

Prophecy in the New Testament

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I was invited to a large conference at which various wild doctrines were propagated (including one that God had a physical body with DNA!!) and all of these new doctrines were justified on the basis of being 'prophetic revelations' to the head pastor of this group (which I now believe to have been a cult). Prophecy is being abused left and right by such unscrupulous people and often for considerable financial gain. Just because someone claims to have received something under the anointing does not mean that you should believe it.

In this study we will look at what is true and false, and what is right and wrong, regarding prophecy in the Church, particularly in the NT. I do believe that NT prophecy is for today, and has a place, but I want to look very carefully at what that place is.

First we need to understand New Testament prophecy is substantially different from Old Testament prophecy in that:

a) The OT prophets only prophesied up until the time of John the Baptist, who was the last of the line. There is no one like the OT prophets around today:

Matthew 11:11-14 MKJV *Truly I say to you, Among those who have been born of women there has not risen a greater one than John the Baptist.... For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. (14) And if you will receive it, this is Elijah who is to come.*

b) Prophecy in the New Testament does not, at any point, form the basis of Scripture. The New Testament was written by apostles, and not by prophets. For instance there is no 'book of the prophet Agabus' (Acts 11:28-30, 21:10,11). The grand exception is the book of Revelation, which was a prophecy given to the **apostle** (not prophet) John.

c) Prophecy in the New Testament is much more common and widespread : **Acts 2:17 MKJV...** *"And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*

d) OT prophets were rare but in the NT there may be a number of prophets in the same church congregation (Acts 13:1-4, 1 Corinthians 14:29-31)

e) New Testament prophets are not powerful authority figures (like Moses, Ezekiel etc) but rather are 'judged' by the congregational leadership and their prophecies are weighed up (1 Corinthians 14:29-31).

f) Prophecy in the New Testament is never the basis for the development of doctrine. Doctrine proceeds from the knowledge of Christ, and from deep examination of the Scriptures - in a sensible and reasoned fashion.

This confusion has come about in part because there are two main words for prophecy in the Bible and they are very different. The word for OT prophecy is the Hebrew word nabi – which means someone who is inspired by the spirit of a god or demon (there were also false prophets). When authentic these nabi wrote Scripture, called down judgments and had enormous cultural influence.

The word for NT prophecy is the Greek word "prophetes" which is a very broad word that includes philosophers and mathematicians (the mathematician Pythagoras and the philosopher Epimenides were considered to be 'prophets' in the Greek world. Epimenides is even called a prophet in Titus 1:12) Such prophecy included scientific inquiry and the development of insight and understanding. There was certainly a spiritual component and the idea of inspiration was still important but it was not the same kind of majestic inspiration as that of the major Hebrew prophets.

Now, unfortunately, we have taken these two very different concepts (nabi and prophetes) and translated them by using the exact same English word. This has resulted in untold spiritual confusion in the area of prophecy. The OT "nabi" prophet is a very narrow specialized sub-set of the much broader Greek word "prophetes". We cannot import the authoritative nabi concept into every use of the word prophet in the New Testament. Instead we must look at each context to see what is appropriate.

What then are the functions of the normal congregational New Testament prophet?

a) Edification, exhortation and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3,31) especially of the Church (1 Corinthians 14:4,

b) Bringing about the conviction and repentance of unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:24,25)

c) Imparting of spiritual gifts and the calling out of missionaries: (1 Timothy 1:18, 4:14, Acts 13:1-4)

d) Warning about upcoming events of a rather immediate nature so that Christians can take the correct course of action – e.g the prophecies of Agabus about (i) the famine and (ii) the imprisonment of Paul (Acts 11:28-30, 21:10,11).

The NT congregational prophets 'prophecy in part' (1 Corinthians 13:9), as through a mirror dimly and as such inaccuracies may (and do) occur. Therefore prophecies were to be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29-31) and the good prophecies were to be sorted out, kept and held onto (1 Thessalonians 5:20,21) and they were not to be despised (1 Thessalonians 5:20). In fact all Christians were to seek to have the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1,5 39) so they could build up the Church.

The thing that strikes me about such prophecies is their immediate application. The person walks into the service and is convicted of sin and falls down before God or, in the middle of a prayer meeting, people sense that God is sending out Paul and Barnabas. Even the prophecies of Agabus do not relate to events centuries in the future but for the times that are immediately at hand.

Thus NT prophecies are for the present context. They relate to the immediate edification of the church and the equipping of those who serve in it. NT prophecies are for edification, exhortation, and comfort; for the building up of the saints; for the conversion of sinners; and for the anointing and sending out of workers into God's vineyard and for the warning of the church about things in the immediate future.

NT prophecy operates only within the Church. It is not authoritative 'over nations' as some claim. Nor does it have a grand far future application; nor does it establish new doctrines; and it certainly does create any body of revelatory work that is to be added to or compared with Scripture. The Bible must be the rule and the standard by which all prophecies are judged. Prophets are to be reverently submitted to the Scriptures, and to Christ, at all times.

If NT prophecy is kept within its proper biblical bounds then it can be a tremendous help in building up the Church – which is why Paul desired for all to prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:5 EMTV (5) *Now I wish you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you should prophesy; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edification.*

1 Corinthians 14:39 EMTV (39) *Therefore, brothers, seek to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.*

Even Moses desired the same thing!

Numbers 11:29 MKJV *And Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would God that all Jehovah's people were prophets, that Jehovah would put His Spirit upon them!*

So we are to seek to prophesy, so that we may build up the Church, with fitting words for each occasion, that come from the Spirit of God. Yet we must do so humbly and within the bounds of Scripture.

We found out that New Testament prophecy involves speaking an anointed word, given by the Holy Spirit, for the edification of the church. The general outpouring of the gift of prophecy is part of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:17,18).

NT prophecy nearly always applies to events that are immediately at hand, and is for the conviction and repentance of unbelievers and for the edification, exhortation and comforting of the saints. It is to be weighed up by mature believers and when so validated is so useful that Paul encouraged everyone to desire to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14: 1,5,31,39).

Prophecy is viewed as part of the normal package of spiritual gifts:

Romans 12:6-8 MKJV *Then having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, if prophecy, according to the proportion of faith; (7) or ministry, in the ministry; or he who teaches, in the teaching; (8) or he who exhorts, in the encouragement; or he who shares, in simplicity; or he who takes the lead, in diligence; or he who shows mercy, in cheerfulness.*

1 Corinthians 12:7-11 MKJV *(7) But to each one is given the showing forth of the Spirit to our profit. (8) For through the Spirit is given to one a word of wisdom; and to another a word of knowledge, according to the same Spirit; (9) and to another faith by the same Spirit; and to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; (10) and to another workings of powers, to another prophecy; and to another discerning of spirits; and to another kinds of tongues; and to another the interpretation of tongues. (11) But the one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing separately to each one as He desires.*

1 Corinthians 12:28 ISV *(28) God has appointed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then those who perform miracles, those who have gifts of healing, those who help others, administrators, and various kinds of tongues.*

And is given to the Church as a blessing that results from Jesus filling of all things with the Holy Spirit (which in turn flows from the Ascension):

Ephesians 4:10-12 ISV *The one who went down is the same one who went up above all the heavens so that he might fill everything. (11) And it is he who gifted some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, and still others to be pastors and teachers.*

NT prophecy is a normal spiritual occurrence that arises when the Church is filled with the Holy Spirit. It is as normal as the gifts of faith, administration and teaching. When the Church is filled with the Holy Spirit and faith then anointing flows more readily giving rise to supernatural words of wisdom, knowledge and prophecy.

The difference between prophecy and teaching is that prophecy reveals hidden things such as the secrets of the heart, while teaching expounds known truth with clarity so it can be understood. Both are very valuable, but prophecy has the added bonus that it can also impart spiritual gifts:

1 Timothy 4:14 ISV *Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy, accompanied by the laying on of the elders' hands.*

Which is why it is involved in sending out God's workers:

Acts 13:1-2 ISV *Now Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul were prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. (2) While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set Barnabas and Saul apart for me to do the work for which I called them."*

And may sometimes be 'life-maps' that God's workers are to follow:

1 Timothy 1:18 ISV *Timothy, my child, I am giving you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may continue to fight the good fight*

Indeed many a Christian worker has had a "Macedonian Call" that has directed their entire life and ministry. Prophecy can also be used to encourage believers by exhorting them with words that carry a powerful anointing and which are specific to their particular situation:

Acts 15:32 MKJV *And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, exhorted the brothers with many words and confirmed them.*

Prophecy adds an extra depth to spiritual ministry within the congregation by bringing words from God to particular life situations. It is complementary to the teaching ministry which lays down general truths and principles to live by. For instance a person hearing a teaching sermon may be convicted about going overseas to serve as a missionary but be perplexed as to how and when and where and with whom. A reliable congregational prophet may be able to fill in some of these details as they pray over the person e.g. by saying that they can see them teaching in a bible college in Thailand.

The New Testament tells us to desire to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14;1,39), and not to despise it or to quench it (1 Thessalonians 5:19,20). We are to encourage the development of the prophetic gift – with the confidence that we will be able to sort out the wheat from the chaff as we go along. Starting people off in small groups is often wise as small groups allow everyone to have a turn at sensing what God is saying, give rapid feedback and are generally gentle in their approach to others.

How Prophecy Should Be Used

In this study, I will focus on the proper use of anointed congregational-level prophecy. I am deliberately excluding the book of Revelation from the discussion since Revelation is not a model for the average Christian with the gift of prophecy in the local church. This is because Revelation is: (a) A prophecy by one of the Twelve founding apostles and such absolute spiritual authority figures no longer exist (b) The bulk of Revelation is given outside of the local congregational mode and (c) Revelation is not just prophecy it is also 'apocalyptic' – a different genre.

New Testament congregational prophecy was used for guiding, sending and gifting individuals and for the edification, exhortation and comforting of the Church and for the conviction of sinners. It was also used for 'short-range' predictions such as Agabus predicting a famine so the Church could prepare and react with compassion.

New Testament congregational prophecy was never used 'over the nations' e.g to prophesy with authority against Babylon, Rome or Israel, or to predict long-term events hundreds of years into the future. There are no collections of writings by NT prophets and they did not publish any books.

The NT prophets were not the untouchable spiritual giants of the OT, rather they were fallible men and women who heard from God and had their words evaluated by the local congregational leadership. They were submitted to an orderly system of church government.

I have no problem with prophecy that speaks with insight into someone's life or which exhorts a church in the things of Christ. I do have problems with people who make wild economic or political predictions or who prophesy over whole countries boldly claiming such authority from the Lord. Not only do such prophecies often fall flat and discredit the 'prophet' but, when made public, they can also discredit Christ and His Church. I believe that many such people are indeed well-intentioned and even godly but they are confusing NT prophecy with the line of OT prophets (see study 36).

A very disturbing modern practice is where some 'prophets' ask for a per-prophecy fee of say \$50 for a ten-minute prophetic session. This is similar to the sin of Simon Magus in Acts 8. While the laborer is certainly worthy of his hire their ministry support should come from a general source such as a church salary, gifts and tithes or from team support. We do not see Jesus or the apostles charging a per-service fee for spiritual ministry. When it comes to spiritual ministry such as miracles, healing, or prophecy the rule is 'freely you have received, freely give'. Financial support generally came from others in the area such as the worthy 'man of peace':

Matthew 10:7-13 MKJV *And as you go, proclaim, saying, The kingdom of Heaven is at hand. (8) Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. You have received freely, freely give. (9) Do not provide gold nor silver, nor copper in your purses, (10) nor a bag for the journey, nor two coats, nor sandals, nor staves. For the workman is worthy of his food. (11) And into whatever city or*

village you enter, inquire who within it is worthy. And there abide until you go away from there. (12) And when you come into a house, greet it. (13) And if the house is worthy, let your peace come on it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

Luke 10:4-9 MKJV *Carry neither purse nor bag nor sandals. And greet no one by the way. (5) And into whatever house you enter, first say, Peace to this house. (6) And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest on it. If not, it shall return to you, (7) And remain in the same house, eating and drinking the things shared by them; for the laborer is worthy of his hire. Do not move from house to house. (8) And into whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you. (9) And heal the sick that are in it, and say to them, The kingdom of God has come near you!*

In fact Paul could say at the end of his ministry:

Acts 20:33-35 MKJV *I have coveted no man's silver or gold or apparel. (34) Yea, you yourselves know that these hands have ministered to my needs, and to those who were with me. (35) I have shown you all things, that working in this way we ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

There is much spiritual yearning in the heart of growing Christians and this is easily exploited. Everyone wants to 'hear a word from the Lord that is especially for them'. Even more so when it speaks to tough times and promises tremendous financial breakthrough or grand ministry results - or when it solves thorny political situations by offering a simple revelation of the future of the world.

Jeremiah contrasts true prophets who get a valid word from the Lord with false prophets who often just relate their dreams or who simply copy their ideas from each other:

Jeremiah 23:25-32 MKJV *(28) The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream. And he who has My Word, let him speak My Word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? says Jehovah. (29) Is not My Word like a fire? says Jehovah; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (30) So Jehovah says, Behold, I am against the prophets who steal My Words each one from his neighbor. (31) Jehovah says, Behold, I am against the prophets who use their tongues and say, He says. (32) Jehovah says, Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams and tell them, and cause My people to go astray by their lies and by their lightness. Yet I did not send them nor command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all, says Jehovah.*

The true Word of God is like fire or a hammer that breaks the rock. The true prophecy is the wheat while the false prophecies are light, dreamy, and insubstantial. The false prophecies are copied from one person to the next as the false prophets practice to deceive the people of God. One sign of a false prophecy is that 'it does not profit this people at all'. In my view most of the prophecies of

'financial breakthrough' fall into this category – they create an strong unfulfilled hope and damage the person's faith in God.

As I see it the valid uses of NT prophecy are:

1. Convicting sinners and bringing them to repentance by disclosing the secrets of their hearts
2. Edifying, exhorting and comforting the saints
3. Predicting situations that the Church or its leaders need to immediately respond to
4. Giving a personal word that acts as a guiding principle for those doing God's work
5. Prophetically imparting spiritual gifts at ordination or its equivalent
6. The proper sphere of operation is the church congregation
7. NT prophecy is submitted to Scripture, to the local church leadership and possibly also to the other prophets who may also be present

On the other hand I think we should be cautious when we observe:

8. Prophets charging per-service fees such as \$50 per prophecy
9. Prophets predicting economic times or telling you to stock up on goods they are selling (which happened with the AD 2000 computer bug scare)
10. Prophets claiming authority over nations, world events or even over the weather!
11. Prophets predicting end-time events, or identifying the anti-Christ, or making wild and rash political statements
12. Prophets writing books of their own prophecies, particularly if they give weight to them or imply they are authoritative for the church as a whole.
13. Prophets refusing to come under the headship and authority of the local church
14. Prophets adding to Scripture or, on the other hand, down-playing Scripture in favor of 'spiritual experiences' and 'revelations'
15. Prophets who tolerate idols, witchcraft, astrology or the occult or who turn people from the simplicity of Christ to bizarre philosophies and 'deep truths'.
16. Prophets who live lives of immorality or of vast material excess or who condone or encourage such things.
17. Prophets who are harsh, condemning and legalistic, or who seek to dominate individuals or a local church - often in an effort to sound like the OT prophets.
18. Prophets who seek to introduce new major doctrines and even heresies based on sudden visions and revelations (such as the well-known preacher who claimed a revelation that there were 'nine gods - a trinity of trinities')
19. Prophets who promote holy water, medical cures, herbs, and remedies or who promote the veneration of relics.
20. Prophets who claim revelations from saints or from the Virgin Mary

As you can tell my view is that there is little, if any, biblical justification for what is being done by some elements in the prophetic movement today. However this does not mean that there is no biblical validity to NT prophecy, or to the idea of the prophetic gift or to the role of the congregational prophet. There is still some wheat amidst the chaff!

Who Can Prophesy?

When Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost he answered the question of who is able to prophesy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

Acts 2:16-18 MKJV *But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: (17) "And it shall be in the last days, says God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (18) And in those days I will pour out My Spirit upon My slaves and My slave women, and they shall prophesy.*

Here we see sons, daughters, young men, old men, men-servants and maid-servants included in the God's prophetic activity. Prophecy is a universal spiritual activity in the New Testament. It goes along with the general outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the believer. It is also part of the abundance of revelation given through the promised Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-16) and the writing of God's laws within our hearts (Hebrews 8)

In fact it seems that a whole congregation could participate in the prophetic:

1 Corinthians 14:31 MKJV *(31) For you may all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be comforted.*

And that even young women are not exempt:

Acts 21:8-9 MKJV *And the next day those around him going out, Paul came to Caesarea. And entering the house of Philip the evangelist, he being of the seven, we stayed with him. (9) And there were four virgin daughters to this one, who prophesied.*

Praying and prophesying seem to go together as twin activities available to all believers and which are exercised by both males and females:

1 Corinthians 11:4-5 MKJV *(4) Every man praying or prophesying (5) But every woman who prays or prophesies*

At Pentecost, Cornelius' house, and at Ephesus we find whole groups of completely new believers prophesying:

Acts 19:6-7 MKJV *And as Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. (7) And all of the men were about twelve.*

Thus prophecy is so general and universal an activity that it must be very different from teaching and preaching.

Indeed while on one hand everyone is encouraged to desire to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:1); yet on the other hand James warns that 'not many' should desire to be teachers:

James 3:1 ISV *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more severely.*

Thus the old argument that NT prophecy is "just the same as teaching and preaching" starts to fall apart. There are just too many differences:

- a) NT prophecy is for all believers, teaching is for a few mature believers
- b) Women could prophesy freely, while only men could teach in NT times (1 Tim 2:12)
- c) Brand new believers with little understanding still prophesied - while as yet they would have been completely unable to teach the Word.
- d) Young people 'sons and daughters' could prophesy whereas generally only elders would teach in the church

NT prophecy is simply reporting the spiritual impression that you are receiving from the Holy Ghost; using words which are given to you by God:

1 Corinthians 2:9-13 EMTV *(9) But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (10) But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (11) For who knows the things of a man, except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (12) Now we did not receive the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, in order that we might know the things granted to us by God; (13) which we also speak, not in words taught in human wisdom, but in words taught by the Holy Spirit, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.*

God can and does speak to anyone, and through anyone, that He wishes - and they can be young or old, male or female, slave or free. NT Prophecy is an immediate

word from the Holy Spirit that comes to a believer because God wants it spoken in order to reveal something. Prophecy does not require age or education. However it does require spiritual openness and sensitivity. Prophecy is freely available to all whose consciences have been sensitized to the voice of the Holy Spirit (more on that later in this series).

If everyone can prophesy then what is the difference between 'someone who prophesies' and a prophet?

A NT prophet is someone that the body of Christ recognizes in that role, whose prophetic utterances have been tested and found to be accurate, and whose prophetic gift is well developed and mature so that it is available for ministry at any time. Such prophets are only second to apostles in the body of Christ:

1 Corinthians 12:28 EMTV (28) *And those whom God has appointed in the church are: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, kinds of tongues.*

Ephesians 4:11-12 EMTV *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, (12) for the perfecting of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ,*

Because prophets can ordain others and impart gifts e.g. the gift of evangelism that Timothy had (2 Timothy 1:6, 4:5), they are essential to the development of other ministries and for the building up of the Church as a whole.

God willing, we will look more in detail at the office of 'prophet' in the tomorrow's study.

The New Testament Prophet

We saw that prophecy is for all Spirit-filled Christians. Does this therefore make all Spirit-filled Christians into NT prophets - a position second only to that of the apostles? The short answer is "No!" There is a difference between those who operate in prophecy as a mature ministry gift and those who prophesy from time to time as God graciously touches their lives.

There is a clear instance of this in the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers:

Numbers 11:24-25 MKJV *And Moses went out and told the people the words of Jehovah, and gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them all around the tabernacle. (25) And Jehovah came down in a cloud and spoke to him, and took of the spirit on him and gave it to the seventy elders. And it happened when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they never did so again.*

The 70 elders prophesied once in their lives, but there were not 'prophets'. Moses was the prophet, the elders were just ordinary people with a personal spiritual experience of prophesying. And in the New Testament we find something similar with the twelve rather confused disciples at Ephesus:

Acts 19:4-7 MKJV *And Paul said, John truly baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe into Him coming after him, that is, into Jesus Christ. (5) And hearing, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (6) And as Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. (7) And all of the men were about twelve.*

Here the disciples were prophesying as part of their initial Christian experience.

On the other hand a NT prophet is someone that the body of Christ recognizes in that role, whose prophetic utterances have been tested and found to be accurate, and whose prophetic gift is well developed and mature so that it is available for ministry at any time.

We observe apostles, prophets and teachers 'hanging out together' in the New Testament and using their gifts to edify the body of Christ by planting churches, equipping and gifting leaders and instructing the believers for their edification, exhortation and comfort.

Acts 13:1-2 MKJV *And in Antioch some among the existing church were prophets and teachers. (such as Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, the foster-brother of Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. (2) As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, So, then, separate Barnabas and Saul to Me for the work to which I have called them.*

Prophets who are named as such in the New Testament include Agabus (Acts 11:27, 21:10), Judas & Silas (Acts 15:32), and possibly Barnabas and Paul (by inference in Acts 15:30-32 combined w. Acts 13:1-2 above). Silas later works with Paul as a team of an apostle (Paul) and a prophet (Silas) to raise up an evangelist (Timothy – Acts 16:1, 17:4).

In NT times someone with the title of 'prophet' worked as part of an apostolic team with the overall goal of mission, church-planting and strengthening of the brethren. For example after the dispute over circumcision a letter was written to the Gentile churches and sent to Antioch along with Judas and Silas:

Acts 15:30-33 MKJV *Then indeed they being let go, they came to Antioch. And gathering the multitude, they delivered the letter. (31) And when they had read it, they rejoiced at the comfort. (32) And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, exhorted the brothers with many words and confirmed them. (33) And remaining for a time, they were let go in peace from the brothers to the apostles.*

Judas and Silas delivered the letter from the apostles, then used their prophetic gift to exhort the brethren and when the mission was completed they returned to the apostles in Jerusalem (but Silas ended up remaining in Antioch). So the prophets worked with the apostles yet had the ability to do their own teaching and exhorting and also could make decisions about the direction of their ministry.

Here are the approximate categories of prophets that I observe in the New Testament:

1. People who prophesy just once or very infrequently, generally as part of the initial experience of Spirit baptism.
2. Congregational prophets who take their turn prophesying in a service and whose prophecies are weighed up by those present to sort out the wheat from the chaff
3. Prophets like Agabus and Silas who work with apostolic teams in order to strengthen the church and who operate in prophecy as a mature ministry gift.
4. False prophets who enter into the church in order to flatter, deceive and destroy.

Now we have no great concerns about categories 1 & 3 – one who prophesies very occasionally or the mature and recognized godly prophet. But categories 2 and 4 are a problem. What is the difference between a congregational prophet 'in training' who makes a genuine mistake in hearing God and a 'false prophet' that wants a personal following and tries to split and destroy the fellowship? How can we tell the difference between 'genuinely mistaken' and 'deviously deceptive'?

Every spiritual gift has a learning curve: evangelism, teaching, administration, healing, tongues, interpretation of tongues, discernment of spirits – and prophecy! A spiritual gift may take five, ten or even fifteen years to become fully mature and in the process many unintended mistakes get made. We need to give those developing the gift of prophecy the same amount of leeway - while still holding them to biblical standards.

The godly congregational prophet, who is still on the 'learning curve' is open to correction by the elders and by Scripture and seeks after righteousness and truth. There is a desire to bless the body of Christ and not to tear it apart.

They will be content starting one on one or in a small group. They do not seek to have people follow after them personally but only after Christ. They respect the church eldership and there is a wonderful humility and graciousness as they seek to develop the gift of prophecy appropriately for the edification of all present.

On the other hand the false prophet is not seeking after righteousness nor are they open to biblical correction. They are ego-centric, carnal, boastful and flattering and often use swelling words to deceive the people of God. They are divisive and seek after a following and such false prophets can be greedy and even immoral (see

Jude 1:10-16). False prophets will be judged by God and should be immediately removed from any church they attempt to join (2 John 1:9-11).

2 Peter 2:1-3 MKJV *But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who secretly will bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction. (2) And many will follow their pernicious ways, and because of them the way of truth will be evil spoken of. (3) And through covetousness they will use you for gain with well-turned words; for whom judgment from of old does not linger, and their destruction does not sleep.*

The false prophets can be discerned by the fruit of their lives (see also Study 38 – NT Prophets 3) and their lawlessness and iniquity (their inability to follow after holiness and God's righteousness). The false prophet will be arrogant and divisive and demonstrate evil fruit. Though they may work mighty miracles we are never to follow them:

Matthew 7:15-23 EMTV *"But beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (16) You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grape clusters from thorns, or figs from thistles? (17) Thus every good tree produces good fruit, but a rotten tree produces evil fruit. (18) A good tree cannot produce evil fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. (19) Every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire. (20) Consequently, by their fruits you shall know them. (21) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. (22) Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name we cast out demons, and in Your name we did many mighty works?' (23) "And then I will confess to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you who work iniquity!'"*

Matthew 24:24 EMTV *For false christs and false prophets will be raised up, and they will show great signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.*

Yes we should all seek to prophesy. Yet if only a few should claim to be teachers (James 3:1), I think that perhaps even fewer should claim the title of the office of NT prophet. And we need to apply biblical correction and discernment to all who claim to move in prophecy.

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