if I speak in strange tongues? Not a bit, unless I bring you some revelation from God or some knowledge or some inspired message, or some teaching.

Paul's solution then is the same solution today. We're not a church where tongues is regularly practised, although I know some people do have this gift and use it privately. It's not unnatural - it's part of the spiritual make-up of humans. Glossolalia (tongues) occurs in most religions of the world. That's not a sign that all religions lead to God but it is a sign that the spiritual world can find expression in the human spirit – both the Holy Spirit and the demonic can find resonance in human beings, and this comes out in the speaking in tongues unknown to human beings. The flesh can generate glossolalia too but in this case, nonsense flows forth..

So don't think tongues unusual: most people who use tongues in praise of God find that aspect of their worship helpful. But as Paul points out, even more helpful is when they or others can interpret the tongue and so we know what God is saying through it. The genuineness of tongues can only be gauged by those interpreted as we can apply the same tests of prophecy which we looked at in earlier weeks.

So in Corinth, people who spoke in tongues thought they were superior – a good sign that their tongues were of the flesh or worse, rather than being spiritual. Their services were a noisy mess. And Paul makes a simple point – if a prophecy is spoken then it is intended for all and builds up the church. An uninterpreted tongue only edifies the speaker: *Set your hearts on spiritual gifts, especially the gift of proclaiming God's message. 2 Those who speak in strange tongues do not speak to others but to God, because no one understands them. They are speaking secret truths by the power of the Spirit. 3 But those who proclaim God's message speak to people and give them help, encouragement, and comfort. 4 Those who speak in strange tongues help only themselves, but those who proclaim God's message help the whole church.*

In fact he compares the speaker of an uninterpreted tongue to someone who tries to play an instrument but who doesn't have a clue how to! *7 Take such lifeless musical instruments as the flute or the harp — how will anyone know the tune that is being played unless the notes are sounded distinctly? 8 And if the one who plays the bugle does not sound a clear call, who will prepare for battle? 9 In the same way, how will anyone understand what you are talking about if your message given in strange tongues is not clear? Your words will vanish in the air!*

And that was worship in Corinth, a noisy mess. They thought it spiritual and even quoted scripture to back it up. The most difficult verses are verses 22 and 23 which due to the vagaries of translation seem to contradict one another. Are tongues a sign for the unbeliever or not? Rather than give you translational gymnastics, I'll give you the Message rendering of these verses that get the spirit of the verses if not getting it spot on with what Paul is trying to say: *1Co 14:21-24 It's written in Scripture that God said, In strange tongues and from the mouths of strangers I will preach to this people, but they'll neither listen nor believe. So where does it get you, all this speaking in tongues no one understands? It doesn't help believers, and it only gives unbelievers something to gawk at. Plain truth-speaking, on the other hand, goes straight to the heart of believers and doesn't get in the way of unbelievers.*

You could imagine that the shallow people would quote this piece of scripture to back up their claims for being spiritual but Paul gives them a reality check. It goes like this and this happened to me as a believer so how would an unbeliever find it. Suppose an unbeliever comes into a meeting where everyone is speaking in tongues (and probably at the same time) and there is no interpretation, he's going to think they're barking mad! We may think tongues supernatural proof of God, but they are not going to be impressed in all probability. They will be put off.

But suppose they came in and there was a prophetic word, either from an interpreted tongue or a conventional prophetic word – and it reveals all the deepest secrets of their heart – they're going to sit up and listen! There will be an impression.

The upshot of all this is – prophecy is a powerful gift, and given the choice for asking for it as against tongues, then go for prophecy. But this passage doesn't poh-poh tongues. Paul could speak in tongues better than all of them – he just wanted to get them weaned off the idea that the more supernatural a gift may seem, the more spiritual the holder must be – which isn't so. Gifts are gifts – pray that god makes you useful through the gifts that He has given you – and ask to be prophetic in your dealings with others.

How I want to end this evening is with a bit of homework to be done between yourself and the Lord. If prophecy is a gift for now; then who might we recognise as prophetic/prophets in our own church, other churches and in the national worldwide church today? Maybe you think that you may have a prophetic gift and you've not known what to do with it, or too afraid to tell someone about it because it's something we've recognised strongly in MRBC. If you've been anointed with it, talk to me and we can see how we can develop that gift in you much in the way as they did in the OT. Perhaps you desire it – you can only ask – because people can only prophesy according to the Spirit.

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