

PROPHECY

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CHAPTER 1 PROPHECY IS A GIFT

I am thankful that our God is a communicating God. I am thankful that he has chosen to tell us the rules by which he operates. I am thankful that he coaches us as we endeavor to live and work for him.

God is not limited in how he may communicate with us. He spoke to a Babylonian king by writing a message on his wall during a party--with a detached hand, no less. And the writing was in a language no one understood so that it took a prophet to interpret it. Another time God spoke to a renegade through a donkey. It was highly unusual, but it got the man's attention. I suppose it could happen today, too. Your dog could meet you at the door and give you a message from God much more profound than, ``Arf! Arf!'' something perhaps like, ``Why weren't you raising your hands during the worship service tonight?'' Of course you remember how God spoke to Moses through a burning, talking bush.

Considering those types of phenomena, the method of communication God has set forth in the New Testament is not at all strange, although it is understandably foreign to a person who has never experienced it. God today speaks through mature Christians who have disciplined themselves to hear the voice of his Spirit and to pass the communication on to others, according to his prompting. The Bible distinguishes four uses of this kind of imparted word to his people. The chief among them, perhaps, is prophecy, which is the subject of this book. Others are tongues with interpretation, the word of knowledge and the word of wisdom.

Any Christian can be used to prophesy general messages of edification, exhortation and comfort if he fulfills the conditions God has specified. However, we will see that not every Christian will be used to prophesy, for this is a ministry that is given only to those to whom God desires to give it. The Bible teaches that those who are elders in the church can be used to a more directive degree of prophecy, and those who are prophets or apostles can be used to convey very specific prophetic messages.

In this study of prophecy, we will take our instruction from the Scriptures, using the New Testament as a specific guide, with insight, comment and examples supplied by the Old Testament. One of the main passages in all of Scripture on this subject is the fourteenth chapter of 1Corinthians. It is here that we receive our definition for prophecy, which is to foretell or to speak under inspiration. Here Paul referred to it as one of the ``spiritual gifts,'' saying that ``everyone who prophecies speaks to men.'' It is here that we find that the effect of prophecy is always to be good: ``strengthening, encouragement and comfort.'' God knows we Christians need these things. We tear ourselves down quite enough, and others in the church sometimes help us, not to mention those outside the church family. So when God speaks through the gift of prophecy, it is a refreshing voice to build us up. It is not necessarily a revelation of future events, but always a revelation of God's words, which obviously may include foretelling of things to come.

In this book you will not read much argument for the validity of prophecy, but rather guidelines for prophecy. These words are for the Christian who has already seen the validity of prophecy in the Scripture and, I trust, in his own experience in the church. It is my hope that the reader of this book will understand the order that God has established for the prophetic gift in the church, and will come into that order. In this way the Holy Spirit will have more liberty to speak in the church.

So the first thing to say about prophecy is that it is a gift from our heavenly Father to his children. Anything and everything we have from God is good, and good for us. This simple fact helps explain a couple of more complex things about prophecy:

If God is the giver of the gift, then the recipient is the gifted.

Since God is the giver of the gift, he can determine who the recipient will be. He chooses both the person who will prophesy and the group who will hear the prophecy, carefully attending to the timing of the message as well.

Prepare Yourself For Prophecy

The Apostle Paul wrote that there are, in a great house, many vessels, or containers. Some are made to carry noble gifts, and others are made to carry less noble things. The higher vessels are made of gold and silver; the others are made of wood and earth. Paul encouraged Timothy by teaching him that each man in the church can choose what kind of vessel he will be.

If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. (2 Tim. 2:21)

Everyone in the world is being used by somebody or by something to convey some sort of message. If we prepare ourselves properly, we can be used by God in the specific ministry of prophecy. Such preparation includes studying to see how God acts, thinks and talks. It includes reading the Bible to find out what God intends to do. It certainly includes communicating with our heavenly Father through prayer and meditation on a consistent basis. Sustained fellowship with godly Christians and even regular periods of fasting also are good equipment for prophecy, like hammer and saw to the carpenter. Imagine a man showing up on the construction site without his tool belt. That is like a Christian who seeks to prophesy but who fails to prepare the basic tools of daily Bible study and fellowship, prayer and fasting.

Nobody enjoys fasting. It goes against our self-indulgent nature. But that is precisely why a person must fast if he is to be used to prophesy. He must put down his own soul in order to exalt God's Spirit. He must deny the voice of his own pleasures in order to convey the voice of the Lord. Fasting is an excellent way for a person to intensify his spiritual sensitivity.

If a person wants to be used in spiritual gifts, he will work at it. These things don't flow from someone's life in a totally automatic way. Even though God distributes the gifts as he wills, giving them to his people as he chooses, he desires that we all seek his gifts, and that we even work at receiving those gifts which will be edifying to others.

Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in

gifts that build up the church. (1 Cor. 14:12)

Even if you never have been used to prophesy, or in any kind of manifestation of the Holy Spirit, you should not get the impression that God doesn't want to use you, or that he would never choose to use you. The Bible instructs that you should seek to be used in gifts of the Spirit by becoming qualified as a minister of those gifts. Prepare yourself. Put yourself in a position to be used in the gifts of the Spirit. Undoubtedly God will choose to use you if your desire is to serve him and encourage his people with this ministry.

CHAPTER 2 EXAMINING THE PROPHETIC WORD

From the beginning, a Christian who has prepared himself to be used by God in the spiritual gift ministry will need some means of examining a supposed prophetic word to see how authentic it is. He does not want to attribute something to the Holy Spirit if it is not, in fact, coming from there. But, on the other hand, he does not want to withhold a message of comfort and strength from the people if it is, in fact, coming from the Holy Spirit.

When a man or woman begins to wait upon God to hear from him, most certainly he will receive some kind of thought, a mental impression or picture by which God's Spirit communicates. Before speaking it as prophecy, however, he should examine it. For it is possible that such thoughts could originate from some source other than the Spirit of God. This is especially so in one's first experiences in hearing from the Lord.

I will outline here three ways in which to judge supposed prophetic messages from the Lord in order to determine whether or not they should be spoken as prophecy.

1. Content

The first principle in learning to minister gifts of the Spirit is this:

God will never contradict in prophecy that which he has caused to be written in the Bible.

This is a guideline that will serve you all through your years of prophesying. For if God never contradicts his word in prophecy, then it follows that the prophecy--a specific message given for a specific person or group at a specific time--will always agree with the general word of God as it is written in the Bible.

There are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (1 John 5:7)

The Holy Spirit will never motivate you to speak something that is not consistent with the Bible. He will never give you words that are not supported by the Bible. If God ever gives new insight or new revelation by his Spirit, it will always be complimentary to the words of Scripture, never contradictory.

God feels very strongly about this. He takes a firm stand against persons who presume to prophesy for him, yet their words

contradict his words.

``I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, `I had a dream! I had a dream!' How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?' declares the Lord. ``Is not my word like fire,' declares the Lord, ``and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

``Therefore,' says the Lord, ``I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. Yes,' declares the Lord, ``I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, `The Lord declares.' Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,' declares the Lord. ``They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,' declares the Lord. (Jer. 23:25-32)

Lies can be spoken in prophecy to varying degrees. In the extreme, it is possible that the very essence of a supposed prophetic message is in error. For example, you may have heard it prophesied that Jesus Christ would return and the world would be destroyed on a specific date. When the appointed day passed, it became obvious that the prophecy was false through and through. It's very core contradicted many Bible passages.

However, most error in prophecy, I suppose, is partial. It involves mixing God's words with other words. In such cases, a man may truly hear from God, but he fails to pass on the communication accurately. He may begin to prophesy according to the prompting of the Spirit, and then inject his own ideas into the message, thinking they will help support it. For example, the Lord may give this word: ``I'm going to bless my people.' And the prophet may say, ``Yea, verily, thus saith the Lord, I want to bless you because I am your God and you are my people and I will extend my arm...' The person, in such a case, has added quite a bit to God's simple message. He has drawn from his own imagination, which the Lord told Jeremiah is the delusion of his own mind. For one to say, ``this is the word of the Lord,' when really it is his own word, is very grave. It is particularly serious when that word causes people to do something that God has not told them to do.

It is possible that a man will mix the word of the Lord with portions of good sermons he has heard, portions of disturbing news broadcasts or portions of other persons' prophecies. I suppose it is particularly tempting to add portions of Scripture to the prophetic word as it comes from the Spirit of the Lord. Scripture is good. And preaching is also good. But if a man gets up to prophesy, and everyone in the assembly understands that his words are prophecy, then he should stick to what the Spirit of the Lord says he should say to those people at that time.

It is distressing to hear filler words in prophecy whose sound seems to generate the impression of extra spirituality, but which really are void of meaning. I have imagined a person speaking an entire message without saying one word of substance: ``Thus saith the Lord, yea, yea, verily, I would say unto you, and this I would say, thus saith the Holy Ghost, saith the Lord Almighty: yea, yea I have spoken unto you, and I will yet speak again, saith the Lord.' It seems ridiculous when put that way,

yet just one such filler word not given by the Holy Spirit is too much. Even Scripture portions have been used as empty filler in prophecy. It is a tragedy.

If the Spirit quotes Scripture, then of course the person should quote the Scripture faithfully. If the Spirit refers to the current news, then he should do so. But if the Spirit does not say those things, then he should not. He should speak accurately and precisely what the Spirit gives him to speak. Never say, ``Thus saith the Lord'' when it is really ``thus saith the newspaper.''

When God says, ``Stand up and say, `I`'' then the one with the prophecy should stand up and say, ``I.'' When God says, ``will,'' he should say, ``will.'' When God says, ``bless,'' he should say, ``bless.'' When God says, ``you,'' he should say, ``you.'' When God stops speaking, then he should stop speaking. That is what the Lord meant when he told Jeremiah, ``Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully.''

A noted Bible teacher who has addressed this subject quite well says that in his younger days as a Christian he prophesied to everybody and everything that would stand still. He had what he felt was a word from God for everybody who came up to him. After a meeting when he was prophesying to quite a number of people, someone approached him and said, ``Brother, I have a word for you.''

``Yes?'' he said. ``What is it?''

The man said, ``Thus saith the Lord: when I stop talking, that better make two of us!''

What does straw have to do with grain? Straw is useless, but grain is good for food. God wants prophets to give his people good food, free of non-nutritive additives. Some supposed prophecy is like diet soda pop: there is nothing in it that remotely resembles food; there is nothing in it to build or strengthen the partaker. God's word, when it comes, is like fire which burns away the straw, so that only the grain remains. It is like white-hot fire which purifies metal, consuming the dross. But the person who mixes the word of God with his own empty ideas ends up with a little flickering flame, barely hot enough to warm his hands.

God's word, when it comes, is like a hammer which, when it must, breaks the sin-hardened heart and grinds it to dust. As God applies the water of his Spirit, he forms a malleable lump of clay which he can shape into a new vessel that will please him. But if the prophet mixes that powerful word with his own empty ideas, he ends up with a back scratcher. He may relieve little areas of discomfort, but he never will cause change in people's lives that the pure word of God will bring.

Not everyone in the church, obviously, will be used to prophesy like a wrecking ball. But some will. In examining your word of prophecy, consider whether it is consistent with your own faith level. In this ministry, as in others in the church, some do the heavy work while others fill a supporting role. Weigh your role accurately.

If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. (Rom. 12:6)

One who is just learning to prophesy should not try to imitate others who are old-timers at it. It may be that such a person would even end up usurping authority that God has not given him. If he receives a thought as he waits upon the Lord, he must determine what God's intention is in giving him that

thought. (Perhaps it is not even from God--it could be the result of indigestion or a rebuff from a friend.) It may be a thought for the person to apply to his own life. It may be the seed thought for a sermon or a testimony which he will share with a few friends. Or it may, indeed, be the beginning of a prophetic message. Be careful never to say ``thus saith the Lord'' until you're certain it isn't just ``thus saith me.'' If the message is your own, and not God's, you may share it with others, of course, but don't share it as prophecy.

2. Anointing

It is not necessarily true that every word you receive as you wait on the Lord is really intended for a prophecy, even though it may agree in content with the Bible. As I said, there are three areas of a supposed word of prophecy that must be examined in order to determine which one God actually intends to be spoken as prophecy. Content is the first. Once you have been assured that the word you have received is in agreement with the written word of God, then you must check to determine whether the Spirit of God is moving you to speak that message to the group of people then gathered. This specific direction to speak is what I refer to as anointing.

My daughter at ten months old had just learned to recognize my voice. In a room full of people, we noticed that she perked up and looked in my direction when I started to talk. Just so, the Christian who prophesies must learn to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit when he speaks. Without this ability, he will have difficulty knowing when and where to deliver a valid message from God. This is the urgency of spending good time with the Lord.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Rom. 8:16)

The principle of God's Spirit communicating with our spirits has direct application to our sensitivity to the anointing of the Holy Spirit for prophecy and other spiritual gifts. This spiritual communication begins as soon as one is saved; it is enhanced as he continues to spend time with God in Bible reading, prayer and Christian fellowship. These things serve to energize him spiritually for all kinds of Christian service, including being used in imparting the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is imperative that the Christian who desires to be used by God continues to maintain his spiritual sensitivity consistently. He cannot do well Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and then neglect his time with the Lord on Thursday, thinking he will make up for lost time on Friday, maybe taking Saturday off before prophesying in church on Sunday. After a few weeks like that, it would be hard to know the voice of the Lord. God could talk to him right in his ear, and he would ask, ``Do you have any identification?'' Be consistent in your daily time with God, and your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit will remain consistent.

Pride can destroy one's sensitivity to the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is a particular danger to those who are used in the gifts of the Spirit, for a person may be tempted to think he is better than others because God is using him. It is imperative that he continue to regard the grace of God and keep humble about the way in which God is using him.

My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Ps. 131:1-2)

We demolish... every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:4-5)

In church one Sunday my pastor publicly praised the Lord for a word of prophecy I had delivered. I was a Bible school student then, and was just beginning to be used in this way. The pastor was doing nothing more than recognizing the miracle that God had done in the life of a real reprobate, but my thoughts were making something else out of his remark. ``They've finally realized what a jewel they have in me,' I thought. And God nailed me for that prideful attitude. There came a pause in the service, and I thought I would prophesy again. As I was standing up to say, ``Thus saith the Lord,' I felt the finger of God point at my heart, and I heard a voice within me very clearly questioning, ``Are you going to speak `Thus saith the Lord' for the glory of God, or are you going to speak so that everybody in the church hears Frank Gularte's voice?''

The unweaned child cries, ``Mother, I want my milk right now!'' but the weaned child has been trained to control his desires. In other words, he has learned to control his soul. It is this same type of control that will enhance the sensitivity of the person who prophesies. Man originally was designed by God as a spiritual being who possessed a soul. But when the first man fell into sin, his soul took control of his spirit. In that condition, if a word came to him from God, his soul would get hold of it and mangle it beyond recognition. Even the person who is saved must guard his soul carefully, for it is constantly subject to the pollution of the world. The person who prophesies, then, must be certain that he maintains control of his soul, wrecking imaginations, plowing through carnal reasoning and tearing down those things which lift themselves up against the Lord. He must captivate every thought, making it obedient to Christ.

Earlier we read from the prophet Jeremiah concerning those who steal other prophets' words. These second-hand messages do not have the clear ring of the anointing of God upon them, even though the content of the message is virtually the same the second time around. The difference is the simple matter of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Without this, the message--even the identical message repeated at another time--is not prophetic. It is nothing more than words. The true message of prophecy will be not just a word from God, but what I call a proceeding word from God.

He answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. (Matt. 4:4 KJV)

The witness of God's Spirit with your spirit will tell you whether the word you have received is a static word or a word that is proceeding from God's mouth at that time. This is the anointing. Without this anointing, you have no prophecy.

``Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackals among ruins.... Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, `The Lord declares,' when the Lord has not sent them; yet they

expect their words to be fulfilled. Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, 'The Lord declares,' though I have not spoken?

''Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord.''' (Ezek. 13:5-8)

You are waiting on the Lord before a church service, and a message comes into your mind which might well be a prophecy from the Holy Spirit. You consider the content, and you are convinced it is biblical and it is within your measure of faith. Now you must ask, ''Is the Spirit of the Lord bearing witness with my spirit that this is a prophecy? Does God want me to speak this as a prophecy?'' You may not get the answer immediately, but you must get the answer before you ever begin to speak. For, if you say, ''Thus saith the Lord to these people,''' and it was not the Lord to these people, you have become a liar. Not only that, Ezekiel wrote, but if you persist in this kind of exercise, God says, ''I am against you.''' And if you are ever going to have someone against you, you don't want it to be Almighty God.

I am certain that God makes allowances for the young Christian who is just learning to discern the anointing of the Holy Spirit. I am certain that God's mercy extends to the sincere Christian who is doing his best to be a servant to the Lord, a vessel yielded to him, even though he may miss God's perfect anointing for a word of prophecy once or twice. I am certain that God extends himself as a father to a young child, teaching him patiently and carefully to be a spokesman for him. Be encouraged, if you are young in the Lord and just moving into the area of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Be careful. Do all you know to do. But don't be so fearful of failing God that you do nothing. There is a difference between ''false prophet'' and ''one who is beginning to prophesy.''' As you prophesy according to the level of your faith, God will work with you, bless you and increase you.

3. Timing

Finally, the person with the anointed message from God must discern the Holy Spirit's precise timing for the delivery of that message. This involves discerning the flow of what God is doing and then fitting the prophetic message in where it fits. It involves consistent fellowship with God's people as well as with God.

For example, in a time when God is leading his people into a time of refreshing and renewal it would be inappropriate to bring a prophecy that berates them for their sin and calls them to repentance. Or if you have a group of people who are in the midst of a difficult trial, who have become weak in their faith and are about to give up totally, it would be devastating to bring a prophecy that brings them to task in a threatening way. God would not tell a person, ''If you don't stop sinning, I'll kill you,''' when he was already about to commit suicide. As I said before, prophecy's intent, most generally, is to build us up, not to tear us down.

Of course, God is sovereign over these things, and he may speak whatever he wishes to speak. Occasionally God's Spirit does bring messages of judgment through prophecy. It could happen, in a service where the direction and flow has been to impart the love and blessing of God, that God himself would elect to change that direction and send forth a call to repentance through a judgmental prophecy. It can happen. But most generally,

prophecies will compliment the flow of a meeting rather than run contrary to it. Either way, the matter of discerning God's timing for the message is a critical one.

Which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?... I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds. (Jer. 23:18,21-22)

The servant with God's word must not run until he is sent with the message. And then, when he has the instruction to deliver the message, he must not hesitate. If he speaks too soon, the people may not be ready to hear the message. Perhaps God wants to use the pre-service prayer meeting, the worship service, the music and testimonies, to prepare the people's hearts to receive the prophecy. Then, after all that, he wants his servant to speak. If he speaks before those things have transpired, he will have missed God's will. God's people will not be ministered to. Can you imagine someone speaking to people about how to operate space ships when the only vehicle they've ever seen is a covered wagon? Are you aware of the difficulties faced by a baby who is born prematurely, before it is fully developed, before his time in life? Can you see how important it is for God's people to be prepared for the word he will speak to them through prophecy?

Then again, if the prophecy is not spoken and the appointed time slips by, if the meeting continues with, perhaps, a sermon or more music or whatever is happening, and then later he decides to deliver the message, he has the same problem. God had the people ready to hear, and he failed to speak. Even if he does speak later, they are not in the state of readiness God wanted. They did not receive ministry. ``But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.''

It has happened to me. Now I understand that God was building his people up, putting vital things into the church meeting, and then he gave me something to say, but I let the opportunity pass without speaking. I missed a chance to feed God's people. After the meeting I was grieved about it. I said, ``O Lord, I'll do it next time.''' At the next service I was early for the pre-service prayer time. I tried hard to muster the anointing of God for that prophecy. ``Come on, Lord,''' I prayed. ``I'm ready now. Move on me and I'll speak it this time.''' But I could tell it was too late. If I would have spoken, it would have been no more profound than saying, ``Thus saith the Lord: Abraham Lincoln has already died.''' It would have done absolutely nothing for the people.

CHAPTER 3 BE A SERVANT

Being a servant is the basic foundation of being able to speak for God. When a person prophesies, he speaks what, where and when God tells him to. When God says, ``Do this,''' he must be willing to do it. Once he knows it is God's voice, and that the command is to act now, then he cannot delay, even in the name of praying about it or sleeping on it. As a servant he first must be

in a position to hear God's commands, and second he must speak exactly what he is told to speak, adding nothing and taking nothing away. He must also speak where he is told to speak, and nowhere else.

And he must continually live under God and his government. He must live in proper relationship and consideration to others in the church, too, and particularly to those who are over him in the Lord.

The centurion replied, ``...I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, `Go,' and he goes; and that one, `Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, `Do this,' and he does it.'' (Matt. 8:8-9)

If God tells you, ``Go and do this,' you might be tempted to say something like, ``Of course, Lord, just as soon as I finish two years of Bible school,' or, ``Let me see if that is really what God means; let me examine the Hebrew and the Greek,' or, ``Well, of course, I better fast and pray about this for about two weeks, and then when I'm sure I'll go and do it.' There are times for evaluating the word of the Lord, of course. But do not use these legitimate forms of evaluation as excuses to delay when you have heard a certain word from God. No, when God says, ``Go and do this,' then you must go and do it precisely as he commands that it be done. That is servitude.

Jesus Christ came to earth as a servant. The Apostle Paul said, ``Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'' (Phil. 2:5-7) If you want to prophesy--or to serve God in any other way--you must empty yourself. Become a servant--and not just God's servant, but a servant to all people.

God spoke to me about love some time ago. I was getting the message quite strongly: ``We ought to manifest love one to another.'' So I preached it and prophesied it quite a lot. But as I prayed and waited on the Lord some more, I gradually began to realize that God really was giving me this message for me. ``Tell your wife you love her,' he was saying. ``Exhibit love to Mrs. Gularte.'' And it went further than that. ``Live in proper relationship to your wife. Live in consideration to your wife. Live under my headship with your wife.'' I saw in a new way the meaning of speaking what God is saying when God is saying it and to whom God wants it said.

If you think God is giving you instructions that pertain to big things that are going to happen to our nation politically, socially and economically sometime in the future, and if you begin to think you have world-changing answers, then you want to be very, very certain you have heard an authentic word from God. If you miss it, you could send thousands off to buy up goods and store them underground when God's plan is just the reverse. While you do not want to delay in bringing God's true message, you must be careful never to speak without being certain you have heard accurately--and especially when your message will motivate great numbers of people to take drastic action.

The process of speaking for God involves hearing first. Part of the trouble with Phariseeism was doing without hearing. It happens in the charismatic movement, too. The Bible says ``pray'' so we charismatics tend to pray, pray, pray. The Bible says ``fast'' so we charismatics tend to forget about praying and just fast, fast, fast. The Bible says ``prophesy'' so we charismatics

tend to forget about fasting and praying and just prophesy, prophesy, prophesy.

God told Saul to destroy the Amalekites, slaughtering everything in sight, even making a list for him: men, women, children, infants, cattle, sheep, camels and donkeys. All were to be destroyed. Saul slew the Amalekites, but he saved the king alive, along with the best of the sheep and cattle and everything else that was good. Then the Prophet Samuel came to Saul, and Saul greeted him, saying, ``God bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions.'' And the prophet said, ``Oh, really? Then what is this bleating of sheep and lowing of cattle I hear?'' And Samuel, trying to justify his sin, said, ``Well, I saved these for a sacrifice to the Lord.'' He even argued with Samuel when Samuel said, ``Wait a minute. God told me last night that your mission was to completely wipe out the Amalekites. Why didn't you obey his voice?'' When Saul kept insisting he had fulfilled the mission of the Lord, Samuel spoke these now-famous words: ``To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.'' (1 Sam. 15:22)

How important is precise obedience for the man or woman who expects to prophesy in the name of the Lord! No measure of good intentions can ever replace it.

God told me, ``Tell your wife you love her. Prove it to her.'' When finally I discerned that God was speaking those words to me rather than through me to someone else, I heard some more words. ``Wash the dishes for your wife once in awhile.'' Understand, now, that I would rather do almost anything for my wife than wash dishes. But I told the Lord, ``Okay, if that's what you want, I'll do it.'' Then I got real busy helping my wife around the house: I vacuumed, I made the beds, I washed the car, I mowed the lawn. I even took her out to dinner, bought her a new dress, got her some flowers, sent her a record, wrote her love notes on the mirror, and lots of other things I had written down on a list.

After a time, when the Lord said to me again, ``Wash the dishes for your wife,'' I argued, ``But, Lord! Look at all the things I've done for her already!'' And as soon as I did, I could hear these words ringing in my ear:

``Many will say to me on that day, `Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then will I tell them plainly, `I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'' (Matt. 7:22-23)

Obedience is first hearing exactly what God is telling you to do, and then doing it exactly as he told you. Obedience is better than the list of things you want to do for God. Obedience is not, ``Lord, I'll do all this for you,'' but, ``Lord, what will you have me to do?'' Obedience is, ``My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'' (Matt. 26:39)

When Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ``Who do people say the Son of Man is?'' Peter had the correct answer, ``You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'' Jesus told him, ``Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'' The Bible says, ``From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.'' This time Peter rebuked Jesus. ``Never, Lord!''

he said. `This shall never happen to you!'' And this time Jesus said to him, ``Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumblingblock to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'' (Matt. 16:13-23) What an illustration of being consistent in speaking just what, where and when God tells us to speak! How important it is for each of us to guard against hearing our own carnal reasoning, even though we may have just had a good experience of hearing from the Lord.

Know Your Level Of Authority

When you speak for God, you are taking authority. Before you ever do that, you must know just exactly how much authority God wants you to take, for not all Christians may prophesy with the same level of authority.

In legal matters, we find a parallel in power of attorney. This is a device whereby one person gives to another the authority to sign his name. Most often power of attorney is limited to specific purposes. For example, one man may give another the authority to sign his name to withdraw money from his account at the bank. In such a case, the man holding that power of attorney would have no authority to use the other's name to obtain credit at a department store or to make some other obligation. The power of attorney specifies when, where and for what the name may be used.

So it is in prophecy. The Lord designates when, where and for what certain individuals in the church may prophesy. A thorough study of this reveals three levels of authority relating to this gift of the Holy Spirit. Here I'll present just the net results of this study.

The first level is the most common. At this level, prophecy is a gift which may be given by the Holy Spirit to any Christian who fulfills the basic requirements of being Spirit-filled and maintaining a steady walk with God and who consistently waits on the Lord for this ministry. This level is also the most restricted of the three. ``Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort,'' wrote Paul in 1Cor. 14:3. Verse 31 of that chapter says, ``You can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.'' The Christian man or woman speaking for God on this level, then, must not usurp authority over others in the church family by supposing to impart specific gifts, by giving them supposed specific direction for their lives or by bringing supposed correction to them. His level of authority is only to strengthen, to comfort and to encourage.

The second level of authority in prophecy is reserved for the presbytery in the church. This word means overseers. It includes the five offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher as well as all others who have been ordained as overseers, which are sometimes referred to as bishops or elders. All of these offices must be filled by men who meet specific requirements outlined in Titus 1 and 1Timothy 3. Men on this level of authority may use prophecy to speak admonishment, to be predictive, to exercise their oversight, and to impart spiritual gifts to other men and women in the family of God. (Prophecy is not, of course, the only way in which any of these things may be accomplished.) Paul wrote to Timothy, ``I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight.'' (1 Tim. 1:18) He also wrote, ``Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid

their hands on you,' (1 Tim. 4:14) and, 'I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.' (2 Tim. 1:6)

The third and highest level of authority in prophecy is that of the prophet. Notice that, on the first level, prophecy was the gift, and the Holy Spirit was the giver. The individual person was the recipient of the gift. But on this third level, the prophet himself is the gift, and Jesus is the giver. The church is the recipient of the gift.

The apostle also has this authority in the church, but the apostle's chief function is not in prophecy as the prophet's is. For a prophet is, through and through, a spokesman for God.

A prophet, speaking on this highest level, has the authority even to speak a corrective word on behalf of the Lord. This authority is not necessarily given to others who are overseers in the church or to any other member of the presbytery (except to an apostle). Prophets may be used by God to rebuke or reprove, to speak things into existence, to be predictive; in short, to give foresight as well as insight.

However, such a word--as any prophetic word--is always subject to judgment by the other overseers in the church, of course. Furthermore, a prophet's rebuke never will be a venting of his own anger. He may speak a heavy word, but never a harsh word. He never leaves a man without recourse, with no room to repent and become right with God. Consider the example of Jesus washing Peter's feet in order to convey to him the message of servitude. Peter, totally misunderstanding the Lord, said, 'No. You shall never wash my feet.' Now, if Jesus had wanted to be harsh, he could have grabbed Peter by the scruff of the neck, shook him, and said, 'Okay, Peter. One more remark like that and you're out! I can always get another fisherman!' No, Jesus was not harsh, but the word he spoke was a definite rebuke. He said, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' You probably already know Peter's response to that. 'Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Again, Jesus was patient. You read no heavy judgment here. Rather he took the time to explain, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean.' (John 13:8-10)

The prophet is similarly limited in his authority, never venting his own anger, but always proclaiming God's covenant. God always deals with his people through covenant; that is, he makes agreement with them. Through Moses he made the old covenant of the blood of a lamb and the word written on stone. The new covenant is the blood of the Lamb Jesus and the word written on the flesh of our hearts. Now God says to us that in the Old Testament every disobedience received just punishment; so how shall we escape if we neglect the great salvation we have through the terms of the new covenant? There's a difference in Jesus Christ, but there is still a covenant, which means there are terms to be fulfilled by both parties. In other words, God's promises--even to us on the New Testament side of the cross--are conditional. And the role of the prophet in bringing judgment is simply to remind us of the conditions of the covenant when we have forgotten them. He never vents his own personal anger; he always expresses the burden of the Lord. When the prophet speaks judgment, he is simply proclaiming the faithful father keeping his faithful promise to an unfaithful people.

Recognize and follow these three levels of authority in the church. It will bring a wonderful, godly order to prophecy and actually will release the Holy Spirit to work in a greater

measure among us.

If correction is indicated in some individuals or in some local churches in order to bring them in line with these guidelines, let us establish that such correction will serve to magnify the word of the Lord as it comes through prophecy. Some who are younger in the Lord may find they have usurped authority that has not been given to them by God. They may need to return to a lower degree of authority, conscientiously restricting themselves to prophecy that is strengthening, encouraging and comforting. Women who have felt led to prophesy words of correction or direction similarly may need to adjust their level of authority, for women cannot correctly become overseers in the church.

Our desire is for a pure word of prophecy. It is essential to follow the mandates of Scripture if ever we are to achieve that high goal. Let us all humbly submit to God's design for prophecy, even when it requires us to change the way we are used to doing things.

Those who submit to their proper levels of authority also will find that, in so doing, they will bring themselves into position for further growth in God--for advancing to new levels of authority and grace. But to break out of the boundaries of proper authority--in prophecy or in anything else in the kingdom of God--is to leave the very foundation of the principles of prophecy, for one who speaks for God must do exactly as he is told to do, go exactly where is told to go and speak exactly what he is told to speak exactly when he is told to speak it. A person who rebels against that will not grow. A person who rebels in any area will not find grace added to his life, for God is never committed to bless disobedience.

Advancing In Authority

Of course, if one were forever confined to one level of authority, then he would never advance in the kingdom of God. So we see that God has established a moving from one level to the next. As in any living organism, this growth in the church is gradual and almost unseen, rather than sudden and startling.

Let's look at a man who is saved and becomes a saint. Very soon he may begin to be used in the gift of prophecy occasionally. No doubt, his gift will find expression first in a small setting: a home gathering or prayer meeting with good oversight. As his gift is exercised, he may begin to be used in larger gatherings, such as a meeting of his local church attended by hundreds. All this time, his gift is within the proper confines of strengthening, encouraging and comforting the people.

As time progresses and he matures in the Lord, it may be that God would even use him to bring a directive or corrective message to an individual--again in the presence of an older overseer in the church. As we have seen, this level of authority in prophecy is not given to those who are not ordained as overseers in the church. Therefore, this man is going beyond his level of authority. But, if he has been faithful to maintain his level of authority in the past, and if he begins to move into the next level carefully and under good oversight, then this movement is not seen as usurping authority that does not belong to him, but rather it is viewed as his growth into a new level of authority. It is, perhaps, part of his coming into the office of an overseer in the church. He will not be out of order as long as his prophecy cannot be shown to be incorrect. However, if his prophecy proves to be false, then the responsibility falls upon

him heavily, and his progress into an oversight position is hindered thereby.

The same principle may apply to a man who has been ordained as an overseer in the church and is growing into the office of a prophet or apostle. Before being ordained to that office, he might be used to bring a corrective message on that level of authority. Again, if it is done carefully and under the oversight of other leaders in the church, it would be viewed as part of his maturing in the Lord rather than a case of usurping authority that does not belong to him. He has that liberty in the Holy Spirit. But if he fails, he must bear the responsibility.

CHAPTER 4 THE BURDEN OF THE LORD

The servant of the Lord who wants to prophesy must hear the burden of the Lord for his people. In short, this burden is this, that God's heart is not to reject even the most vile sinner. Rather, it is to draw unto him a perfect people who will serve him gladly throughout eternity.

But God also must be faithful to perform that which he has promised in his covenant--measuring blessing to the obedient as well as cursing to the disobedient. I have found in my relationship to my own children a simple example of this burden. If I tell my daughter, ``Honey, don't touch that stove again, or I promise I'll spank you,'' then, when she touches it, I must fulfill my promise to her. But it is not an angry response: I do not call her foul names and kick her out of the house, telling her I never want to see her face at my door again. I might even say something like, ``I wish you hadn't touched that stove, because I promised you that I'd spank you if you did.'' Then, of course, I would faithfully fulfill my negative promise to her.

Look at the burden of the Lord to his disobedient children.

The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. (Matt. 21:43)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. (Matt. 23:37-38)

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ``If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'' (Luke 19:41-44)

Just before this time, Jesus, seeking fruit on a fig tree and finding none, cursed it, and it withered and died overnight. Israel was the spiritual fig tree on which he sought fruit and found none. Here is Jesus riding into Jerusalem, and into the temple, the heart of Israel. He was looking for fruit, and he found money changers, profiteers, racketeers, people making merchandise. The Bible says he stood there, looking over the city, and cried. His heart was broken for the people God had

worked with from the time of Abraham, people who had refused to be faithful to him. This is the burden of the Lord.

God had said, ``If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.'' He listed manifold blessings that would be theirs. His heart was to treat them very well. But he also made a promise to those who would not obey the Lord: an equally long list of curses that would overtake them. (Deuteronomy 28) Both the blessing and the cursing are part of the covenant promise. It does not please God to fulfill his promise to disobedient people, but he must be faithful in this, too. This is the burden of the Lord.

Read the burden of the Lord in the Old Testament prophets. When God must judge, he expresses hurt and sorrow. God doesn't necessarily want to wield judgment, but he sometimes is forced because of the people's disobedience. God's judgment is an expression of sorrow for those who don't want him, who reject him, who play tricks with him after he has given them all he has to give. God longs to turn sinful people to repentance, to bring the unfaithful into a place of blessing. God simply fulfills his covenant promise.

This is the burden of judgmental prophecy, for this is the burden of the Lord in judgment.

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