

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

28 Prophets and Prophecy

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 14:1 – 3 and 24 – 40

What Prophet?

If the gift of tongues qualifies as the most controversial of the gifts of the Spirit then the gift of prophecy must come as a close second. In some places, to even suggest the possibility that prophecy is a continuing gift is to invite a strong reaction. At the other extreme there are places where the word of anyone who claims to bring a message directly from the Lord is enthusiastically accepted.

The Bible Is Complete

We must make clear at the outset that the canon of Scripture is closed. In the Bible we have a complete, sufficient and final revelation of God which cannot be added to or taken away from.

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”

Hebrews 1:1

The Lord Jesus is God’s final word; there is no more to be added. To have an open ended book would be to open the door to all kinds of heresy.

But this does not mean that our understanding of Scripture is complete: that is always growing. The Scriptures need explanation, interpretation and application, otherwise there would be no place for preaching: and the man in the pulpit should do nothing more than read from the Bible.

What is more, although we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, that belief does not rule out the possibility of personal guidance.

Prophecy Lives On

The prophecy of Joel, recalled in Acts 2, seems to suggest that prophecy will be an ongoing thing in the present age but if that is the case then we need to ask what is the nature of that prophecy and what role should it be playing in today’s church?

In Scripture there are different levels of prophecy. In Old Testament times there were prophets whose prophecies were for the people of God in every subsequent generation. Their words have been recorded and preserved as authoritative Scripture but there were others, like the one hundred prophets hidden by Obadiah (1 Kings 18:13), who must have spoken a message from God (otherwise they would not have been called prophets) yet their words have not been recorded. Presumably their utterances only had local or temporary significance.

In the inter-testamental period, when for three centuries, authoritative prophecy had ceased in Israel it was recognised that there were still men who spoke from God. Their words did not carry the same authority as those of the Old Testament prophets against whose words theirs were tested. They were the equivalent of modern day preachers but they too were called prophets and Paul, schooled as he was in the rabbinic tradition, would have been familiar with that use of the title.

When it comes to the New Testament, Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly recognised the unique authority of the Old Testament prophets. The New Testament writers also put their own writings on the same level as those Old Testament prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:37, 2 Peter 3:16).¹ Both are to be received with unquestioning belief and obedience. However, when Paul deals with the matter of prophecy in the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 14, the basic theme is that the words of the prophets are to be tested: their teaching has to be weighed up.

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.”

1 Corinthians 14:29

¹ We may conclude that the apostles were the New Testament successors of the Old Testament prophets having authority granted directly by God (Galatians 1:1).

Two Kinds Of Prophecy

So we can recognise in Scripture two levels of prophecy. One, delivered by men appointed by God for the purpose, authoritative, of enduring significance and demanding unquestioning obedience, the other also authoritative but having only local and temporary significance and needing to be tested. The former can no longer be possible because the canon of Scripture is complete — such prophecy ceased with the death of the apostles — but the latter could conceivably be delivered in a local church today.

If it was, what form would that prophecy take?

Thus Saith The Lord?

First if the words of the Corinthian prophets were to be tested by Scripture it would be presumptuous for a modern day prophet to put his words on a level with it. He could not, therefore, introduce them with the phrase, “Thus saith the Lord...” That would be both misleading and dangerous. It would obscure the distinction between infallible Scripture and words that must be tested by Scripture.

Secondly, the purpose of the kind of prophecy under the spotlight in 1 Corinthians 14 did not necessarily have anything to do with foretelling the future. It was intended to strengthen, encourage and comfort. In commenting on the passage John Calvin says.

“I am certain in my own mind that he means by prophets, not those endowed with the gift of foretelling, but those who were blessed with the unique gift of dealing with Scripture not only by interpreting it, but also by the wisdom they showed in making it meet the need of the hour.”

The prophet is a proclaimer, a preacher. Preaching is not, after all, simply teaching, or the delivery of a well-prepared statement of Christian truth. It is the explanation and application of Scripture to the circumstances of the hearers. It calls for more than teaching skills. It calls for wisdom and spiritual insight and, more than that, it calls for an anointing of the Spirit. This fits with Ephesians 4 in which the prophet is distinct from the teacher.

Thirdly, although it need not necessarily do so, prophecy may have a predictive element. There are illustrations of this in the book of Acts (Acts 11:28 is a notable example) and throughout church history but when it does, such predictions must be viewed critically and in the light of Scripture (see Acts 21:10 – 14 where Agabus, recognised as a prophet, did not get it entirely right).

The gift of prophecy then is the ability to receive a message from the Lord and to declare it to men and women in such a way that they will realise that God has spoken. That message will accord with Scripture, it will honour the Lord Jesus Christ and it will come with authority to those who hear it.

“But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.”

1 Corinthians 14:24 – 25

Some would go further and say that to qualify as a gift, prophecy must be immediate, unpremeditated insight into the meaning of Scripture. It is not necessary to take that view: the gift may well lie more in being able to read a situation and interpret and apply God’s Word to it. In fact, to voice unpremeditated insight would put the prophet in a position of bringing a message which he himself has not tested against God’s Word.

It is worthy of note that the Didache, a piece of Christian literature written around 100AD, not long after the close of the apostolic age, describes the gift of prophecy and prophets in the way outlined above.

Next Week

Next week we will look at the gift of healing.