

Sermon 145: Romans 12:6: The Gift of Prophecy

OUTLINE

What prophecy is
What prophecy isn't

INTRODUCTION

The Charismatic church tells us that the gift of prophecy is an ongoing gift and function in the church today. They tell us that prophecy continues, but that it is something that is faulty. 'When Mike Bickle interviewed Bob Jones about his prophetic ministry, Bickle asked, "So there has been errors; there's been a number of errors?" Jones responded with this: "Oh, hundreds of them." And at the National School of the Prophets (on May 13, 2000), Chuck Pierce and Cindy Jacobs similarly acknowledged: "We've made a lot of mistakes. There's no excuse but we need to do better." Self-proclaimed prophet Kim Clement sums up the charismatic viewpoint with these words: "You can be a wrong prophet and not be a false prophet." (Trinity Broadcasting Network, "The prophetic ministry of Kim Clement," Aug, 13, 2002)¹ 'We must not be quick to call someone a false prophet simply because something he said was inaccurate. . . . Missing it a few times in prophecy does not make a false prophet. No mortal prophet is infallible; all are liable to make mistakes.'" (Bill Hamon, *Prophets and Personal Prophecy*, 176)' 'Jack Deere suggests that even if a prophet were to "miss it so badly" that his prophecy "had immediate destructive effects" in the lives of other people, we still should not regard that person as a false prophet (cf. Jack Deere, *The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy*, 131–32). Elsewhere, he explains:

Jack Deere: "Prophets are really messy. Prophets make mistakes. And sometimes when a prophet makes a mistake, it's a serious mistake. I mean, I know prophets just last year that cost people millions of dollars with a mistake they made. I talked to people who made the wrong investments, actually moved their homes, spent tons of money.."(Jack Deere, National School of the Prophets, "Mobilizing the Prophetic Office," May 11, 2000, tape #3).²

Paul tells us about the gift of prophecy in Romans 12:6, we want to spend some time now looking at this gift, at what prophecy is and isn't.

What prophecy is

Paul writes, 'if prophecy, in proportion to our faith.' This is the first of 7 gifts mentioned in this list. In each case there is exhortation for each gift to be used correctly for the edification of others. These exhortations will be Paul's way of honouring the truths he has mentioned so far, that we are to be holy, humble, and acting out of our union with each other. Paul tells the Romans that they are to prophesy 'in proportion to our faith.' What does this mean? There are two possible ways to understand it. On the one hand some think that Paul is indicating a gift of faith that each prophet receives when they reveal a revelation and that this leading of the Spirit should not be exceeded. The other view, and the one I favour is that to view the words, 'our faith' as referring to the Christian faith, and that prophecy must be done in line with the already revealed faith. In other words, it is a call to not innovate and go beyond the apostolic gospel. The word 'proportion' is literally

1 <http://thecripplegate.com/strange-fire-modern-prophecy/> accessed 30 March 2017.

2 Ibid.

analogia. The Reformers spoke about the analogia of faith being the deposit/standard of faith. Nothing is lost by choosing one of these.

But what is prophecy? How did the apostles understand it? Those who argue for an ongoing practice of prophecy claim that Paul was using the Hellenistic view of prophecy which was very broad in its meaning and could embrace ecstatic utterances to basic teaching and encouragement. This means that Paul envisaged a version of prophecy that could have errors and could be equal to the impressions Christians have. This however is an imposition upon the bible instead of taking a definition from it. The idea of prophet used by Paul is the OT one, the Hebrew one.

Deut. 13:1-5, 'If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.' Notice the emphasis in these verses. Miracles are much less important than message. A false prophet can perform lying signs and wonders like Pharaoh's magicians, and this is irrelevant if they get a prophecy wrong. Unfortunately miracles have often been used to condone a false prophet. Good modern day examples of this would be William Branham and Oral Roberts. These men claimed all sorts of healings which have never been substantiated, and because people believed they were performing miracles many bought what they were selling. Oral Roberts began the sowing in the faith and prosperity gospel, and Branham taught that the Trinity was Tritheism. Both these men prophesied, Branham claimed that Jesus would come again in 1977. He was wrong, he led people to another teaching, and if he had been alive in the OT he would have been stoned to death. Notice as well that the Lord allows these deceptions to come, one of His reasons is to test us.

God did not leave His people in the dark and at the mercy of those who claim to be prophets, He gave them a way to test, Deut. 18:21-22, 'And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'--- 22 when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.' The OT prophets gave direct revelation from God. It came in various forms, such as dreams, visions, pronouncements, etc. And it was prefaced with sayings such as 'Thus says the Lord.' This type of formula is used by NT prophets such as Agabus, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit' (Acts 21:11). NT prophecy is not seen as a fallible suggestion that may be right but rather as foundational and mysteries revealed by the Spirit, Eph. 2:20, 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.' Are we going to say that the church is built on a fallible foundation? Eph. 3:4-5, 'When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.' The prophets together with the apostles give us direct revelation from God. The main difference between apostles and prophets is not a difference in the quality of revelation but administration and witnessing functions attended with distinct signs. The prophets would speak predominantly to God's people and the apostles had a distinct ministry to the unbeliever as well.

Prophecy has traditionally been understood as having two parts, foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling has to do with revealing future events, but forthtelling has to do with preaching God's demands upon the people. Isaiah 53 which is a messianic prophecy which tell about how Christ will be the innocent one who suffers the punishment of God for our sins is an example of foretelling. This depends on God's revealing the future to the prophets. But Malachi rebuking Israel for the many men who were divorcing their wives is an example of forthtelling. This depends on God's revealing the sinful state of our hearts to the prophet and a relevant word being spoken. The prophetic word would be an infallible act in both the receiving and telling of the message. It is reasoned that biblical prophecy is about 90% forthtelling and 10% foretelling. We have both these aspects in NT prophecy. We see the foretelling aspect in Agabus who prophesied a famine in Judea, and Paul's arrest, Acts 11:28, 'And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).' (Acts 21:11). But we see from Paul that prophecy was made up of things that need not be exclusively non-foretelling aspects, 1 Cor. 14:3, 'On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.' These three things make up aspects of the foretelling and non-foretelling part of prophecy and are evident in OT prophecy. We can find hundreds of examples of messages of upbuilding, encouragement and consolation in the OT. The main difference between NT and OT prophets would be that the OT prophets would be speaking about the Christ to come and of God's demands under the Mosaic law, but the NT prophet would be speaking about the mystery of the gospel revealed in Christ and applying that good news in the lives of the believer.

Examples of NT prophets are Judas and Silas from Jerusalem in Acts 15:32. There were prophets in the Antioch church 13:1-2. Philip had four daughters who could prophesy 21:9. And Agabus was one of several prophets from Jerusalem, 11:27-28. A big question is, is prophecy limited to the office of prophet? The answer I think is no. We see several instances of the Spirit coming on those who did not hold office as prophet yet who prophesied, e.g. Saul.

Also because the gift lists are not intended as exact definitional statements there may be overlap in some of the gifts. It is possible that the gift of knowledge and wisdom might be related to prophecy as well as interpreted tongues. Discerning of spirits is likely related to the testing of prophecy. We must not think of this gift as hermetically sealed off from the others.

What prophecy isn't

That said here a few things that prophecy is not. The gift of prophecy does not save. We know that God sometimes allowed unbelievers to utter prophecies. Some examples are Saul as he was chasing David to kill him 1 Sam. 19:23. John 11:49-51 records Caiaphas the Highpriest prophesying the death of Jesus, one man for the nation. Jesus speaks about those who call Him 'Lord' and prophesy in His name being those whom He never knew, Matt. 7:22.

Secondly, we can know that not all could be prophets. Paul asks some rhetorical questions with the obvious answer of no in 1 Cor. 12:29-30, 'Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?' It is not everyone's gift, there is a necessary diversity in the body. Since this gift also came with authority and laid the foundation of the church, we cannot say that everyone is part of the foundation.

Thirdly, we must say that prophecy is not merely preaching. During the time of the Puritans it was popular to think of prophecy as preaching. They looked at the verse which spoke about prophecy being edification, exhortation and comfort and said that this is the purpose of preaching. They saw that prophesying was giving God's word to the people and so did preaching. The trouble is not in where they agree but where they are different. Prophecy is 100% inspired and does not err. It comes with the full authority of God. Preaching is a human endeavour that although it is blessed by God to save souls and build the church, it is not infallible. Likewise preaching does not have the foretelling aspect of prophecy. It is for this reason that teaching is third in Paul's list and comes after prophecy. It is also the reason why teaching is not along with the apostolic and prophetic ministry part of the foundation of the church.

Fourthly, prophecy is not a mixed message of man and God that we have to sift out the bad elements to find God's word. Some have argued that because Paul calls the Thessalonian church to test prophecy in 1 Thess. 5:20-21, we must expect prophecy to be mixed. They say that the difference between OT prophets and NT prophets is this: the OT prophet would receive God's word and understand it and communicate it infallibly kept by the Spirit. But they say that the NT prophet receiving the same revelation does not receive or communicate it infallibly, that they can misunderstand what they receive and make mistakes in their communication. This is reading way too much into the call to test prophecy, all prophecy in the OT would have been likewise tested.

Fifthly, if we agree that the office of prophet is foundational, and that prophecy was not a mixed error filled thing, then we must conclude that prophecy is not a permanent gift or function in the church, just like apostle.

Sixthly, because prophecy is foundational and inerrant, we cannot call any impressions or activity of the Holy Spirit in modern day saints prophecy. Let us concede that the Holy Spirit does still from time to time and give access to information unable to be known by us, or lay a strong impression on our hearts. We can acknowledge this real and active working of the Spirit without claiming the name and function of prophecy. Having shown that the NT understands prophecy as being foundational and inerrant, and therefore authoritative and binding, we must refuse to employ prophecy to describe this phenomenon. However much overlap in apparent experience our modern day impressions are to prophecy we must insist on calling prophecy that which is inerrant and foundational, and distinguish it from our experiences. We must not twist biblical definitions to suit our vague associations. Today there are thousands of Christians whose consciences are bound by those who claim to be prophets, they have married, given away money, moved country, and done many things in obedience to so called prophets. Likewise there are those who have replaced the bible which was written by the Holy Spirit for their inward impressions. In their minds because the Spirit's inward impressions are given equal weight to the scriptures, in fact they are given a greater weight. This results in their intuition replacing God as their authority.

Because what we experience inwardly is not prophecy which is inerrant, you can only be certain about your impressions as far as they conform to God's word which is inerrant. It is for this reason that we stress the bible as our authority for all we do and believe, it is the only infallible guide. Do you dare to risk replacing God's word for your intuition? Remember the heart is deceitful above all things. Because of sin we often believe lies and are convinced they are true when in fact they are not. Move away from the unsure, from presumption, from the mixed, from error and self-deception and come into the light. Do not be held hostage to your or anyone else's impressions, God alone is your Lord and the one

you submit to. Because you are not a prophet and there are no living prophets, you can never sin in disregarding your impressions or another's for the clear teaching of God's word. We do not shut the door on God's occasional work of impressing things upon our hearts, but we do protest that it is not prophecy and cannot have the binding authority of scripture. God has sufficiently equipped us for every good work by giving us a bible which instructs us in principle or precept for every situation. I am jealous to secure your obedience for God, to bind your conscience not to anything fleeting or unsure but to the word of God.

Let me give you an example of the work of the Spirit upon our hearts which is real but cannot be taken as prophetic. Let us think of the conviction of sin.

We know that it is the work of the Spirit to convince of sin in order to draw a sinner to see their need for Christ. Because the Spirit works repentance everywhere He enables faith, there will be a universal experience of conviction. However, because of the different ages of the people involved, the level of theological understanding, the personalities of the individuals and the varying levels of conviction the Spirit sees fit to apply there will not be a single experience that fits all. Here is a real working of the Spirit; can we agree that it is not prophecy? Will we allow for a real spiritual experience that we don't have to label prophecy? Good! Let's examine it a little more deeply. So we can have real experiences of guilt, these feelings are usually reactions to truths that are understood, and impressed upon us by the Spirit. We feel because of what we think. But we can think wrongly. Although the Spirit is using the truths of the gospel we have heard to make us feel the depth of our sins, we are full of error and mix it into our experience. Some can think that God cannot forgive them and so they feel torments under sin that are not necessary even though these emotions are the result of a work begun by the Spirit. It is a real work of the Spirit but in a mind with wrong thoughts and so it can lead to all sorts of wrong emotions. Prophecy we understand to be inerrant, it is a perfect word of God, perfectly received and communicated, and in the instance of God deciding that we needed in our bibles, perfectly written down.

I am wanting to demonstrate the shifting landscape of our inner emotional lives. It is more like a tossing ocean than solid ground. The Spirit may be working on your heart, but because He is not overseeing the process as He would prophecy there are all sorts of errors that can creep in. Never rest on them in any authoritative way. For example, I have had a person laid on my heart to pray for them. When I think of them there is an urgency in my desires, and this urgency lasts days and weeks, beyond what would ordinarily be the case and this fuels my praying for them. Perhaps it was the Spirit increasing my sense of urgency in a case that if evaluated logically could induce such emotions, perhaps not. But let us all be careful to never call these things prophecy.

We can fall into many dangers in these unknown and uncharted waters of our hearts. We can look inwardly and begin to associate certainty with the work of the Spirit, or urgency, or some other emotion, but all we are feeling is our own emotions moving in response to different data. Do not make a rule of following certain emotions. And let us not try and impress others by proclaiming our impressions with the voice of certainty that we make out as if we are always hearing God speaking in a little voice in our heads.

We can do this by interpreting our emotions as the Spirit but we can also do this by taking a verse out of context and personalizing it as if it was not written to people living in an Ancient near Eastern culture facing war and tribulation. George Whitfield was one who used to follow impressions and read the bible as if it were written to him personally and make bold statements of truth on the basis of them; until he made a big mistake. His wife was pregnant and Whitfield believed God had told him from verses about John the Baptist that

his son would herald the second coming of Christ. His son died in infancy. If we are to make the bible our authority in leading us, we must make sure we apply the proper rules of interpretation and not snatch verses out of their original context to suit us.

The main ministry of the Holy Spirit now is not repeating the prophetic word but illuminating it for us. We see in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit is the one who teaches and brings things into remembrance. It is true that we do not have as the apostles had it, nor for the same purpose, but we can describe this as a typical function of the Spirit. We may not have prophecy but we do have the author of Scripture in our hearts and active through the teaching ministries of the church to help us gain a deeper understanding of what has been revealed.

Let us end on a positive note. Revelation 19:10 reads, 'Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' When Jesus appeared to His disciples He showed them how all the scriptures testified to Him. The Holy Spirit through the prophets points us to Jesus Christ. From the very beginning of the bible the Holy Spirit has been telling us about this Saviour who must save us from our sins. The Spirit prophesied that He would be born of a woman, that He would suffer harm in his fighting against the devil. The Spirit tells us that He must be born of a virgin, that He will be born in Bethlehem, that He will be betrayed by friends. We are told that He would be an innocent man who would be punished for our sins. We are told that He would rise from the dead and begin a new age where His Spirit would be poured out on all nations. This is the word of prophecy that we must heed and reject all that challenge or seek to change this message.