

Life in the Spirit

The Gift of Prophecy

PURPOSE: To understand the gift of prophecy and its proper use in the church.

KEY TEXTS: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 2-26, 29-40

I. NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL EVIDENCE OF PROPHECY

Prophecy, like tongues, undeniably occurred in the N.T. Likewise, we have no evidence that this gift has ever ceased.

Acts 2:17-18 - " 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

Acts 19:6 - And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

1 Corinthians 12:7-10 - To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

1 Corinthians 14:1 - Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

II. WHAT IS PROPHECY?

Vines Dictionary - The speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God.

Our working definition - A manifestation of the Holy Spirit in which God spontaneously reveals a message for an individual or church. The purpose of the message is to edify in a particular situation or need.

¹ For this study, we leaned heavily on a discipleship class from our sister church, *Crossway Community Church* in Charlotte.

A. A Manifestation of the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 - Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...to another prophecy...All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

B. Spontaneously Reveals a Message

By spontaneous we differentiate a prophecy from a teaching or counsel. In prophecy, a person does not set out to study a particular truth but God would bring that truth unexpectedly.

1 Corinthians 14:26 - What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

1 Corinthians 14:30 - If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.

WAYNE GRUDEM – “Paul is simply referring to something that God may suddenly bring to mind, or something that God may impress on someone’s consciousness in such a way that the person has a sense that it is from God. It may be that the thought brought to mind is surprisingly distinct from the person’s own train of thought, or that it is accompanied by a sense of vividness or urgency or persistence, or in some other way gives the person a rather clear sense that it is from the Lord.”
(Systematic Theology, 1056)

C. Reveals a Message

Prophecy is a manifestation of the Spirit wherein the Spirit impresses upon us a message of encouragement, exhortation or comfort. Though it can come in an external voice this is rare. One has an inner sense or perception of what the Lord is impressing on their heart. This is a subjective experience in that different people sense it differently. However it is an objective experience in that 1) it is the Spirit of the Lord moving upon us and 2) it always must conform with the word of God.

D. For an Individual or Church...in a Particular Situation or Need

Prophecy is local and situational not normative and universal. This is why prophecy is God truly speaking to His people but is not on par with scripture. While they are both God's word to us they don't carry equal weight or application.

2 Peter 1:20-21 - ...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

II. THE FUNCTIONS OF PROPHECY

We see that prophecy has a variety of different functions in N.T. scripture, including foretelling the future (Acts 11:27-30, 21:10-14, 1 Peter 1:10-11); giving direction (Acts 13:1-2); and, correction (1 Corinthians 14:24-25, Revelation 2 and 3). The primary purpose we see mentioned however, is edification.

1 Corinthians 14:1-4 - Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:26 - What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

1 Corinthians 14:31 - For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged

A. A Word of Encouragement Regarding Preaching and Teaching...

As charismatics we need to be careful that we don't overemphasize the "spectacular" work of the Spirit in relation to the work of the word. God will often sovereignly and graciously send the Spirit directly or through gifts to bless and edify His people and we should eagerly desire this BUT it is not a replacement for the word preached and read and can never supplant it as number one in our values. The place we most consistently and fruitfully meet God in CG and on Sunday is in and through His written and preached word.

B. A Word of Caution Regarding Personal Prophecy...

DONALD GEE – “Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want the extraordinary and exceptional to be made the frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for ‘messages’ through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as of contemporaries...The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.” (Quoted in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1059, emphasis mine)

III. THE LIMITATIONS OF PROPHECY

1 Corinthians 13:8-12 - Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

WAYNE GRUDEM – “To summarize this passage: prophecy is imperfect because it gives only a glimpse of the subject it treats (in part, v.9); because the prophet himself only receives some kind of indirect revelation, and a limited one at that (we see in a mirror v. 12); and because what the prophet does receive is often difficult for him to understand or interpret (dimly, v. 12)”(The New Testament Gift of Prophecy, 123)

“Those such revelations are valuable they are also limited. They must never compete with Scripture in the authority or importance we attach to them and they must never be allowed to function without continued evaluation by the church, especially those in leadership. All must recognize that the revelation is impartial and may not be clear to the person prophesying and may contain elements of mistaken understanding or interpretation on the part of the person prophesying (Ibid 111-112)

A. Prophecy Is to Be Judged

1 Corinthians 14:29 - Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 - Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.

Paul points out two problems with prophecy

1. Not taking prophecy seriously or being cynical and critical thereby quenching the Spirit
2. Accepting prophecy uncritically

We must acknowledge that while prophecy is God's words to us, they are coming through a fallible human vessel. Therefore, Paul instructs us to carefully weigh and judge what is being said before accepting it as genuine. We can do this in two ways. We judge the prophecy and we judge the prophet.

B. Judging The Prophecy

We will find prophecy, false prophecy, non-prophecy (nice sentiments and true but more the thoughts of the speaker than the words of God) and a mix of prophecy and non-prophecy. These tests can be used both by the speaker before prophesying and the recipients after receiving a word of prophecy.

1. Is it in conformity with the scriptures?
2. Do we have an inner witness of the Holy Spirit?

1 John 4:1 - Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

3. Does it glorify God?

1 Peter 4:10-11 - As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

4. Is it edifying?

1 Corinthians 14:26 - What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

C. Judging the Prophet

Matthew 7:15-20 - "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

1. Is the speaker of proven character?
2. Is the speaker submitted to authority?
3. Is the speaker rightly motivated?
4. Is the speaker known for sound judgment?

IV. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. Be a Person of the Word

Colossians 3:16 - Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

1. What goes in will come out!
2. Be Christ centered.
3. Be a worshipper.

B. Be Filled With The Spirit and Be Refilled With The Spirit (Be A Person of The Spirit)

Acts 2:17 - And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

Acts 19:6 - And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Luke 11:9-13 - And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

John Calvin said the Holy Spirit is "what is to be sought above all else." In its answer on why prayer is necessary, the Heidelberg Catechism says in part

that “God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them (Q&A 116)

John Nolland, a theologian, at Trinity Seminary speaking about Luke 11 “a prayer by people who already have the Spirit and who also stand in need of a greater fullness, a more powerful anointing to equip and empower them for ministry.”

C. Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. (I Corinthians 14:1)

1. Other translations: “be earnestly ambitious” “be zealous” “keep on desiring”
2. We should put off sinful desires and put on kingdom desires. Cultivate a hunger for God and for his word and for the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit.
3. This includes times of prayer when you are asking specifically and desiring specifically prophecy and other gifts.
4. Walk in love.
5. This desiring includes an expectation of faith in God using you.
6. Come ready to meetings.

Romans 12:6 - Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith

D. Grow in Your Ability to Discern the Impressions of the Holy Spirit

1. Give expression to the impression.
2. It seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.
3. Ask for clarification.
4. Burden and vision.