

Reflections of a Formerly-Charismatic Calvinist
Greentree Community Church
August 2, 2009

Note: After the original presentation, I've added some explanatory comments in italics. I also need to make a correction, for the benefit of those who attended or who later hear the recording: in discussing examples of prophecy in the book of Acts, I confused two instances from Acts 21. What the chapter actually shows us is two episodes, one in which unnamed "disciples" at Tyre urge Paul "through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem (vv. 3-4), an exhortation which Paul ignores. The second occurs in Caesare and involves the prophet Agabus, who predicts that the Jews in Jerusalem will arrest Paul and hand him over to Gentiles; based on this prediction, others urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem—and again, he ignores their pleas (vv. 10-15). What do these episodes reveal about "prophecy"? First, Agabus' prophecy shows us how a foretelling of the future also functions to prepare the church for a coming crisis—in this case, the arrest of the preeminent apostle to the Gentiles. Second, the incident involving Agabus points to the need to distinguish a prophecy from its application: Agabus predicts that Paul will be arrested, and others take this to mean that Paul should respond to the prediction by avoiding Jerusalem. (The text does not say whether Agabus himself drew this conclusion. It's also worth noting that we don't hear Agabus say, "But Paul has to go to Jerusalem in order to fulfill the prophecy!" This suggests that the prediction may have had something of a conditional nature: "If you go to Jerusalem, you will be arrested....") Third, if 21:4 describes prophetic activity (many scholars are convinced that it does, based on the combination of "urging" and "through the Spirit"), then we see that NT prophecy may not have carried the same binding authority as the messages of OT prophets. In other words, this appears to be an example of an NT prophecy being prompted by the Holy Spirit, delivered out of good motives (protection of Paul and of his mission and service to the broader church), and yet still disregarded (that is, Paul still chose to go to Jerusalem). Many, myself included, see this as an instance of the evaluation of prophecy described in 1 Corinthians 14, and as an indication that NT prophecy was a less authoritative form of Spirit-prompted speech than OT prophecy.

Challenges

- Misunderstanding
- Experience
- Overreaction

Commitments

- 1 Cor 12:3: the fundamental Christian confession is "Jesus is Lord"
- 1 Cor 12:21-22, 26: we need each other, even those we may consider "weaker" in some way
- 1 Cor 14:20: Attempts to prove our superior spiritual maturity demonstrate our immaturity
- 1 Cor 13:1: No activity is truly Spiritual if it is done without love

Definitions

- What is "prophecy"?
 - the delivery of a spontaneous message prompted by the Holy Spirit, given to strengthen, exhort, and comfort God's people, and subject to public evaluation by its hearers

- *Note: on the assumption that OT prophecy and NT prophecy are not precisely parallel, this definition is meant to apply only to the NT phenomenon described most fully in 1 Corinthians 14, but also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11, in various places in Acts, and in a handful of other NT texts. The messages of OT prophets were not always “spontaneous,” they were not subject to the same kind of public evaluation mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14, and they would better be described as “inspired” rather than “prompted” by the Spirit.*
- What is “tongues”?
 - a Spirit-endowed ability to proclaim spiritual truth in a language not learned by or known to the speaker
 - “glossolalia”: what is spoken is not a human language (though it tends to involve sounds from the speaker’s native language)
 - “xenoglossia”: what is spoken is a known human language, and could be understood by native speakers if they were present
 - *There are tremendous debates as to which of these types of speech are present in the NT. Most agree that in Acts, tongue-speaking involves known human languages, and evidence from 1 Corinthians 14 demonstrates that this is what Paul had in mind there as well (e.g., Paul uses known human languages in 14:10 to illustrate his point, and the example he gives in v. 21 involves human languages as well. However, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 13:1 (“tongues...of angels”) and Romans 8:26 (“groanings that words cannot express”), most Charismatics believe that there is a form of speaking in tongues that involves something other than a human language (often referred to as a “prayer language,” considered to be primarily for the individual’s private edification, and therefore not necessarily needing to be interpreted for the benefit of others). Many non-Charismatic students of Scripture, myself included, are not convinced that such “glossolalia”(from Greek terms meaning “tongue-speech”) is ever mentioned in the NT; based on the NT, we would expect that whenever tongue-speaking might occur today, it would involve “xenoglossia” (from Greek terms meaning “foreign speech”)—for example, a person who had never studied Arabic being given supernatural ability to communicate the things of God and the gospel in Arabic to native speakers of Arabic.*
- What is a “miracle”?
 - an event in human history caused by God’s supernatural power (i.e., power which produces results beyond what could be expected from the means employed)
 - Biblical miracles: all believers should know about, accept as true, and understand the importance of these events, especially as they authenticate God’s messengers
 - Contemporary miracles: part of God’s on-going work in the world—but knowledge of them is not necessary for someone’s spiritual maturity

Application

- Introductory questions
 - What was the original purpose of these “extraordinary” gifts?
 - Why are some Christians reluctant to believe that these gifts continue to have a role in the *ordinary* life of the church?
- Four illegitimate reasons:
 - Skepticism regarding the supernatural (“God-in-a-box”)
 - Low view of the Holy Spirit
 - Faulty view of worship
 - Sinful pride
- Five legitimate reasons:
 - Reverence for Scripture
 - Desire for orderly worship
 - Rejection of a faulty view of Christian growth
 - Tongues or some similar sign is often treated as evidence that one has experienced a second “reception” of the Spirit.
 - Such a theology:
 - creates a division between the “mere” Christian and the spiritual elite
 - undermines the Bible’s emphasis on the indwelling of the Spirit (which begins at conversion; see Rom. 8:9-11) as the definitive factor for Christian maturity
 - can erode the confidence of those who have not experienced the “second blessing.”
 - Reflection on church history
 - *Significant Silences*: Speaking in tongues has historically been practiced by relatively small numbers of Christians. At the same time, great movements of mission, revival, and reform in the church do not appear to have suffered because their leaders were not given this gift.
 - *An Early Decline*: Evidence from the early church suggests that speaking in tongues was a rare occurrence after the early second century.
 - *A Cautious Approach*: Interest in “prophecy” (at least by that name) appears to have declined after the conflict with Montanism (late second century). As many (including Luther and Calvin) acknowledge, the church “may still enjoy some use of ‘prophecy’ without calling it that” (D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 168).
 - Recognition of unique purpose of extraordinary gifts
 - *Apostleship as a Precedent*: At least one of the items in NT “gift lists”—apostleship—is widely acknowledged to have a unique place in the life of the church. Apostles served to communicate, verify, and safeguard pure testimony about, from, and for Christ; when this role was fulfilled, and that testimony preserved in Scripture, the gift of apostleship ceased to function, so that it is not an ongoing feature of the church’s life. *In*

principle, therefore, it is not impossible that other gifts had such a unique role.

- *Patterns from Acts:* In the book of Acts, speaking in tongues seems to have such a unique function. It is never described as an ongoing part of the life of the church, occurs only when apostles are present (see esp. 8:14-17), and serves to convince (often reluctant) leaders that newly converted groups are full members of the redeemed people of God. In particular, it serves to address issues that were of concern in “first generation” Christianity: have the apostles been empowered to fulfill their mission to go to the ends of the earth (1:8; 2:4)? Are reports that the despised Samaritans are converting true (8:14-17)? [Is Saul the feared persecutor really one of God’s chosen apostles (9:17)?] Can uncircumcised Gentiles really be saved (10:44-48; 11:2, 15-18; 15:1-11)? How can Paul be sure that those who once knew only about John the Baptist are now truly believers in Jesus (19:1-7)?
- *Descriptive v. Prescriptive:* Even 1 Corinthians 12-14, which does describe speaking in tongues as a consistent feature in Paul’s life and in the worship of the Corinthian congregation, never prescribes this gift as a permanent part of the church’s life.
- *Dramatic Signs in Redemptive History:* Like Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (see esp. Luke 4:18; 5:24; 7:18-22; Heb. 2:3-4), Paul mentions “signs, wonders, and miracles” as “marks” that confirm his God-given authority (2 Cor. 12:12; see also Acts 15:12). This fits an overall biblical pattern in which miracles occur in clusters at key moments in the history of God’s redeeming work: at the Exodus (Moses); during the conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua); at the spiritual low point of Israel’s apostasy (Elijah and Elisha in the North; Isaiah in the South); at the inauguration of the New Covenant era through the Messiah (Jesus); in the early years of the New Covenant community (primarily the Apostles). Once the Apostolic era has closed, we might not expect such dramatic clusters of miracles until the next key moment in redemptive history—the return of Christ.