

Order in Prophecy pt. 1

What It Was, What It Is, Whether It Remains

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-3

Where We Are

We have spent this series asking how God has designed the gathering of the saints to function together. We walked through worship and the role singing plays when the church assembles. We walked through polity, the leadership and governance model God gives His church. We walked through giving and the financial support of the body. And we walked through community, where the points were these: we are to be a people who pursue one another, welcoming those who walk through our doors and pursuing real friendship; we are to be a people who play our part, using the gifts we have been given for the building up of the church and the glory of God, producers and not merely consumers; and we are to be a people who pray together.

Today we come to the last subject in the series, and it is the one that requires the most care. We are talking about order in prophecy.

Why This One Is Hard

This is a difficult subject because I have seen firsthand the pain and confusion that the unordered and flippant use of this gift can cause. It is also the only spiritual gift Paul tells us not to despise. Out of all the gifts he names, and all the ones he does not, prophecy is the single one he felt the need to circle back to and defend.

Why? Because I believe it is the most easily despised. It is despised because of some of the people claiming to use it. It is despised because of the way it is often done. And sometimes it is despised simply because it is a confusing concept and people do not understand it.

So we are going to answer three questions. What is prophecy? Is it for today? And if it is, how does it work? We will take the first two tonight and give the third the room it deserves next time.

What Is Prophecy?

In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the Spirit of the Lord would come upon or rest upon an individual and use that person as a mouthpiece for God. Sometimes this took the form of word for word messages. Sometimes it came through dreams or visions. Sometimes it came as the interpretation of a leader's dream or vision.

This was almost always given to people of godly character. As best we can tell there is only one real exception, Balaam, a pagan prophet God used anyway. Every other prophet was of noble character. They had failings, yes, but they were repentant, not openly or secretly rebellious.

These prophets were raised up by God and often rejected by their own generation. They functioned almost as covenant prosecutors, largely tasked with holding Israel accountable to the terms of the covenant she had made with God. You find them calling out sin, delivering rebuke, warning of judgment, weighing in on strategic decisions, and calling Israel back to God.

In that era, prophecy was both authoritative and costly. It was authoritative because the prophet was understood to be speaking the very words of God, and to disagree with his witness was to disagree with God. Put it in our terms: prophecy was to them what the Bible is to us. And just as there are many today who call themselves Christians while disagreeing with and disobeying the Bible, so it was with Israel and her prophets. Nonetheless, what the prophets spoke was authoritative revelation. A good deal of it became Scripture itself.

It was costly because if you claimed to be a prophet and were not, the penalty was death. If you delivered something that proved untrue, they would kill you for it. There are even instances of God Himself striking down those who led His people astray by false prophecy.

So when I ask what prophecy was in the Old Testament, I want you to think of it this way: authoritative revelation from God, delivered through people of noble character, calling the people of God back to faithfulness and to the covenant they had made with Him.

They spoke the words of God to the people of God.

One note before we move on. There is a prophet named Joel who foretells a day when the Spirit of God will rest not merely on a spiritual elite, but on all people.

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

In the New Testament

Joel's prophecy comes true in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is poured out, and everyone who comes to Jesus and is born again is born not only of water but of the Spirit. All of God's people now have the Spirit of the Lord upon them and within them. There is no more prophetic elite.

Here is where the way things work appears to shift. Rather than addressing a nation with the authority of God as covenant prosecutors, we find people speaking to individuals or to small groups, not claiming divine authority, but speaking by the Spirit. We see them foretelling events in Acts 11 and Acts 21. We see them pastoring people through encouragement and ministry in Acts 13 and Acts 15.

Acts 21 in particular is worth sitting with, especially against the older paradigm. Agabus, who had already proven himself a prophet by New Testament standards back in Acts 11, gives a prophecy to Paul before Paul goes to Jerusalem: he will be bound and handed over. The company of believers then urges Paul not to go. Paul disregards their interpretation of the prophecy and goes anyway, and he is in fact imprisoned. They got the prophecy right and the interpretation wrong. Under Old Testament standards, that was punishable by death. Not so here.

In the Old Testament, the burden of interpretation rested on the prophet, because the prophet was the one who had the Spirit of God. Now we all have the Spirit of God, and the burden of interpretation rests on the hearer. Paul was responsible to hear the word and discern what to do with it. In other words, disobeying the prophet no longer equals disobeying God.

Paul goes on to give a good deal of instruction about how prophecy should work. He says it should flow from love and produce upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation.

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

1 CORINTHIANS 14:3 · ESV

Why does Paul leave out the covenant prosecutor piece, the accountability function? Because that is now the work of the Holy Spirit. He convicts us of our sin, which is exactly what we covered in our study of John.

When you sin, you do not need a Nathan or a Jeremiah. You have Someone better, louder, and much harder to ignore.

Is Prophecy Still for Today?

There is debate here, mostly within Western influenced churches. There is a view called cessationism which teaches that prophecy no longer happens today. The argument runs something like this: prophecy existed only in the time of the apostles to get the church off the ground. Think of the boosters on a rocket. They fall away once it clears the atmosphere.

This is almost always supported by one passage in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-12 · ESV

Paul is talking about the age to come, eternity, what most of us would broadly call heaven. He is saying that tongues, prophecy, and knowledge come to an end when we see Him face to face. The cessationist reads the coming of the perfect as the completion of the New Testament.

What we actually have in the meantime is this, two verses later.

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

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1 · ESV

If we have a clear command to pursue this gift, a clear command not to despise it, and nothing anywhere telling us to stop, then we cannot stop.

There is a historical argument here as well. If the gift of prophecy ceased with the death of the apostles, why do we have four centuries of church fathers directly after the apostles describing prophecy as still in operation in their own day? To be fair, it was not treated as especially normative. But it happened often enough that they taught on it.

Is prophecy still for today? Yes. There is no biblical or historical argument to think otherwise.

BEFORE WE GO FURTHER

Sit with this honestly for a moment. Which side of this have you landed on, and why did you land there?

Some of us have quietly written this gift off. Not from Scripture, but from experience.

Somebody used God's name to get something from you, and you decided it was safer to close the door on the whole thing. Paul understands that instinct well enough to command against it.

Others of us have been careless with it. We have attached God's name to our own impressions because it carried more weight that way. That is not a small thing. It is His name.

Ask the Lord which of those is nearer to you, and let the rest of what we say tonight land there.

Naming It Plainly

If I had to define it in a sentence, prophecy is the gift of communicating and explaining divine revelation.

That is vastly different from a teacher or a preacher. Teachers teach the Word of God, not from a place of fresh divine revelation but from careful study and examination of the text and of the church's historic understanding of it. Preachers are evangelists, primarily declaring the gospel, the message of salvation.

It is also vastly different from discernment, and from simply hearing the voice of God. All of us hear God. Some hear Him clearly, some softly, some poetically. We hear Him best with our faces in our Bibles, in the company of God fearing, Spirit led, courageous believers, or sitting still in the deer stand.

Prophecy is not hearing God for you. It is hearing God for the purpose of communicating it to others.

That is what the gift is, and that is why Paul refuses to let us throw it away. It was given for the building up of the church. How it is meant to work among us, and the guardrails that keep it safe, is where we will pick this up.

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