

# THE MINISTRY AND GIFT OF PROPHECY

## Introduction

Prophecy is often found to be mysterious, difficult, a bit strange, and at best, non-useful to most practical people. The truth is that God, throughout time and ages, has used prophecy to build a bridge to men and women that allows them to glimpse not only Him, but His workings with people.

Beginning in the Old Testament, prophecy and “Prophets” held a valuable and esteemed place in all the work God did. In fact a major portion of the Old Testament includes books entitled by the names of prophets. We divide these books into two groups, the Major and the Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets include Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations and Daniel, while the Minor Prophets make up the last twelve books of the Old Testament including Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The significance of these prophetic books is clear in the New Testament, as **Luke 24:44** states Jesus’ words:

*These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.*

## Clarifying Old Testament Prophecy

Often we view these books as Old Testament stuff that is very historical and rarely applicable today. That is a major mistake on our part. The Old Testament prophets did two things that make them important to us today. First, they foretold the future, some of which has come to pass and some of which has yet to unfold, but may in fact be taking place in our lifetime. Most of us, if challenged, would agree that prophecy is just that, foretelling of the future. This is part of prophecy, but only a portion. Much of the ministry of both Old and New Testament prophecy and prophetic ministry has less to do with the future and more to do with the present. It is forth-telling, not foretelling.

This second aspect of prophecy, forth-telling, may impact each of us more than the more widely understood aspect of foretelling. It is declaring the present, clarifying the present, helping us to get a grasp on what God is up to in the here and now. We find both of these throughout prophetic ministry in the Bible.

## Old Testament Prophets and Prophecy

In the Old Testament, prophecy and prophets operated with two very clear distinctives. First, God used both the function of prophecy and the office of prophet to communicate His will, direction and correction to Israel. Prophecy was the mouth of God in the Old Testament. Second, because of the critical role prophecy held in directing Israel and God’s people, perfection was the standard. You had to be one hundred percent accurate and true. False prophets were not tolerated (**Deuteronomy 18:20-22**) and were condemned to death for betraying God and leading people astray. This all changed at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the church. It would now be His voice and the written Word which would lead the New Testament church, and prophecy would only be used to confirm what He had spoken. With this in mind, it is critical to view prophecy and the office of prophet with clarity as you differentiate the roles and functions in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament is full of prophets and prophetic instances. Abraham is called a prophet in **Genesis 20:7**, Aaron likewise in **Exodus 7:1**, as well as his sister Miriam, who is called a prophetess in **Exodus 15:20**, and Deborah who likewise was called a prophetess in **Judges 4:4**. With just a cursory glance at the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the historical books, you can see prophetic ministry permeates the Old Testament.

Beginning with Moses we see the seventy elders, Eldad, and Medad prophesying in **Numbers 11**. *"The Spirit of the Lord rested upon them and they prophesied, but they did not do it again."* (**Numbers 11:25**) It is worth noting that both Eldad and Medad were not in the meeting and yet they too prophesied in the camp (Vs. 26). Clearly God's Spirit was moving and Moses declared such in verses 28-29 when challenged about those not in the meeting prophesying.

*Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"*

These seventy elders were never used again by the Spirit for prophetic ministry according to the text. They prophesied, but they were not prophets. It is also evident that Moses loved what the Spirit was doing and fully embraced this prophetic moment, declaring that he wished *"all the Lord's people were prophets."*

Another telling prophetic incident captured in the Old Testament included a young King Saul. Just after being anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, he is told that God would move on him to transform him while in the act of prophesying. **I Samuel 10:5-6**;

*...you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and a lyre before them, and they will be prophesying. "Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man."*

This wasn't the only time Saul prophesied (**I Samuel 19:20-24**), but he was a King and was never recognized as a prophet. David also functioned as a King who prophesied throughout the Psalms. It is said of David in **II Samuel 23:1-2**;

*Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse declares, The man who was raised on high declares, The anointed of the God of Jacob, And the sweet psalmist of Israel, "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, And His word was on my tongue."*

God declares Moses a prophet while outlining the Old Testament prophetic guidelines. **Deuteronomy 18:18** states;

*I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.*

Clearly the prophet in the Old Testament held an office as a direct report to God. Prophets were His mouthpiece and as such there was no room for error or moving falsely in His name lest they fall under the penalty of death.

## **Office of Prophet**

It is important to differentiate between the Old Testament prophets and those that the Holy Spirit came upon who prophesied. This is the difference between the office of prophet and a person who prophesies. As a little boy, we are told that Samuel occupied the office of prophet and that his words were the words of the Lord, **I Samuel 3:19-20**:

*Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail. All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD.*

Samuel's life was given to the office of prophet. This was a life call from God, not a moment of prophetic anointing. It was an office that held high esteem in Israel, operating alongside the King and the Priest as rulers over the nation. Prophets were the medium for God's voice and it was Him and Him alone who could raise them up. **Amos 3:7** declares such, *"Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets."*

The prophet directed Kings and corrected Israel as did Isaiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel and many others. This office, along with Priests and Kings, were God's primary means for leading and ministering to Israel, God's people in the Old Testament. The functions of this office changed dramatically at Pentecost. Though we find the office of Prophet functioning in the New Testament (**Ephesians 4:11**) we do not find the Prophet functioning with the same authority or accountability as the Old Testament model.

### **New Testament Prophecy**

The great gift of the New Testament was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto all of God's people. We no longer need a priest to make sacrifice for us as Jesus has atoned for our sins (**Hebrews 7:21**) and in fact we are all now part of the priesthood of believers according to **I Peter 2:9**:

*But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.*

Likewise we no longer need the prophet to declare the word of the Lord to us as we all now have His Spirit working in us revealing the Father to us. Jesus made this clear in **John 14:16-17 & 24-25**:

*I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.*

*These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.*

So New Testament prophetic gifting and the office of Prophet remain, but with an entirely different role and function. This distinction is made clear when Paul outlines prophetic ministry and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in **I Corinthians 12, 13, 14**. In **I Corinthians 13:8-9** Paul declares;

*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part.*

*"For we know in part and we prophesy in part,"* unlike the Old Testament there is a grace to fail implied here. For prophecy, though very useful, is no longer the mouthpiece of God. His Spirit and His Word now take that role. New Testament prophecy is given according to **I Corinthians 14:3** (But one who prophesies speaks) *"to men for edification and exhortation and consolation."* New Testament prophetic gifting encourages and builds up the church confirming what the Spirit is saying.

The distinctive of New Testament prophecy is that it is now deemed a spiritual gift imparted by the Holy Spirit (**I Corinthians 12, Romans 12**). This fact includes the potential that now all may prophesy according to **I Corinthians 14:24** and that we should all “...*desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy*” (**I Corinthians 14:1**). This is a fulfilment of the Prophet Joel's words quoted in **Acts 2:17-18**:

*“And it shall be in the last days,” God says, “That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; 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 bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit And they shall prophesy.”*

## **New Testament Gift and Office of Prophet**

The distinction between the office of prophet and the gift of prophecy is also evident, though blurred, in the New Testament. We are certain there were prophets in the New Testament as **Acts 11:27-28** details:

*Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.*

**I Corinthians 12:28** also states that “*God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets...*” Acts mentions prophets numerous times including, **Acts 15:32, 21:9-10**, but it is clear that the office of prophet took on a vastly different role in the early church.

**Ephesians 2:20** states that prophets helped to establish the church, “*built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.*” G.W.H. Lamp states in his work, Christ and Spirit in the New Testament:

“Within the New Testament period there seems to have been a definite, though to us obscure, distinction between occasional prophesying by ‘ordinary’ church members, on the one hand, and the exercise of a ministry by, ‘specialist’ prophets on the other.”

In fact, quite often the line is blurred between those who prophesy and those called prophets. (See **I Corinthians 14:32**).

For Paul, prophecy is revelation. It is a word or insight from God. This is not a prepared message though the revelation may come forth in a sermon. Spontaneity marks this divine gift and its work. It is certainly seen as valuable and supernatural as Paul lists prophecy just after miracles in the **I Corinthians 12:10** gift list. But it is clear that this spontaneous word from the Lord does not hold the same value as the written Scriptures. Because, as we stated earlier, God now works within the limits of our humanness, meaning we know in part and prophecy in part leaving room for human error.

The purpose of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is outlined in its entirety in **I Corinthians 14:3** as Paul states, “*But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.*” Edification (oikodome) is actually two words combined that mean to build the house. Oikos or house and doma/demo, to build, which tells us prophecy is a tool God uses to build us up, to encourage us and to strengthen us. The second word Paul uses, exhortation (paraklesis) is para to come alongside and kaleo to call. The word means to come near and comfort or call to, as in summons to move ahead in a direction. So prophecy is to build us, move us, comfort us, and finally Paul added the word consolation (paramuthia) which means to persuade or console, to help people hear what God is doing so they can rest in it and trust Him.

**Ephesians 4:11-12** identifies the office of prophet, which is now filled by those gifted with a special accuracy of prophecy, as vital to the building up of the body of Christ.

*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*

Without these five ministries functioning in the local church the saints often fail to become all that God has intended for them to be. So the New Testament office of prophet continues to hold a vital, though not as defining, role in the church.

## Processing Prophetic Words

Each of these prophetic processes are meant to confirm what the Spirit has already said or will say to the individual. They are not in and of themselves, "The word of the Lord" as they were in the Old Testament. Many believers err here revamping their whole life around a word they received from someone. The wisest counsel one can give is to take all prophetic words and put them on the shelf of your life. Pray over them asking the Spirit to speak to you and testing them in the Word.

It is by the written Word and the Spirit that we direct our lives in the New Testament using prophecy to clarify and confirm what the Spirit is saying. It is not an accident that the gift of discernment is always found nearby the gift of prophecy. (**I Corinthians 12:10, 14:29, I Thessalonians 5:20-21, I John 4:1**)

Each word and thought should be prayerfully tested and discerned. Prophecy contains great potential to touch and change lives, but it also, by its high powered nature, contains the ability to wound and hurt if not handled correctly. True prophecy will never violate Scripture or the heart of the Father. It is harmonious with the Word and with the nature of God. True prophetic ministry will build up not tear down; it will bear witness with others and glorify God, not man.

Prophecy can also be used by the Spirit to bring unbelievers to Jesus. Though prophecy is primarily a gift for believers, according to **I Corinthians 14:22**, it can, and often does, bring a conviction to unbelievers. This conviction can open them up to meet and experience the great hope and healing God has for them. **I Corinthians 14:24-25**;

*But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.*

In conclusion, all prophecy should bring life. We should hunger to prophesy (**I Corinthians 14:1**). It should be orderly (**I Corinthians 14:29 -31**). It should be discerned and judged freely and openly, and it should not be confusing but clarifying (**I Corinthians 14:32-33**). In the end it should bring life from the heart of God.

## Functioning in the Gift of Prophecy

(From Water of Life Gifts and Ministry of the Holy Spirit II Class Syllabus)

### PROPHECY

The gift of prophecy is the special ability to receive and communicate an immediate message of God to His people through a divinely-anointed utterance.

## What is Prophecy?

Prophecy is speaking God's heart, mind, and purpose by the inspiration of the Spirit. This speaking incorporates the revelatory and prophetic things of the Spirit resident in the one speaking. Primarily to build up, encourage, comfort and communicate a fuller counsel of God to His people. Since we are all imperfect vessels it is important to have all prophecy brought into the light and be judged.

## Primary Purpose of Prophecy

**1 Corinthians 14:3**, *"But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort."*

## Who may Prophecy?

**1 Corinthians 14:31**, *"For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged."*

## Prophetic Protocol

**1 Corinthians 14:40**, *"But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."*

The following guidelines are set up to protect you, the prophetic ministry, and others listening to the prophecy.

- **No Dates:** Jesus Himself, gave no specific dates regarding His return.
- **No Mates:** We are not to tell a person who they should marry, divorce...etc.
- **No deaths or births:** Telling a person these things can bring heartache and confusion.
- **No correction or specific direction:** Correction and specific direction should come from those whom God has given a place of authority, covering, and accountability over a person's life.
- **Thus saith the Lord:** We prefer that prophetic words be prefaced with "I sense," "I see," or "I believe the Lord is saying..." etc. **This leaves room for error on the part of both the one giving the word and the one receiving it.** *"We know in part and we prophecy in part."* **1 Corinthians 13:9**
- **Prophecy should be judged:** When receiving prophetic word from someone it should be judged against the "more sure prophecy" of the Bible (**II Peter 1:19**). Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge (**I Corinthians 14:29**). All new information must be consistent with the existing, inerrant Word of God. Secondly, prophecy should 'bear witness' with your inner witness causing you to feel built up, encouraged and comforted. Do not receive prophecy from someone that resists having the prophecy judged by church leaders (**I Corinthians 14:29**). If a personal prophecy is given, it is recommended that it be written down or recorded. This will serve to judge the prophecy and bless those who have received the word.

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