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| Chapter 4

4.1 Prophecy

If tongues is the “gateway” gift, then, in a sense, prophecy is the “pinnacle” gift of the Spirit. That is not to say it is more important than others, but it embodies and epitomises God’s purpose of making himself known through his Spirit-filled people.

In Joel’s prophecy about the age of the Spirit, prophecy was to be the key manifestation:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

Joel 2:28-29 ESV

Following a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the elders of Israel, Moses says,

“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”

Numbers 11:29 ESV

4.2 The Nature of Prophecy

All can prophesy

Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

1 Corinthians 14:5 ESV

For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged,

1 Corinthians 14:31 ESV

Whilst we know that the Spirit gives gifts “*just as he wills*” (1 Corinthians 12:11) this should not limit our expectation as to which gifts we can move in: I suspect that “*just as he wills*” is influenced by our “*eagerly desiring*”.

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:1 ESV

It seems that just as the entry gift of tongues is universal, so too, at least potentially, is the gift of prophecy.

4.3 The spirit of prophecy

Prophecy is making known the very mind of God – and it is testifying of Jesus. These 2 things are one and the same: Jesus is the logos of God (see John 1). Logos means “word” but carries also the sense of “thought” and “idea”. Now of course Jesus is much more than a thought or an idea: rather he embodies every idea of God, so when we prophesy we are declaring the testimony of Jesus and revealing the ideas of God!

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he [the angel] 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.

Revelation 19:10 ESV

Prophecy is speaking from God. Whilst it is important for us not to elevate prophecy to something equal to (or above!) the written word of God, neither must we belittle the honour of being able to be the mouthpiece of the word of God! It is his word not ours!

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.

2 Peter 1:21 ESV

This is why it is vital that when we have a word from God we bring only what God gives us, and we don’t try to “fill it out” or “fill in the gaps”!

Manifestation of our nature as the prophetic people of God

Why do we prophesy? Not because we are “charismatic”, but because we are prophetic! The church is a prophetic statement to the world: we are here to testify to Jesus (Acts 1:8) and “*the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*”

Being a prophetic people means more than a prophesying people: we are individually and corporately prophetic by all that we say and do: the way we conduct ourselves, act with integrity, do our jobs, raise our children, manage our finance, care for our environment, bless those around us, heal the sick, preach the gospel, speak out for justice, meet the needs of the poor.



The gift of prophecy will be used by the Holy Spirit to shape and direct all of the activities of a prophetic church: this is how the prophecy relates to being prophetic.

Prophets are given to make us prophetic

So if all can (and should) prophesy, why do we have prophets?

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Ephesians 4:11-13 ESV

The ascension gifts, apostle, prophetic, evangelist, pastor-teacher, are given to equip us for ministry and to mature the church; not to do all the work! They do this by forming their own gifting throughout the church. A prophet will equip individuals to prophesy and will bring the church to a mature understanding and experience of what it means to be a prophetic people.

Because of the communicable nature of anointing, often the presence of a prophet (or prophets) will lead to a stirring of prophetic gift in others (see Saul and the prophets 1 Sam 10:10-13; 19:20-24). This is part of the equipping gift of the prophet, and means that there is no place for us thinking “well the prophets are here, why should I prophesy?”

Forth-telling and fore-telling

The two main aspects of prophecy are forth-telling (proclamation) and fore-telling (prediction). Prediction is in a sense a by-product of proclamation. Prophecy proclaims God: his character and his purpose; in proclaiming his purpose there will often be an element of describing future events.

Sometimes, however, fore-telling is the main purpose of a prophecy, in these cases then the prophecy is also a sign or a wonder, and can be very similar to a word of knowledge.

The creative word

Creation came about through God speaking a word: God’s words are creative. So, therefore, are prophecies. When a prophetic word is spoken something happens, something that God is not going to do until you speak it! This was the dynamic of creation: the Holy Spirit had all the power to form the universe out of nothing, but he brooded until a word was spoken. Psalm 29 is informative as to the effects of the prophetic word. In this psalm the “voice of God” is described

seven times (compare the seven thunders of Revelation 10) – each time a different facet being brought to the fore. The prophetic word is at times destructive and at times creative, just as God said to Jeremiah:

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Jeremiah 1:9–10 ESV

Embodying the word

The prophets of the OT often were called upon by God to embody their word: in their occupations, their family relationship, what they called their children, what they wore, how they acted out etc. Whilst demonstration of the prophetic word is often powerful and effective, for us today there is a still more pressing call to embody the word we bring: to live a prophetic lifestyle. The word of God must "*dwell in you richly*" (Colossians 3:16). It is in us that the word of God is "*living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*" (Hebrews 4:12). If you bring a prophecy, you are the first person God wants to hear it! And it is not just to be heard, but acted upon and made part of our lives – it is to be consumed – eaten! (see Ezekiel 3:1-2, Revelation 10:9)

4.4 Prophecy FAQs

1 Corinthians 14 directives

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

1 Corinthians 14:3 ESV

This verse describes the *up* factor of prophecy: it *builds up*, *stirs up*, and *cheers up*. One of the first ways to weed out prophecy that is not genuine is to ask, is it uplifting, edifying, and encouraging? Is it the kind of thing a loving father would say to his children that he only wants the best for? Does it leave us feeling better or worse? Genuine prophecy, even if it is dealing with issues in our lives, will always leave us in a better position and never one that is worse!

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV

This is not a prohibition on no more than three prophetic words being brought in a meeting. Paul says we can all prophesy in turn, and it is in the atmosphere where all prophesy that the unbeliever who enters will be convicted by the presence of God. But there should be no more than three prophetic words brought without stopping to weigh up what has been said and to respond. For God does not speak just for our entertainment or to fill up time, when he speaks it always demands a response. If more than three words came in quick succession we would be hard pressed to remember all that was said, and God does not want any of his words to fall to the ground or to return to him void.

If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged

1 Corinthians 14:30–31ESV

For you can all prophesy - This is an important statement. Paul says earlier in the passage that "I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy." (Verse 5). Paul's clear desire is that every believer would move in the prophetic gift. Nor is this something that originated with Paul, for it is an echo of the heart of God that resonates through all the writings of scripture. Moses said, "Would

that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). And Joel prophesied, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28). What these men saw from a far is now made possible by the abiding outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Jesus, the baptiser in the Spirit, now bestows without measure on those who believe.

The church was birthed in the outpouring of the Spirit that Joel prophesied; we are by nature a prophetic people. Prophesying is not something that is strange or alien to us, it is an integral part of our new nature. In Acts 19, when the Ephesian believers are first filled with the Spirit, they speak in tongues *and prophesy*. Peter says that, "*whoever speaks*, [should do so] as one who speaks oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Our words *are* prophetic whether we recognise that fact or not. However, each prophesies according to the measure of faith that he has, and different individuals have a different measure of grace in the gifts as the Spirit has apportioned. The fact that all can prophesy does not mean that all are prophets!

Prophecy one by one - With prophecy as with all the other Spiritual gifts, it functions in the body, for the body. The primary purpose of God giving a prophetic word is so that the body may be built up, not just so the prophet can prophesy. The gift must be used with sensitivity to the needs of the body, and a deferral to others who are moving in gift. We are not in competition with each other to see who can bring the most or the best prophetic words, we want the body to be built up - and that only happens when each part does its work as God intends (Ephesians 4:16). Sometimes this will mean I should prophesy, at other times it may mean that I need to hold back to allow someone else to prophesy.

And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

1 Corinthians 14:32-33 ESV

This is also an important point for us to grasp as we step out in the prophetic gift. For it does not just mean that we can hold back a prophetic word when we should - it also means it is possible for us to hold back on a prophetic word when we shouldn't! Even when the word feels like fire shut up in our bones, God will not compel us to speak. It has to be a decision of our own wills - there has to be a step of faith.

Prophecy should bring peace and not confusion. It's purpose is to illuminate not to obfuscate! This does not just apply to when we prophesy, but also how we bring the prophecy. We to a large extent have control over the words and expressions we use to communicate the revelation that God has stirred us with. We do not need to dress up the word with fancy language or impenetrable imagery. If God has given you something to say, just say it, as clearly and as

plainly as you can. God will watch over his word to see it done. It comes with the authority of God - he doesn't need our help to give it more clout!

Prophesying in part

For we know in part and we prophesy in part

1 Corinthians 13:9 ESV

Although prophecy is communicating the voice of God, and every word of God is trustworthy and true, prophecy itself is not infallible. This is because it comes through a fallible medium - *us!* It is possible for us to hear wrong, mistake our own imagination for the voice of God, or just get the wrong end of the stick. More often than not though what we prophesy is not wrong, it is just part of the truth. What we bring is just a part of the picture, a piece of the puzzle. When we combine the partial picture we have seen with the partial picture others have seen then the true image starts to appear. This again illustrates the God-ordained inter-dependence we have on each other as part of the body of Christ. No one prophet, no matter how anointed, can communicate all that God wants to say by his Spirit to the church. Because of this, every instruction that God wants to bring will be established by more than one prophetic word...

Establishing the word through witnesses

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offence that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

Deuteronomy 19:15 ESV

But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Matthew 18:16 ESV

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

2 Corinthians 13:1 ESV

There is a principle that runs through Scripture that one isolated witness is never enough to establish a matter - there is no way to verify what he says. Every matter must be established through the mouth of two or three witnesses.

This is not just the case for establishing guilt. The same principle applies in the realm of revelation from God. God gave Pharaoh two dreams to show that, “*the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.*” (Genesis 41:32). There were two witnesses, Moses and Elijah who appeared at Christ’s transfiguration and beheld his glory. These same two are represented in the prophetic book of Revelation as the two witnesses who prophesy (Revelation 11). Again these two represent the two-fold witness of the Old Testament towards Christ: the Law and the Prophets. In fact the whole of the Scriptures are a two-fold witness: Old Testament and New.

God never speaks to a man in isolation; the Spirit speaks to the churches. If a prophetic word is genuine it will be established by a confirming word from one or two others. This is another reason that Paul says that *two or three prophets should speak*, it is not to set a limit, but in order to establish the witness of the Spirit.

Weighing the word

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV

Weighing the word does not primarily involve determining whether the word was from God or not (that has more to do with the gift of discernment of spirits). Weighing a prophecy involves catching how much emphasis, importance, weight to give to the different aspects of the prophecy that was brought. Every prophetic word of God carries authority, but since each man prophesies according to his faith, and subject to his own spirit, not all carry the same weight - and even within an individual prophetic word, some aspects of what was said will carry more weight than others. It is thus very important that prophecy be weighed to make sure we pick up on what the Spirit is saying to the church. We weigh the word, not so we can give it marks out of ten, but so we know how we need to respond - for every word of God demands a response.

Generally speaking a prophet will not bring directive guidance of what to do in response to the word he brings. That is for those who receive the word to do. The prophet discharges his responsibility when he brings the word, it then becomes the responsibility of all those who receive it (which will of course include the prophet himself) to decide what needs to be done in response. If a word is brought to an individual or a group, it is down to that individual or group to decide what to do in response. This is how it was when Agabus predicted the famine. He did not tell the people to take an offering, those who had received the word themselves determined to do this in response to the word. Likewise when he prophesied that if Paul went to Jerusalem he would be bound and handed over



to the Romans, he did not bring a prohibition against him going. Paul determined to go in the full knowledge of what awaited him.

In the situations where a directive word does come, the response will be according to the direction and submitted to the authority of those in leadership in the body - for the Spirit brings order and never tries to "pull rank" over that order that he himself has established in the body.

Practical guidelines

- You'll never know if you never step out.
- Prophecy according to your faith.
- Don't try to prophesy like anyone else - each part of the body has its own unique importance.
- Don't give direct personal prophecy without checking it with an elder first.
- If you have a prophecy, prophesy it! - Deliver it in the first person not the third.
- Don't feel you cannot bring a prophetic word because someone just prophesied something similar - every word must be established in the mouth of two or three.
- Fill your heart with the word of God.
- Spent time with the prophets - those in the body and those in the Word.
- Learn to trust your anointing - God's gift and call are irrevocable.
- Don't despise the "small" words - be faithful with the little.
- Don't limit prophecy to a Sunday morning
 - Always seek God for his word.
 - Listen for the voice of the Spirit when you read the word.
 - When you get something don't always assume it is just for you - be prepared to share it.
 - Bring a prophetic edge to whatever you do or say.
- The more you give the more you will receive - God gives seed to sowers!
- Eagerly desire to prophesy more than you currently do - don't be passive.
- Come prepared and expecting to prophesy