

EVERYDAY PROPHECY

Ephesians 4:11-16, Acts 2:16-18, 1 Corinthians 14:1-3, 24-25 (NASB)

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Over the last fifty years or so a remarkable Christian woman named Joni Erickson Tada has spoken in countless churches and other forums about how God uses suffering in our lives. She became a quadriplegic at the age of seventeen in a diving accident. She has written over fifty books. Many of her messages are available on the internet for those who have not heard her speak.

Joni has a way of speaking which pierces hearts with her personal testimony of faith in Christ, but which also goes beyond testimony to teaching, into preaching, and beyond. Her words are full of God's words. She works from specific passages in the Bible but she also naturally flows in and out of Scriptures which come to mind as she speaks. Joni is one of the most well-accepted Christian speakers of our time. But where exactly does she fit in the pattern of New Testament instruction? How should we categorize her lifelong work?

Over the last four years we in the Northeastern District have been working on doing ministry together as a team based on the Apostle Paul's explanation of how the Church of Jesus grows: **"...But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love"** (Ephesians 4:15-16). We have had some encouraging growth as a result and promise of more to come.

But working together is not the only thing revealed in our touchstone passage. The beginning of the section gives us the pattern for increasing the capabilities of each team member: **"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ..."** (Ephesians 4:11-12). Team members have a calling to grow in their capacities. And let us not forget that this equipping work also raises up leaders who go on to equip others.

I want to issue a challenge: We are all familiar with the equipping work done by apostles who train others to plant churches, evangelists who train others to share the good news, pastors who teach others to shepherd the flock of God, and teachers who train more teachers.

But here is a giant hole in our thinking: What were the New Testament prophets teaching other believers to do? How is prophecy as a normal activity of all believers represented in the church today?

PROPHECY AS AN EVERYDAY THING

We turn to the second chapter of Acts to learn from the Apostle Peter. He explained a crucial difference between God's plan for Old Covenant prophecy and New Covenant prophecy: **"...This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS**

AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophecy” (Acts 2:16-18, caps in original).

The ministry of the word was, according to Peter, the direct fulfillment of the prophecy from Joel. No longer would the spirit of prophecy rest only upon a few selected men and women as it did under the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant the Holy Spirit who is the spirit of prophecy would be poured out on both men and women, young and old, Jews and Gentiles.

The listeners on that day explained what they heard: “...**We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God**” (Acts 2:11). Through the special gift of tongues which was given that day believers in Jesus became conduits for the eternal truth of God’s word to connect with hearers from many countries. These words brought both challenge and also salvation.

Let us acknowledge that this was a unique event, a sign to the whole world that the church was born that day. But in that acknowledgement let us not lose the way God used people not previously identified as prophets to speak eternal truth for the growth of the kingdom. This gives us a clue about the normal, everyday function of the New Testament gift of prophecy. All receive the Spirit of God and all do the work of prophecy in ways appropriate to their gifting and station.

We also gain a visual paradigm for how it works. If you have never seen a van der Graaf generator there are many videos on the internet where you can see one in operation. It is basically a large metal ball on a stand which has a belt which runs up the center of the stand and inside the metal ball. When you turn the belt either by hand or with a motor static electricity builds up in the ball. This charge has tens of thousands of volts but almost no amperage.

If you put your hand near the ball a large spark will jump. If you hold a fluorescent tube near the metal ball it will light up. If you put your hand directly on the ball your hair will rise up until you look like a dandelion. If you then reach out to someone else the voltage will travel right through your body, jump the gap to the other person and give them a shock.

This is a picture of how prophecy works. Any believer, regardless of education, sex, or age, can reach up and grab the energy of the eternal truth of God as represented in his word. And then, as the Holy Spirit may lead, any believer may reach out to another person and become the conduit of God’s powerful truth to them.

So we may venture a definition: New Testament prophecy is when anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit reaches up to God for the eternal truth of his word and becomes a conduit to particular people, places, and things. Let us also recognize, as we learn from both Old and New Testament prophets, that the amount of energy transmitted by God’s word is immense compared to the trivial amount of a van der Graaf generator. We may get a little fried as the mighty power of the word flows through us. But the alternative is to deprive both the church and the world of what Peter called “**the words of eternal life**” (John 6:68b). We have been chosen to be God’s instruments to transmit this truth. He has no other plan.

This picture helps us understand the stunning power which Joni Erickson Tada has wielded worldwide through her speaking and writing ministry. She herself has clearly grabbed the power of God's word. She found herself driven to it by her desperate need to find out what God was doing in her terrible injury. And instead of directly grabbing others to deliver the shock of prophetic energy the way preachers often do, Joni has chosen to deliver that word in the form of a testimony. Instead of latching on to us she attracts us to herself and invites us to reach out and touch her to make the connection. We see ourselves as she speaks of herself. We know that we need the same work of God that she has needed.

And we now have the right category of ministry in which she operates, which is prophecy. She never attended a school of the prophets, she does not claim to have a gift a prophecy--though she clearly does--and she does not hold the office of a prophet in the Church. But prophesy she does. Testimony is a subset of everyday prophecy. You and I may not have her prophetic gift. But testimony is one of the easiest ways for us to engage the regular ministry of prophecy.

WHAT EVERYDAY PROPHECY IS NOT

I believe that part of the reluctance of the church to minister through prophecy is that we are distracted by the special uses of it. As in every age there are also egregious abuses of prophecy which turn many people away from it. And both of these distractions cause most Christians to think: *I don't see myself doing those things so I had better just stay away from prophetic ministry.*

What are the special uses? The most obvious is telling the future, which is how the word is used in current English. Jesus prophesied that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed. A second special use is the work of instruction God gave the prophets to found the church with the apostles. We see this work taking place in Acts 15:32: **“Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.”**

Why did Paul not include teachers, for example, along with apostles and prophets when he described the founding of the church? He wrote in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is **“...Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone...”** We do not know with certainty, but prophets seemed to have had a role in communicating revelation to the early church, including the **“lengthy message[s]”** of prophets like Judas and Silas. The church today has no mental socket for lengthy prophecies.

A third special use of prophecy is direct revelation where God uses the prophet to communicate directly with someone. I think of Samuel showing up to be the mouthpiece of God to David when he committed adultery and saying: **“You are the man!”** A fourth is that God also used prophecy as direct revelation to write the Bible (cf. Luke 18:31). These are the primary special uses. It is hard to imagine the regular equipping in prophetic ministry described in Ephesians 4:11-12 as focusing on these things.

PURPOSES OF EVERYDAY PROPHECY

In fact the vast bulk of prophecy recorded in the Bible, even from prophets with the special gift, is not comprised of these special uses. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a**

tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:1-3). Many in Corinth had placed an unbalanced emphasis on speaking in tongues. Paul was eager to raise their thinking about prophecy: **“Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy...”** (1 Corinthians 14:5a). He expected wide participation.

Here we find the great purposes of everyday prophecy in all ages: edification, exhortation, and encouragement. Most of prophetic ministry is for building up the people of God, spurring them to love and good works, and lifting up their hearts so they will not quit following an invisible God. We learned earlier from Peter on Pentecost that God also uses prophetic speech to speak to people who do not know him yet.

Suddenly our picture of prophetic ministry changes! Suddenly we understand Peter’s statement that prophecy would no longer be only for a few with a special gift but would become a regular ministry of all God’s people. Can you and I walk in prophetic ministry to edify, exhort, encourage, and speak the great things of God to the world? Yes we can!

We may also find that as we walk in everyday prophecy the special uses sometimes pop out. A study of the Old Covenant prophets shows that they blended the special uses and regular use of prophecy without distinction. And because truth is from the eternal God a prophetic word can be about things past, present, or future—or a complex combination. Some prophecies, such as the sending of a sign in the form of a child in Isaiah 7:14 combines the past, present, and also future in God’s redemptive plan.

PREREQUISITES OF EVERYDAY PROPHECY

As exciting and accessible all this is, we must fulfill a prerequisite for prophetic ministry. Before we can be a conduit for the energy of God’s truth we must put our own hand on the van der Graaf generator. We must ourselves reach up to God to be filled with his truth. This is going to be some serious work—a relentless pursuit, in fact, of God’s self-revelation in his word. Only when our hand is on the generator will we be in a position to transfer energy to someone else.

And this cannot be a merely intellectual enterprise. We must open our hearts in a spirit of humble submission. The prophet Samuel heard the voice of God when only a little boy calling out to him in the night. He was already displaying the true heart of a prophet as he answered: **“Here I am, for you called me”** (1 Samuel 3:6). It took three tries for Eli to figure out that it was God calling, but Samuel’s humble submission was evident every time. As we take the word of God into our minds we must tear open our hearts and call on God to change us before anyone else, to wreck our self-centeredness, and to do a transforming work. If we want to engage prophetic ministry we must speak Samuel’s words of obedience to our Master: **“Speak, for Your servant is listening”** (1 Samuel 3:10).

EFFECTS OF THE MINISTRY OF EVERYDAY PROPHECY

Once we ourselves are filled, wrecked, and charged up with God’s word we are in a position to pass the energy along. Paul explained the effects to the Corinthians: **“But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the**

secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

Paul has just described the kind of worship gathering we all want. When there is broad participation in prophecy the following effects ensue: Conviction of heart takes place. We recognize that we are sinners before a holy God. We are all called to account and hear the call to renew our obedience. We find that the state of our inward selves is revealed to us by the power of the word, and that we must face the reality of it. In the widest sense prophetic ministry brings us into the presence of God. This revelation pushes us into worship. And we find that, taken together, all these things energize transformation in our lives.

It does not matter if the songs are on piano, guitar, or jaw harp. Our clothes do not matter. Pews or chairs does not matter. Cathedral or bowling alley does not matter. The wide embrace of the work of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of everyday prophecy brings us what our hearts seek above all things: the awareness of the presence of our beloved Abba Father, and Jesus Christ our beloved Lord.

And for those who do not yet know God prophetic speech brings salvation itself on eagles' wings!

CONCLUSION

For a time in Western culture many people were willing to come to church to hear God's truth. This became our normal plan though it was never God's plan to restrict the communication of his truth to professionals. In our culture today almost no one, statistically speaking, is independently coming to church to hear God's word from a professional. We must recover the work of everyday prophecy so that all of us—young and old, men and women, rich and poor, extroverted and introverted—take the word of God's truth everywhere he wants it to go!

If you are a pastor or elder, you have work to do for everyday prophecy to be released:

1. You, above all others, must be convinced that Acts 2:16-21 is really what God is doing. Study it out for yourself.
2. Provide a covering for gifts and ministries to function as God intended. Give permission. Tell God's flock that the prophecy from Joel is, in fact, fulfilled in them.
3. Encourage specific people to engage by providing opportunities for them to speak. This will require discernment, wisdom, and instruction. Who in the body can be seen to be moving into the ministry of the word? What is the right context? Don't wait for the ministry to just pop out. The Bible says that the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, so we must choose to do it.
4. Help people understand that the regular work of instructing the flock belongs to the pastors and elders. But also help them understand that others who are not elders can and should speak from time to time. This includes women who, according to Paul, both prayed and prophesied in the general assembly of the saints (see 1 Corinthians 11:5). The Alliance has done this from its beginning though influences from the outside have often kept women and other non-elders out of our pulpits.

5. Provide a real-time oversight and discernment ministry. Everything the local church does is under the oversight of loving, truthful elders. The expression of everyday prophecy will take different forms in different places. That is by God's design. The elders have broad authority and also responsibility to make sure that everything is done decently and in order.

I would suggest the following to those who are not elders, both men and women:

1. Be brave and share the word of God from the treasure house he has built in your heart! You are leading the recovery of the ministry of all believers in the face of a bad habit of evangelical professionalism. Don't expect a smooth ride, but thank God when you get one.
2. Submit peacefully to the pastors and elders about whether, when, and how to speak to the body. Be sure your attitude is good and don't prophesy until it is.
3. Don't take the role of pastor or elder as you speak. I do not think we serve the church well when we include non-elders in a preaching rotation, for example. The question is not whether non-elders can and should preach in some cases. The question is whether there is clarity about the offices of pastor and elder. Ultimately this is a judgment call by the local church elders.
4. Don't try to direct the church through everyday prophetic ministry, even if you are given the pulpit.
5. Stick to the purposes of everyday prophecy. Seek to edify, exhort, and encourage.
6. Use the word of God with power and do not worry about what category of message you are giving. Preaching, teaching, prophecy, and testimony overlap.

To conclude: Prophecy is a verb! You do not need to have stunning testimony or the gift of prophecy like Joni Erickson Tada. All you need is the willingness to do the work of prophetic ministry! The church is starving and the world is dying for lack of hearing the words of God. You have the calling and the empowerment to change that.

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