

Steve Whitacre

SESSION 4: Prophecy (And Tongues)

“Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” (1 Corinthians 14:1)

So what is prophecy? Broadly speaking, “Prophecy is the most common means God used to communicate with people throughout biblical history.”¹

I. PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. In the Old Testament, a prophet is an individual tasked with communicating God’s words to God’s people (or God’s enemies).

“And the Lord said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.” (Exodus 7:1)

“Through the prophets the invisible God becomes audible.”²

- B. OT prophets prophesied according to the power of the Holy Spirit

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.” (Numbers 11:25)

“And he said, ‘Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream.’” (Numbers 12:6)

- C. Prophecy in the Old Testament was a weighty responsibility with significant authority.

“The prophets’ words [in the OT] are the words of God; therefore the people have an obligation to believe and obey them. To believe God is to believe his prophets (2 Chr. 20:20; 29:25; Hag. 1:12), for the words of the prophets are the very words of God (2 Chr. 36:15-16). Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey a true prophet is to disbelieve or disobey God...”³

- D. Themes of OT prophecy⁴

¹ Wayne Grudem, “Prophecy, Prophets.” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 701.

² Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 805.

³ Grudem, “Prophecy, Prophets,” 704.

⁴ Adapted from the ESV Study Bible article, “Introduction to the Prophetic Books”

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1. The prophets declare *that* God has spoken through them
“Thus says the Lord...”; “The word of the Lord came to me...”
 2. The prophets affirm that God chose Israel for covenant relationship
 3. The prophets often report that the majority of Israel has sinned against their God and his standards for their relationship
 4. The prophets warn that judgment will eradicate sin...
 - both within Israel... (see Jeremiah 5-7)
 - ...and among Israel’s enemies (see Isaiah 12-24)
 5. The prophets promise that renewal lies beyond the day of punishment
- E. Two major changes to OT prophecy were predicted:
1. A Prophet yet to come: Deuteronomy 18

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.’”
(Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

2. Prophecy distributed widely among God’s 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; cf. Acts 2:14-26)

The last writing prophet was Malachi, writing in the late 5th century, B.C. But that is not the end of prophecy in the Bible.

II. PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: The Fulfillment of OT Promises

- A. Jesus is the promised Prophet
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“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...” (Matthew 5:21-22)

“Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.” (John 14:23-24)

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” (Hebrews 1:1-2)

B. The Holy Spirit was distributed at Pentecost

See Acts 2. Note that Peter explains how Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled in Acts 2:16ff.

C. Prophecy is assumed to continue in the NT and today, but in a different role and form than in the OT. Whereas OT prophets were God's spokesmen, that role is fulfilled in the NT by Jesus (Heb 1:1-3) and by his word contained in the Bible (2 Peter 1:16-21). Thus, prophecy in the NT takes on a very different role and tone:

*“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.” (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)*

D. The work of the Holy Spirit — including through gifts — is always to exalt Jesus Christ.

*“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. **He will glorify me**, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:13-14)*

III. PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH TODAY

A. Prophecy is encouraged throughout the NT (1 Corinthians 12–14; also Romans 12; 1 Peter 4:10–11; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; etc.)

- B. Nowhere does the NT give us reason to think that the gift of prophecy (or other spiritual gifts) will cease. In other words, we believe that all spiritual gifts named in the NT are to be expected and encouraged today.
- C. At Sovereign Grace Church, our hope is that we will experience the full range of the Spirit's activity, including prophecy, every time we gather, whether that be in families, in small groups, or together on Sundays.

IV. A DEFINITION

“Although several definitions have been given of the gift of prophecy, the NT indicates that it should be defined not as ‘predicting the future’, nor as ‘proclaiming a word from the Lord’, nor as ‘powerful preaching’, but rather as **‘telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind’**.”⁵

V. HOW TO SEEK THE GIFT OF PROPHECY⁶

- A. Pray
- B. Be content with present gifts
- C. Grow toward Christian maturity
- D. Have right motives
- E. Use present gifts
- F. Try to prophecy

“The way to determine our spiritual gifts is not to ask, “What is my ‘thing’ spiritually, my spiritual specialty, that sets me apart from other believers and gives me a distinguishing niche in the church?” Rather the New Testament on the whole takes a much more *functional* or *situational* approach. The question is, “What in the situation in which God has placed me are the particular opportunities I see for serving other believers in word and deed (cf. 1 Pet. 4:10f.)?” “What are the specific needs confronting me that need to be ministered to?”⁷

VI. DELIVERING PROPHECY: GENERAL GUIDELINES⁸

- A. Remember what prophecy is: “telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.” – Wayne Grudem. It is “a report of a revelation.”

⁵ Grudem, “Prophecy, Prophets,” 707.

⁶ Adapted from Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 176–179.

⁷ Richard Gaffin, in Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 178.

⁸ I am indebted to Mark Prater of Covenant Fellowship Church for some of what follows.

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B. Be open to the various forms prophecy may take: It may be a paragraph, a sentence, a word, a picture, a verse from Scripture, a dream, a tongue with interpretation, a poem, or a song.

C. Remember that the purpose of prophecy is to edify:

“The principal content of most prophetic utterances is defined by the effects they produce. Prophetic utterances may edify, exhort, and console (1 Cor. 14:3). They may bring conviction as the secrets of the sinner’s heart are exposed (14:24-25). They may teach (14:31). They may on occasion give direction for ministry (Acts 13:1-3), contain warnings (21:4, 10-14), or present opportunities. They may even identify and impart spiritual gifts (1 Tim. 4:14).”⁹

D. Ask God if he has something for you to share.

Speak, Lord, for your servant hears. (1 Samuel 3:9 ESV)

E. Don’t presume to know the interpretation and application

1. Be content to share your prophecy and then leave it to the person to pray, seek godly counsel, discern its validity, its interpretation, and application
2. The most important thing you can do is to connect the person to God.

F. Share any prophetic word with humility

1. Hold it loosely. It’s ok to be wrong.
2. Embrace the opportunity to grow in humility.

G. Be very cautious with words that seem “corrective” in nature

1. Share with extreme care and gentleness. Remember 1 Corinthians 14:3: “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation”
2. It’s not wise to prophesy to someone you are angry at, jealous of, is sinning against you, etc.

H. Avoid first person, “thus says the Lord,” or anything else that would give a prophecy a sense of authority that it doesn’t actually have. Better: “I believe the Lord would say...” “I think the Lord wants to encourage you with...”

I. Speak normally.

⁹ Sam Storms, *The Beginner’s Guide to Spiritual Gifts*, 204.

VII. CONTEXTS FOR PROPHECY: PERSONAL

- A. Many opportunities for personal ministry like this: family, youth/singles meetings, ministry times after church, at caregroup, etc.
- B. Be alert to opportunities that we might not expect.
- C. All prophecy, including personal prophecy, must be evaluated by Scripture. Remember that we know in part and prophesy in part, so *we should expect prophecy to be of mixed quality.*

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, ESV)

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. (1 Corinthians 14:29, ESV)

- D. Like prophecy for larger groups, the purpose of personal prophecy is edification and encouragement. It may strengthen a conviction or confirm a decision, but we must be very careful about “directional” prophecy. Evaluate and “put it on the shelf.” Time will tell.
- E. A prophecy that seems directional in nature should be evaluated on the basis of Scripture and wise, trusted counsel. It would not be wise to make decisions on the basis of prophecy alone.

VIII. CONTEXTS FOR PROPHECY: FOR THE GATHERED CHURCH

- A. Why do we have a prophecy mic? Why do we have a pastor who supervises the prophecy mic? What is the pastor looking for in a prophecy?
 - 1. Clarity. Is it clear what this prophecy is about? What is the one thing this prophecy communicates to the church?
 - 2. Brevity. Can this prophecy be communicated in a concise and efficient manner?
 - 3. Specificity. Is this prophecy for a broad group in a general way or does it focus on a particular issue for a smaller segment of the church?
 - 4. Continuity. How does this prophecy fit in with what else is happening in this meeting?
 - 5. Credibility. Does this person have the grace to prophesy in this context? Does this person's character support the message?
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“I do not believe the Holy Spirit simply inaugurates the new age and then disappears. He, together with these gifts and fruit, *characterizes* the new age.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Sam Storms, “A Third Wave View,” *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 206.