



Resourcing for Prayer Network Guidelines

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE (4)

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*In the New Testament there is a distinction made between the **Ministry of the Prophet**, and the **Gift of Prophecy**. We are dealing with this in two papers. This paper covers the **Gift of Prophecy** and last month we dealt with the **Ministry of the Prophet**.*

PROPHECY (2) THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

Definition

The definition of prophecy remains the same whether we are considering the role of the Prophet or the gift of prophecy. Last month, when we were considering the role of the Prophet, we referred to Exodus 3 from which we obtained the definition of prophecy as declaring the word of the Lord.

Spiritual Gift

I cannot improve on the more detailed definition of the Gift of Prophecy given by my late colleague the Revd Edmund Heddle in his book **'The Biblical Basis of Spiritual Gifts'**. He writes,

"The gift of prophecy is that 'speaking by the Spirit of God' which manifests some God-given communication for the strengthening, encouragement and comfort of members of the body of Christ. The desire that Moses had that all the Lord's people might be prophets (Numbers 11.29) began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the prophecy of Joel was brought to pass. The result of this outpouring of the spirit was stated in the four words added to Joel's prophecy, *'and they shall prophesy'* (compare Joel 2.28/29 with Acts 2.17/18). This means that every believer, baptised in the Spirit, is potentially able to prophesy. This is true of men and women, young and old, rich and poor."

Ministry and Gift

Last month when we were dealing with the Ministry of the Prophet we noted that prophecy is mentioned in all three of the lists of gifts given in the New Testament. These occur in Romans 12.6, 1 Corinthians 12.10 and Ephesians 4.11. The basic difference between the Ministry and the Gift is that although both are given by God, the Ministry is a role in which a man or woman is appointed by the Lord and is to be exercised within the church in the same way as in the Old Testament when a prophet was appointed by God to exercise Ministry within the covenant people of the Lord.

The Gift of Prophecy, which Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians 12, is not a role to which a person is appointed. It is a 'manifestation' of the Holy Spirit which occurs within a company of believers and is for that time and place. This manifestation could be given to anyone within the assembly. For that person it may be only a once-in-a-lifetime experience. On the other hand it may be that the Spirit moves the same person many times to bring a word to the community of believers. This does not mean that that person is a Prophet. It simply means that they are particularly sensitive and open to the manifestation of the Spirit so that God chooses to use them as the vehicle through which he brings a word to that community.

Dos and Don'ts

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul lists a number of 'dos and don'ts' in regard to the exercise of the spiritual gifts. It has to be remembered in reading this chapter that Paul is not writing an academic thesis on the exercise of spiritual gifts. He

is dealing with real-life situations which were occurring all too regularly in the church at Corinth where things got out of hand and disorder characterised the meetings of the believers. Half a dozen people at once would all be prophesying and no doubt trying to shout louder than their neighbours in order to be heard. Paul recognised that this was dishonouring to God and a terrible witness to any non-believing visitors who came to join in worship as seekers after the truth, or who simply came out of curiosity to find out what was going on in their city.

Paul's exasperation with the situation comes over clearly towards the end of chapter 14 (verse 34) where he rebukes a particularly noisy bunch of women who were evidently of Jewish origin because he even appeals to the Law, the Torah, in telling them to be quiet. This is totally out of character with Paul who, in Romans 8.2 boasts that through Christ Jesus he has been set free from the Law which leads to death rather than life. But, it was not just the women, it was all of the congregation in Corinth who were behaving like infants (verse 20). He says, and here the final rebuke is very much directed to the men, *"Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a Prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored."* (verses 36-37)

Exercising the Gift

Paul makes a particular point of distinguishing between the spiritual gift of prophecy and the exercise of tongues. He makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 14 that these two gifts are entirely different because one is directed TOWARDS GOD and the other is coming FROM GOD. There was evidently confusion in the congregation at Corinth by mixing these two gifts and not understanding that when someone was speaking in tongues they were actually speaking to God and not receiving a message from him. Therefore it was quite erroneous for someone to speak in a tongue and then bring a message of prophecy under the impression that this was an interpretation of what had been spoken in tongues. It was equally wrong for someone else to bring a message of prophecy as an interpretation of what someone had just spoken in tongues; because tongues is prayer, not prophecy.

Value of the Gift

The great value of the 'gift of prophecy' is that it can, and should, be a blessing to the local church. Through the exercise of this Manifestation, the Holy Spirit can encourage, equip, and empower a group of believers. The right exercise of this gift will always build up the community and will never be divisive. It should always be exercised in love for one another and as an expression of the love of Christ for his body. *"Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort"* (1 Corinthians 14.3). It is not clear in verses 29 to 32 whether Paul is speaking about the Ministry of the Prophet or the Manifestation of Prophecy because he begins by speaking about prophets and ends by saying that they can *'all prophesy'*. But the principle in the exercise of both the ministry of prophecy and the gift is the same. It is that those who receive a revelation should speak one at a time in the congregation and not all shout at the same time; those standing in line wanting to prophesy should wait their turn. And that all prophecy should be weighed carefully, particularly by those who are called by God to exercise the Ministry of the Prophet.

Prophecy in Practice

In Acts 21.7-11 there is a good example of the exercise of both the Gift of Prophecy and the Ministry of the Prophet in the New Testament church. Philip the Evangelist is said to have had four unmarried daughters who prophesied and in the next verse there is a reference to a man named Agabus who was recognised as a Prophet throughout the churches of Judaea and farther afield. He is the one who foretold a forthcoming famine when exercising his ministry in Antioch. The daughters of Philip evidently were often used in times of worship in the church at Caesarea for a manifestation of the Spirit to bring a word to the congregation.

This suggests that in the Early Church prophecy as a 'Manifestation of the Spirit' was used in the local congregation, whereas the 'Ministry of the Prophet' was a role which was recognised throughout the region. Those who were called by God, and had the anointing of a Prophet, would evidently be based at a local church but would also exercise an itinerant ministry travelling from congregation to congregation bringing a word from the Lord, encouraging and building up the believers - equipping and empowering them to be witnesses to the Risen Jesus in their daily lives in fulfilment of the Great Commission so that the church multiplied daily through communities of believers living in a secular society but under the direction of the Holy Spirit. This provides a great example of how the church should be functioning in today's secular society if all the five-fold ministries and manifestations of the Holy Spirit were recognised by God's people today.

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