

Ordered: God's Design for Church Life · Sermon Six

Order in Prophecy

What It Is, How It Works, Where It Submits

ACTS II-21 · I CORINTHIANS 13-14 · I THESSALONIANS 5

Where We Are

Good evening. We are in our series called *Ordered: God's Design for Church Life*, in which we have been looking at how God has designed the gathering of the saints, the church, to function together. We have talked through worship and the role that singing plays in the gathering. We looked at polity, that is, the leadership and governance model of the church. We worked through God's design for our giving and for the financial support of the church, and we talked through community, looking specifically at how we function together. The big point there was that we need to be a community that pursues one another. Last week we began the final topic of the series, Order in Prophecy. Today is the last message of the series, and we are going to finish working through God's design for New Testament prophecy.

Last week we spent our time covering how prophecy looked in the Old Testament, what it was, and how it was clearly distinct from the ordinary, everyday prophecy of the New Testament. We then covered why that distinction is there, and it has everything to do with the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, only a select few had the Spirit of God rest upon them, and their words therefore carried a certain weight. Now, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is poured out among all believers, and not merely upon them but within them. The Spirit of God is no longer resting on us; He is dwelling in us. There is therefore no longer a prophetic elite who speaks to man on behalf of God. He speaks to all who are His. We then asked whether prophecy is still for today, and we came to the conclusion, based on Paul's words and on the writings of the first several hundred years of Christianity, that yes, conceptually prophecy is still for today. Today we are going to look at how it should work today.

What Prophecy Is, and What It Is Not

When we are talking about prophecy, we are talking about something specific. Prophecy is communicating divine revelation on behalf of God Himself. This is completely different from teaching or preaching. Teachers teach the Word of God, not from a place of divine revelation but from careful study and examination of the text and of the church's historic understanding of that text. Preachers are evangelists, primarily declaring the gospel, that is, the message of salvation. Prophecy is neither of these.

Neither is prophecy merely hearing the voice of God. Every Christian hears the voice of God. Maybe it is not audible. Maybe it is not even in words. Maybe it comes through your regenerated conscience, or through the God-fearing, Spirit-led, courageous community you are a part of, or through the teaching of God's Word. Most certainly we hear the voice of God every time we read the Word of God. That is not prophecy. That is Christianity.

Lastly, prophecy is not discernment. Discernment is being able to tell when something is off, when it is the Lord and when it is not. It is being able to read the terrain, read the room, or read the person. Often this is what people are operating in, but they lay flowery prophetic language over the top of it. It is noticing that someone's countenance is down and saying, "The Lord told me that you are struggling and in a tough season. He wants you to know He loves you." That is not prophecy. Do not add "the Lord told me" to it. Just be normal. "Hey, you look kind of down. Everything okay? Want to talk? Can I pray for you?"

Prophecy is God telling you something for the purpose of communicating it to someone.

So let us look at what the New Testament says regarding prophecy. We are going to move through these quickly and build out some guardrails as we go.

The Witness of Acts

Agabus Predicts the Famine

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

ACTS 11:27–30, ESV

Agabus predicts a coming famine, and the church responds by sending relief. Predictive prophecy is genuine, but notice that Agabus did not command a particular response. Keener reads this as genuine predictive prophecy, Storms as an excellent example of New Testament predictive prophecy, and Guzik observes that the church wisely applies the revelation it has been given. Prophecy can prepare believers without replacing wisdom.

Barnabas and Saul Commissioned

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers... While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

ACTS 13:1–3, ESV

During worship, the Holy Spirit says, “Set apart Barnabas and Saul.” Notice that the text does not say a particular prophet said it. It says the Holy Spirit said it. That paints the picture of leaders discerning together what the Lord was saying. It could well have come through one of the prophets who were gathered, and Keener thinks it likely did, but what matters is that there was a corporate confirmation of the word rather than one person announcing, “This is the Lord.” Carson calls this a unique missionary commissioning. Major prophetic words should be confirmed within the church and within its leadership, not merely individually. It is not enough evidence that one leader feels it is from the Lord.

Judas and Silas

So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

This is probably the clearest picture we have of ordinary prophetic ministry. We are not told what was said, only what it produced: encouragement and strength. Keener sees prophecy functioning pastorally here, and Storms notes how closely it parallels 1 Corinthians 14:3. Prophecy can function to strengthen believers and to bring them courage.

Salvation at Ephesus

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

ACTS 19:5–7, ESV

Having come to the knowledge of Christ and been baptized, they receive the Spirit, and they speak in tongues and prophecy. Luke records the occurrence and none of the content. He is clearly more interested in the reader understanding that the Spirit did in fact do this than he is in preserving the prophetic messages themselves. Be open to the Spirit doing this kind of thing.

Philip's Daughters

On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.

ACTS 21:8–9, ESV

Four daughters prophesy, and nothing they say is recorded. Women clearly exercised prophetic gifts, and Luke reports it as though it were entirely unremarkable. Women can clearly prophesy in the New Testament.

Agabus Predicts Paul's Arrest

ACTS 19:21, ESV

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.”

ACTS 20:22–23, ESV

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

ACTS 21:10–14, ESV

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Agabus predicts Paul's arrest. Everyone present concludes that Paul should not go. Paul goes anyway. Keener holds that Agabus accurately predicts the events, Storms observes that the application came from the people rather than from the prophecy itself, and Guzik notes that Paul obeyed God's prior leading despite the warning.

The prediction was accurate. The application was not.

Notice also that the prediction was confirmation of something Paul had already sensed. He had resolved in the Spirit to go, and the Holy Spirit had been testifying to him in every city about what awaited him. Paul had to obey what the Lord had already settled in him beforehand. So do not confuse revelation with interpretation. It is up to the hearer of the word to determine whether it is from the Lord and what to do with it, and prophecy concerning personal life decisions seems to be subject to what the Lord has already shown you.

Paul's Instruction to Corinth

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing... 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.

I CORINTHIANS 13:1-3, 8-10, ESV

Prophecy is partial and imperfect, and even if it were neither, love would still be greater. Never elevate prophecy above Christian character.

FOR REFLECTION

Before we go any further, sit with Paul's comparison for a moment. He does not say that prophecy is dangerous or that it is beneath us. He says that without love it amounts to *nothing*.

So ask yourself honestly: do I want this gift because I love the people it would serve, or because of what operating in it would say about me? Would I still want it if no one ever knew I had it?

Prophecy Builds the Church

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. 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.

I CORINTHIANS 14:1-5, ESV

Prophecy builds the church through edification, encouragement, and comfort, and Storms rightly identifies this as the primary purpose of New Testament prophecy. If prophecy consistently tears down rather than builds up, something is wrong.

Prophecy for the Unbeliever

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

I CORINTHIANS 14:24–25, ESV

Prophecy can expose the heart of an unbeliever, and that exposure can lead to salvation. God sometimes uses prophetic revelation to convict the heart of one who does not yet know Him.

Clarity in Prophecy

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. 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, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

I CORINTHIANS 14:29–33, ESV

Two or three, in other words not pandemonium. It needs to be said in a way that can actually be heard and understood, not lost in chaos. Others weigh the validity of what is said, and Carson notes that this evaluation is expected rather than optional. One at a time. God is not the author of confusion, and prophecy does not need to be presented in a way that causes it.

Order in Prophecy

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order.

Paul's writings carry greater authority than any prophetic claim. Do not forbid prophecy. Maintain order. Scripture always governs prophecy, and decency and order are demanded of it.

Do Not Quench, Live Right, and Test

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

I THESSALONIANS 5:19–22, ESV

Do not quench. Do not despise. Test everything. Hold fast to what is good. Live right. Keener frames this as balancing openness with discernment, and that is exactly the posture we want. Prophecy should be subject neither to gullibility nor to cynicism. Do not believe everything you hear simply because it feels good, and do not despise it either.

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.

I TIMOTHY 1:18, ESV

Timothy received prophecies about his ministry, and he needed to remember them in order to keep fighting the good fight of faith. Prophecy may confirm a calling, and it may anchor you when things get difficult.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

I TIMOTHY 4:13–15, ESV

The gift came by prophecy, and it came as the council of elders laid hands on him. Again, prophecy is discerned in community, and specifically by the elders.

Prophecy at Legacy

All of that brings us to where we actually live. At Legacy Church, we affirm the following convictions.

God speaks to His people. He prompts, guides, warns, encourages, and strengthens them by the Holy Spirit.

Prophecy is a genuine spiritual gift in operation today, and it should be earnestly desired according to the Scripture.

Prophecy exists for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the church.

Prophecy is always subordinate to Scripture and must align with it, not merely avoid contradicting it.

Prophecy must be tested, weighed, and discerned within the community of faith.

Scripture, wisdom, prayer, and godly counsel govern all decision-making, not prophecy alone.

What We Reject

Any prophetic claim that carries binding authority.

“God says” language that presents human impressions as divine decree.

Prophecy used to make decisions for others or to control outcomes.

Prophecy that bypasses discernment, accountability, or pastoral oversight.

Pressure to give or to receive prophetic words.

The elevation of prophecy as a marker of maturity or spiritual authority.

Any use of prophecy that produces fear, manipulation, division, or confusion.

Guardrails and Governance

At Legacy Church, governance exists not to suppress the Spirit but to honor Him and to serve His people.

i.

In Sunday Gatherings

Prophetic words are not a regular public feature of our services. Our gatherings prioritize intelligible worship and teaching rooted in Scripture. We ask that any prophetic impressions be submitted privately to an elder rather than shared publicly for the congregation to hear. This can be done in person or through the email addresses listed on our website. We do this to protect the flock from those who would use prophecy for their own gain.

ii.

In Small Groups and Personal Ministry

In more intimate settings, we encourage you to be courageous. If you feel the Lord is prompting you to encourage someone, go for it. But do it with humility. Use language that reflects the fact that you are fallible. Instead of saying “Thus saith the Lord,” try saying, “I feel like the Lord might be putting this on my heart for you.” Always ask permission before sharing, and always leave room for the other person to say, “That doesn’t really resonate with me.”

iii.

Pastoral Oversight

If prophecy ever becomes a source of pressure or division, the elders will step in. This is not about being heavy-handed. It is about shepherding. Our job is to make sure the environment stays safe and that the Word of God remains the final authority in every person’s life.

Legacy Church seeks to be a Spirit-empowered, biblically grounded church. We honor the Spirit by submitting to the Word, by pursuing humility over certainty, and by valuing love above all gifts.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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