

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today? I Corinthians 14:1

There are today among Christians two extremes on the Holy Spirit. Those who are deathly afraid of the Holy Spirit and those who have opened up to the Spirit but are guilty of all kinds of abuses. It seems to me the truth is somewhere in the middle God has given the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts to the church and these gifts are to be governed by the inspired Bible and placed under the sovereign control of God.

The specific spiritual gift we will be examining today is that of prophecy. I give this message with fear and trembling because I know how controversial this subject is among Christians and certainly no gift is more damaging to the church of Christ when used incorrectly. Furthermore, through the years I have changed my mind on this particular gift. Originally I held it was a first century gift which went out of existence after the first century because the gift of prophecy was used to give direct revelation to a young church with no completed canon of Scripture. Yet, as I read the Bible it seemed as though prophecy was somehow in existence, so I came to believe the spiritual gift of prophecy was equivalent to preaching the Word of God with particular insight. But I was still not satisfied with this explanation. Yet I was very uneasy with many of my charismatic brethren who said that New Testament prophecy was equivalent to Old Testament prophecy which was given in the spirit of "Thus saith the Lord." The charismatics seemed to put prophecy on an equivalent level with the inspired Bible or in some cases above it so as to state that God is somehow giving continued, infallible revelation today. I was convinced that God closed the canon of the Bible and there is therefore no more inspired, infallible revelation today. As I continued to read the Bible, there just seemed to be more to the gift of prophecy than I was understanding as a committed Calvinist in the Reformed tradition. I have been influenced by Dr. Wayne Grudem in the book, *The Gift Of Prophecy In The New Testament And Today*, to come to my present position. I confess to you I am still learning and have not closed my mind to any position. Recently I was introduced to an article by Dr. Vern Poythress, a New Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, entitled, "Modern Spiritual Gifts As Analogous To Apostolic Gifts: Affirming Extraordinary Works Of The Spirit Within Cessationist Theology." This article has further clarified for me how Reformed thinkers can embrace a type of modern day prophecy and still hold firmly that all infallible prophecy has stopped with the closing of the canon.

COMMAND TO DESIRE PROPHECY 14:1

Follow the way of love. First Corinthians 14 follows the great love chapter. While spiritual gifts are important, the Corinthians were to make love their number one aim and their chief priority. Love is a more excellent and higher way than that of spiritual gifts.

And eagerly desire spiritual gifts. All gifts may be sought by the Christian. The Corinthians, however, were to seek the better spiritual gifts and tongues was the least of all the gifts. The Apostle Paul does not say a Christian is never to seek the gift of tongues, but if it is the least of all the spiritual gifts, then it should be sought last and not first. Paul never says tongues are wrong or of the devil. While Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues, he strongly encourages believers to seek after the gift of prophecy.

Especially the gift of prophecy. The gift of prophecy is more valuable to the church than the gift of tongues because prophecy is a greater gift than tongues. Since prophecy is of great value to the church, Christians should seek after this gift for themselves as well as for the congregation.

DEFINING PROPHECY

What is prophecy and is it for today? The official office of prophet in the Old and New Testaments involved receiving divine, inspired and infallible revelation from God and giving it to the people in the common language, for in those ancient days there was not a closed canon of Scripture consisting of 66 books of the Bible. In a technical sense, there is no more inspired, infallible prophecy because the canon is closed and God is giving no more infallible revelation.

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men (Westminster Confession Of Faith I-VI).

However, a distinction must be made between the office of prophet and prophecy as a gift. There are no more Prophets who formed the foundation of the church and gave infallible communications. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). Those with the office of Prophet spoke infallibly and what they said always came to pass. If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously (Deut. 18:22). However, in a non-technical sense, there may be a type of prophecy today. This gift would be the ability to speak the mind of God whether that be by preaching the Bible or telling something which God spontaneously brings to mind. This lesser form of prophecy is not inspired or infallible and is subject to error. This lower form of prophecy is always mixed with error; therefore, it is not intrinsically revelatory.

When we compare prophecy to the gift of preaching, we see how something could be of God and yet mixed with error. When a preacher is preaching God's Word in so much that he quotes God's Word directly or is consistent with God's Word in principle, then what he preaches is truth, but his sermons may also contain error because the preacher is human.

The speeches that these people give are not inspired -- that is the speeches are not identically the speech of God in such a way that they

carry unqualified divine authority and perfection. Such speeches may nevertheless be inspiring in the popular sense of the word. We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is present. We thank God for the gifts that are exercised, and we know that when properly exercised they come from the power of the Spirit. But the results are always fallible and must be checked by the standard of the Bible (Vern S. Poythress, "Modern Spiritual Gifts As Analogous To Apostolic Gifts").

So it is when people claim to prophesy -- there is always a mixture of truth and error and the truth is determined by how closely the one prophesying sticks with the exact Word or the principles of the Word.

It is important to understand that "prophecy" and "revelation" are sometimes used in the New Testament in a non-revelatory sense. Prophecy: Rev. 19:10 -- the message attested by Jesus and about Jesus is the essence of prophetic proclamation. Surely this continues until the end of the age. Acts 15:32, I Chron. 25:1,5; Acts 17:10-13 show that prophecy is sometimes declarative. These verses show that the word "prophecy" can mean something less than inspired and infallible words. Revelation: Eph. 1:17 "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him." This seems to be insight and connected with "enlightenment" in Eph. 1:18. Philip. 3:15 -- God reveals, gives insight, or makes clear when off the mark doctrinally. These verses show there are other meanings to apokalupsis than just special revelation. These verses help one to understand that the word "revelation" in I Corinthians 14:2 may have a lesser meaning than inspired, infallible revelation.

John Calvin also saw a secondary or lesser meaning to the concept of prophet. "Paul applies the name "prophets" to all those who were interpreters of God's will, but to those who excelled in a particular revelation (Ephesians 4:11). This class either does not exist today or is less commonly seen" (The Institutes, IV-III 4). Calvin even makes a bolder statement, "It is difficult to make up one's mind about gifts and offices of which the church has been deprived for so long, except for mere traces or shades of them. Which are still to be found" (Calvin commenting on I Cor. 12:28 in First Corinthians, p 271). It was generally accepted among the Scottish theologians that John Knox on occasion gave prophecies. Knox gave prophecies 1) The assurance which he expressed from the beginning of the Scottish troubles, that the cause of the Congregation would ultimately prevail 2) His confident hope of again preaching in his native country, and at St. Andrews, avowed by him during his imprisonment on board the French galleys, and frequently repeated during his exile; 3) With the intimations which he gave respecting the death of Thomas Maitland, and Kircakly of Grange. (Taken from the biography entitled Life of John Knox of the Free Presbyterian Church authored by Thomas M'Crie in 1960).

EXPLAINING PROPHECY

In Acts 21:4 It says of the disciples of Tyre, "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem." This appears to be a prophecy towards Paul. Surely Paul would not have gone if he felt this was God's very words. In Acts 21:10-11, Agabus prophesied that the Jews of Jerusalem would "bind Paul and deliver him in to the hands of the Gentiles." This prophecy was not totally correct because in Acts 21:33 it says that the

Romans not the Jews bound Paul: "The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains."

When prophecies were given in a congregation no more than three could speak and the others were to weigh what was said. "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said" (I Cor. 14:29). The prophets were to weigh or sift out the good from the bad. This would not happen if this was absolute, divine, inspired truth. Obviously, there was truth mixed with error. Also prophets often interrupted one another. "And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop" (I Cor. 14:30). If prophets, were speaking infallible truth, it is hard to imagine they would be interrupted and not allowed to finish the message. It appears that congregational prophecies were flawed and definitely less authoritative than scripture. Therefore, New Testament prophecy is merely human words prompted by the Holy Spirit, not God's infallible words, and not equal to God's words in authority.

When a person senses God wants him to prophesy, he should preface his words with, "It appears" or "I believe" or "I think the Lord is putting this on my heart and in my mind." To say, "The Lord told me" is too presumptuous and arrogant.

The Holy Spirit spontaneously bringing things to mind is referred to as "a revelation." And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop" (I Cor. 14:30). The word "revelation" here is used in the sense of impressions being put into the mind. These impressions or spontaneous thoughts are passed through the human personality which is sinful and therefore liable to error. Man's thoughts often get mixed up with God's impressions. Often these impressions are accompanied with a sense of urgency. Most Christians at times have experienced these impressions and a sense of urgency to make them known. Intuitions prompted by the Holy Spirit would be revelation and the giving of that impression to the congregation would be a prophecy (not perfect).

When it was becoming known that I would be moving over from Senior Pastor to Scholar In Residence at HBF, Arny Arnold, sensing this was a crucial time in the history of this church, asked if there was anyone God was prompting to say something to the church on this matter. In essence, he was asking if God would speak to this congregation through a prophecy.

Putting thoughts into the mind by God will not come by hearing the external voice of God but these will be internal impressions and sometimes they will be quite strong. Prophecy may occasionally involve thoughts about the future as in the case of Agabus' prophecy about Paul (Acts 21:11). Sometimes prophecy will be used by God to convict of sin. But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you" (I Cor. 14:24-25). But the major use of prophecy is to build up, encourage and console God's people. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (I Cor. 14:3). A very practical purpose of prophecy is that it speaks to people's hearts in a very spontaneous, direct way.

About eight years ago, I went to lunch with Greg Brewer, a charismatic, Episcopalian minister. Several days after the lunch, I received a letter from Greg. He said he was writing me a prophecy which God had given him after he dropped me off at the church after lunch. The content of the letter was that I was doing the will of God at HBF and that I should not lose heart. He also pointed out that I should be more sensitive to the needs of the people of HBF. The whole letter was encouraging and uplifting. It occurred to me, however, he could have told me all these things without ever calling it a prophecy. I took the prophecy as information and prayed about it.

Some have put "revelation" and "prophecy" under the heading of illumination. Guidance would include intuitions, impressions, feelings, urgings, impulses, etc. Some have also put this into the area of common grace and general revelation.

PRACTICAL USE OF PROPHECY

Prophecy seems to be a gift that many in a congregation may exercise. Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy." (I Cor. 14:31). Prophecy is not just a gift for skilled teachers. Some obviously will be more gifted in this area than others, but Christians should be encouraged to prophesy when God is prompting the mind and heart to do so. This would certainly help the people in our churches from becoming mere spectators. It would also necessitate Christians having a designated time for prophecy to take place in a worship service. Churches often contribute to spectator Christianity by quenching the Holy Spirit in the area of prophecy. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt (I Thess. 5:19-20).

The gift of prophecy is to be highly valued by the individual Christian and by the church as a whole. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy (I Cor. 14:31). The gift of prophecy could help balance individual Christians and churches that are highly cerebral and intellectual.

If on a practical level someone gives a prophecy, how should we receive it? Merely receive it as information. It may or may not be true. If there is truth in the prophecy, you will be convicted, or, if you are not convicted, the Holy Spirit may confirm the truth with several other prophecies or circumstances. We neither totally reject or credulously accept these prophecies. We wait and see.

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION AND PROPHECY

There is still one area for us to consider. How does my view of prophecy fit into the Reformed tradition? The Westminster Confession says, "... . . unto which (Scripture) nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men." There is no new inspired and infallible revelation today. The canon is closed. Any impressions or promptings of the Spirit today are fallible and liable to error. Scripture takes precedence over any present lower form of revelation. Unfortunately, many people think receiving Holy Spirit impressions are more striking, personal, mystical and inexplicable and, therefore, carry as much authority as the inspired and infallible Bible. They are wrong because all subjective experience must be put to the touchstone of Scripture, our final rule of faith and practice.

Furthermore, it is my personal contention that some, if not many, of the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith also believed in lower forms of revelation and put them into the category of providence. Samuel Rutherford, one of the men responsible for drawing up the Confession said,

There is a revelation _____ testimony of the Spirit giving assurance) of some particular men, who have foretold things to come even since the ceasing of the Canon of the as John Husse, Wickeliefe, Luther, have foretold things to come, and they certainly fell out, and in our nation of Scotland, M. George Wishart foretold that Cardinall Beaton should not come out alive at the Gates of the Castle of St. Andrewes, but that he should die a shameful death, and he was hanged over the wisdom that he did look out at, when he saw the man of God burnt, M. Knox prophesied of the hanging of the Lord Grange, M. Hub. Davidson

uttered prophecies, known to many of the Kingdome, diverse Holy and mortified preachers in England have done the like. . . (Samuel Rutherford, A Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist).

The Confession does not state everything the framers believed. It was a summary of the key doctrines of the Reformed church in England in 1648. The Confession for instance is weak in explaining the details of the Christian life and eschatology. What it said was good but it was not complete. It is my opinion that many framers of the Confession like Samuel Rutherford had views about a third type of revelation, but these are not expressly set down in the Confession. Yet, whatever view the framers may have held on the third type of revelation that revelation was always subject to the inspired and infallible Bible.

The Westminster Confession Of Faith allows for supernatural phenomena in the providence of God. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure (WCF 5:3).

Prophecy may be one of the supernatural means God uses to direct His church. Because of the strong commitment to the sovereignty of God and the mystery of His plan, the Confession acknowledges explicitly that there may also be operations that are not attached to means in any ordinary way. The ultimate determining factor in every case is "his pleasure." The Westminster fathers, in my opinion, would have said there was a third kind of revelation, not canonical, not inspired, not infallible but which God uses to providentially guide His church. They, like me, would be very cautious of this third kind of revelation because it involves the subjective, but I don't think they would have thrown the baby out with the bath water. They would have tested and judged all claims of prophecy with the inspired, infallible Scripture.

SAFEGUARDS FOR PREVENTING THE ABUSE OF PROPHECY

Prophecy deals in the realm of the subjective. Prophecies which try to control people or manipulate situations are to be avoided. Prophecy which dogmatically predicts the future is to come under great suspicion. Prophecy is based on intuition and is therefore subjective. Whenever there is subjectivity there is the possibility that evil spirits can get involved. And there is a greater possibility of the flesh (sin nature) being involved. False prophesying can lead to great evil. It is the task of the church and the elders to discern the spirits and to test all prophecy.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil (I Thess. 5:19-21).

There are limits, boundaries and safeguards to put on prophecy. They are as follows: 1) all prophecy is subject to the inspired, infallible Bible and never contradicts it; 2) all prophecy is to be tested by the church and the elders in particular; 3) any prophecy which is not primarily for building up, encouraging and consoling the Christian is suspect; 4) people giving prophecies must be willing to be publicly questioned by the elders; 5) prophecy used for power play or to draw attention to self should be rejected

and 6) all prophecies must be prefaced with "I think" or "it appears to me" or "it seems as though the Lord is saying this to me" because no prophecy is inspired and no prophet is infallible today.

CONCLUSION

You who are not a Christian, did you know prophecy can play a part in your coming to know Christ in a personal way? In a local church or in a small group where you are present with other Christians, prophecy may be made to you as God impresses a Christian with a particular aspect of your life which needs forgiveness. But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you" (I Cor. 14:24-25).

Perhaps the Spirit of God has spoken directly to your sin through a Christian. You hear the message and you deal with it. Ultimately the message is always the same:

"You are sinful before a holy God. You are under judgment because of that sin. You will perish for all eternity unless you turn to Christ. Christ died for sinners just like you to grant them the forgiveness of sins. Christ also rose from the dead to grant men His eternal life. You can be forgiven of all your sins and share _____ which will bring you an abundant life now and prepare you for heaven. Forgiveness and eternal life can be yours if you will receive, by faith, Jesus as Savior and Lord. The decision is yours."