



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do (1Chronicles 12.32)

## ***Resourcing for Prayer Network Guidelines***

# Spiritual Guidance (1)

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## **UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY (1) MINISTRY**

*In the New Testament there is a distinction made between the **Ministry of the Prophet**, and the **Gift of Prophecy**. We will deal with these in two papers. This paper covers the **Ministry of the Prophet** and next month we will deal with the **Gift of Prophecy**.*

### **Definition of Prophecy**

In order to find the biblical definition of prophecy we have to go right back to the time of Moses. In Exodus 3, Moses argues with God after receiving the command to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt. In the following chapter he pleads that he is not eloquent and asks God to send someone else. God then makes a special arrangement whereby God would speak to Moses, Moses would speak to Aaron, and Aaron would speak to the people. "It will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him" (Exodus 4.16). This gives us the definition of the Prophet as the mouthpiece of God.

### **Nature of Prophecy**

This appears straightforward but a complication arises during the 40 years travel through the wilderness when the Israelites have a 'Tent of Meeting' where worship takes place. On one occasion Moses was told to bring together 70 of the elders of Israel and God said, "I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone" (Numbers 11.17). When the Spirit came upon them they prophesied, but two men stayed in the camp where they also prophesied. This seemed outrageous to Joshua but Moses replied "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

This raises questions about the nature of prophecy which is further complicated during the time of the Judges. In 1 Samuel 9 and 10 Saul, soon to be anointed King, goes out looking for lost donkeys and after a meeting with the Prophet Samuel he gets caught up with a procession of 'prophets' and the Spirit of God falls upon him. Clearly there is a considerable difference between this band of 'prophets' and Samuel the 'Seer'.

### **Non-Writing Prophets**

200 years later, in the time of Elisha (2 Kings 2), we find references to companies of prophets who were probably associated with local high places where they were responsible for the worship, long before the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and the centralisation of Hebrew religious practices. No one really knows what these so-called 'prophets' did, but they are certainly not like the recognised Prophets, both writing and non-writing, who spoke the word of the Lord to the nation. There were many Non-Writing Prophets referred to throughout the history of Israel such as: - Deborah, Judges 4: Samuel, 1 Sam 3: Gad, 2 Sam 24: Nathan, 1 Chron 17: Shemaiah, 2 Chron 11.2: Azariah, 2 Chron 15: Elijah, 1 Kings 17 - 19: Micaiah, 2 Chron 18.7: Jahaziel, 2 Chron 20.14: Elisha, 2 Kings 2: Zechariah, 2 Chron 24.20: Huldah, 2 Chron 34.24 and many others.

### **Writing Prophets**

The Writing Prophets were either visionaries such as Isaiah and Ezekiel or those who heard the word of the Lord such as Jeremiah, Micah and Hosea. Their task was to bring the word of the Lord to the nation; but God used them to reveal his nature and purposes so that Israel would understand the God who had established a covenant relationship with them through their forefathers and this would prepare them to be "a light unto the

Gentiles"; a role which was eventually personalised in Messiah Jesus.

## New Testament

In the New Testament the Ministry of the Prophet is one of five roles listed by Paul in Ephesians 4 which are appointments by God to prepare his people for works of service, *"So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature"* (Ephesians 4.13). In practice, Apostles and Prophets worked closely together to build up the faith and unity of the whole body of believers, to enable the church to receive divine guidance for the fulfilling of its mission in the world.

## Antioch

There were a number of unnamed Prophets in the church at Antioch who played an important part in the history of the Early Church by discerning the call of God upon the lives of Barnabas and Paul to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'." (Acts 13.2). The whole company of believers in Antioch then fasted and prayed for confirmation of the prophetic words that had been spoken before they were sent out. Paul and Barnabas had been worshipping at Antioch for a whole year before this happened and had already brought "great numbers of people" to the Lord (Acts 11.26).

Prophecy was important in the church at Antioch as it was there that the Jerusalem-based Prophet Agabus had predicted a severe famine which occurred about 10 years later (Acts 11.29). He also prophesied over Paul when the Apostle was heading for Jerusalem for the last time. Taking Paul's belt he tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, in this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles" (Acts 21.11).

## Paul's Lists

Prophecy is mentioned in all three of the lists given by Paul in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. In Romans 12 prophecy is one of the natural gifts where someone who is a good speaker is able to expound the word of God. This is an intellectual exercise and is different from the Ministry of the Prophet in Ephesians 4 who receives a direct word from the Lord which he brings under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul deals exclusively with the 'gift of prophecy' but in chapter 14 his teaching on prophecy is relevant to both Ministry and the Gift. He says that anyone who prophesies "edifies the church". In other words, prophecy brings knowledge and understanding even if it is a word of rebuke. If it comes as a word from the Lord, as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 4, it will be communicated in love and will actually build up the body and promote unity rather than division among those who are true disciples of Jesus and part of his body of believers.

## Role of the Prophet

The nature of prophecy is constant throughout the Bible, although the role of the Prophet under the Old Covenant is different from that in the New Covenant, because Jesus completed the full and final revelation of the nature and purposes of God. Therefore the role of the Prophet changed to that of enabling the church to fulfil the Great Commission and guiding the direction of the mission of the Church in the changing social environment. This role has not changed since the days of the Early Church.

The true Ministry of the Prophet is still one who receives a word from the Lord which has to be spoken out clearly to the church to enable the church to be the Prophet to the world. If the church were truly in right order the Five-Fold Ministries would be working together in harmony which would be a powerful combination strengthening believers. This would enable the whole body of believers to use their gifts, both natural and spiritual, in the church in such a way as to create a mature body of believers presenting a united front to the world with a powerful spirit-filled anointing upon their works of service which would glorify Jesus and cause multitudes to want to know him and find that their lives are transformed by God.

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