

Prophecy and Prophets: A Scriptural View

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Part II

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In Part I of this teaching we explored what a true prophet of God is, described his or her call, explained the difference between a prophet and a psychic, and discussed how to judge prophecy. In this Part II of the lesson we will concentrate on the prophetic word, the characteristics of a prophet, and make some observations on the nature of prophets.

THE TIMING OF THE PROPHETIC WORD

There are two different time frames in the delivery of the prophetic word. God causes his word to be given in what I call the "Word of the Moment" and/or the "Word of the Season."

1. The Word of the Moment

The Word of the Moment is an utterance which is spontaneous to the speaker. It occurs when God sovereignly moves on an individual to speak forth a word that He wants the hearers to receive. This kind of word can be delivered by either a called prophet or a person moving in the gift of prophecy. (See Part I).

For those churches with a more free move of the Holy Spirit, an utterance of this kind most often comes in a Sunday morning service. This is known as a public utterance and will always be in harmony with the rest of the service if it is truly from the Holy Spirit.

Occasionally more private prophetic utterances occur when believers are together in prayer, counseling, worship, or even in conversation. And remember, as I stated in Part I, all prophecy, both public and private, is to be submitted for judgement. This judging of a prophetic word is absolutely necessary to prevent error.

2. The Word of the Season

I define the Word of the Season as the word of the Lord delivered after a season of prayer. It is usually a direction the Lord is telling a group or individual to take. Most often this kind of word is delivered by a called prophet who has been burdened by the Holy Spirit on a subject on behalf of an individual or group. The prophet may spend days, weeks, or even months in prayer with this burden. Then, when it has a fullness in his or her spirit, and the Lord's timing is right, that person knows it is time for delivery. This kind of word may also be delivered by one who is not a called prophet but who the Holy Spirit has burdened about a situation and who has thoroughly prayed that burden through.

This Word of a Season is often delivered in the form of a sermon or prophetic message to an entire church or group. A speaker who has a prophetic call may come from without to a church with this kind of word from the Lord. Note, this kind of word does not need to be long. I recall once when the Lord sent our church a clear directive word which was delivered by a visiting speaker in less than fifteen minutes. It was very powerful and we knew at the time that it was the word of the Lord to us for that season.

It should also be borne in mind that the Word for a Season may involve the past, present or future. The word "season" does

not necessarily mean now.

Categories of Prophetic Words

While I don't believe in reducing God's word to formulas and don't like to try to put God's prophetic words into little boxes, it is helpful to view the different categories of the prophetic word as follows:

Edification	Predictive
Exhortation	Rebuke
Comfort	Directive

Words of edification build up the hearer.

Words of exhortation motivate and renew the spirit of the hearer.

Words of comfort do just that, comfort the hearer.

Predictive words foretell things of the future.

Words of rebuke point out sin and extend a call to repentance.

Directive words are those which give guidance to the hearer concerning some action or decision most often relating to the immediate or near future.

As a general rule the first three kinds of prophetic words, edification, exhortation, and comfort, may be delivered by anyone who has a prophetic call - a mature or immature prophet - or they may be delivered by one who is not a called prophet but who is simply operating the gift of prophecy. Why is this so? Because these kinds of words generally can't do harm to the hearer. We all need to hear words of edification, exhortation and comfort from the Lord. They are for the building up of the body of Christ. Furthermore, these words are easy to give. It is very reasonable that the Lord would give these kinds of words through the fledgling prophet or one who moves in the gift of prophecy. The speaker does not need to have much authority in the body of Christ to deliver these kinds of words.

The latter three kinds of words, predictive, rebuke, and directive, are generally delivered by a more mature prophet. Why? In the first place they can do much harm if they are not correct or are given at the wrong time. It takes a seasoned prophet to know when he is receiving this kind of word from God and when it is simply his own thought processes. Further, a mature prophet often will be given a word of this kind in advance but he knows that the time is not right to deliver it. A less mature prophet lacks such wisdom. A mature prophet takes no pleasure in delivering these kinds of words, especially words of rebuke. A less mature prophet is all too often anxious to deliver the message, especially words of rebuke or direction.

These last three kinds of words are most often delivered with authority and, if the speaker is a tested and proven prophet, the hearers are more likely to hear and respond. It simply makes good sense that God would select His mature prophets to "go and tell my people" these kinds of words. For these reasons, young prophet who is not too far along in the learning process is just not as likely to be given a harder word to deliver. However, God has the prerogative to set this rule aside and may, on occasion, use a less mature prophet, particularly in the absence of a mature prophet.

Examining the Vessel

In Figure 1, Part I of this teaching we illustrated how to judge the prophetic word. Now we see that the vessel who delivers the word must also be examined. Much of the credibility of a prophetic utterance depends upon the track record of the person who delivers it.

For example, if someone comes to me who has been a Christian for eight months and tells me he has a word of rebuke from the Lord for me, I listen but I hold it lightly before the Lord. On the other hand, if someone whom I know to be a strong, mature Christian comes to me and says that, after much prayer, he or she believes that a word of rebuke must be spoken to me, you can be certain I listen with both ears and I consider myself very accountable to the Lord for that word.

Let me clarify something else here. Too many times we Christians confuse or mistake a tentative, soft spoken prophetic word as one being delivered "in love." Conversely, we take a stern, direct word as one which, by its stern delivery, was "not delivered in love" and we therefore believe we are free to reject it. Often a true prophet is called upon to deliver a stern word in a very authoritative and stern manner. This manner of delivery does not necessarily mean it was not delivered in love. A mature prophet will have great love for God's people yet be very capable and directed by God to speak sternly. We do not have the license to reject a prophetic word just because we don't think it was "delivered in love." To do so is to make the same grave mistake that Israel did when Jeremiah delivered stern words. They said:

"Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priests will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says." (Jer 18:18 NIV).

We also are not free to reject or not pay attention to a word just because we don't like the way a person delivers it or we don't like his or her manner of speech or personality. Even if a person's accent, habit of pronunciation, etc. is not pleasing to our ears, we are still obliged to hear and judge the prophetic word itself.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CALLED PROPHET

I believe there are certain common characteristics or basic personality traits of an individual who has a prophetic call on his or her life. After considerable study of the Old and New Testament prophets, I believe the following general observations are quite accurate and descriptive of those called to be prophets both in Scripture and today:

1. Strong Personality

Innately the prophet has a strong personality. I have never met a true prophet who didn't have, in secular terms, a type A personality. Prophets are usually intense about most things and are always intense about their walk with God. That is why prophets often have difficulty understanding those who are less than 100% committed to the Lord.

2. Direct - Issue Oriented

A prophet is very issue oriented and sees things in black or

white. For him there is very little gray and most things are either right or wrong. Hence, a prophet will not easily compromise on an issue. Nor does a prophet have a lot of mercy for those who can't or won't measure up to the austere standards of God as he sees them. Again, the mature prophet has love and cares about God's people. But does he have mercy? Not much! I always visualize Amos holding the plumb line as God's stereotypical prophet. (Amos 7:7-9). The plumb line is representative of God's righteousness on any given issue and, to the prophet, all things relating to that issue are to be measured against that plumb line. Those who don't measure up are often told, "Get in or get out!"

3. Strong in Prayer

The prophet is given to much prayer. The true prophet has a real burden, not only for God's will, but for His people as well, both those saved and those not yet saved. This inevitably leads to a strong intercessor's prayer burden for people and issues. Remember, the prophet is intense and this intensity flows over into his or her prayer life.

4. Outward Life in Order

The prophet generally has his outward life in order. Since the prophet sees matters in black or white, he is much less likely to become ensnared in outward sins such as adultery, cheating on his taxes, etc. However, there are two big, covert sins with which a prophet must continually battle. They are pride and judgmentalism. As God matures His prophets, this pride and judgmentalism gradually diminishes, but they are always a potential snare for the prophet. These two sins are Satan's most effective weapons against the prophet.

5. Authority and Power

A prophet, when moving in the prophetic call, will move with great authority and power. This authority and power are not to be confused with speaking in a loud voice or trying to impose his will over others. When God delivers His word through a prophet, it is God's power and authority that is manifested, not the prophet's. Those who have a discerning spirit will know when the Lord is delivering His word through someone be it spoken forcefully or given in a whisper.

6. Prophets are Poor Long-Term Counselors

Prophets generally do not make good long-term counselors. They lack the patience and mercy necessary for this kind of counseling. A prophet is much more inclined to spend some time with a counselee, give that person the word of the Lord, then become impatient if the counselee continues to drift in his sin or shows a lack of commitment to correct a failing.

7. Spiritual Gifts Accompany a Prophetic Call

The mature, called prophet will exercise many of the spiritual gifts enumerated in I Corinthians, chapter twelve. Though the prophet may operate all of these gifts at some time in his or her ministry, the gifts most often manifested are the prophetic word, words of knowledge, words of wisdom, and the discerning of spirits. The prophet often is the first to spot a demonic presence in a person or circumstance. Further, signs and wonders such as healing, the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and the breaking down of demonic strongholds are often seen in the prophetic ministry.

NOTE: For the true prophet, all operations of the above gifts will always point to Jesus. Remember, the prophet's work is to speak the word of God. The prophet's business is the business of the Kingdom of God and the accomplishing of God's purposes. A true prophet's actions and words will not attract attention to himself, nor will it put the focus on natural events such as earthquakes or other future events which only remotely relate to the Kingdom of God.

THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

The pastor-prophet relationship

The pastor and the prophet serve two very different functions in the church body although they often do and should overlap. The primary concern of the pastor is his flock. A good pastor is an encourager, a teacher, and does all with mercy. The mature pastor is full of concern for each individual person under his care.

The primary concern of the prophet is God's will. He places the mandates of the Lord above his concern for individuals in the church. He has a long-range view of spiritual matters while the pastor tends to see more in the immediate. Because of the differences in their callings there is potential conflict between the pastor and the prophet.

However, the mature pastor and the mature prophet will be mutually submissive to one another. The pastor is ultimately responsible before God for his flock, the prophet is not. The mature prophet knows he is responsible only for speaking forth God's word. He is not responsible for causing that word to come to pass.

This understanding is absolutely foundational for the prophet and the pastor to move in concert in a church. Once the prophet has delivered a word to the church or to the pastor, his job is finished unless and until God directs him further. At that point, the responsibility for carrying out the word shifts to the pastor. He and his spiritual elders must pray and hold it before the Lord. Ultimately the responsibility to accept it or reject it rests on the pastor's shoulders.

Sin in the Camp

Given the pastor's general inclination towards mercy, there are times when a pastor will not deal with sin or misdirection in his church. Often he doesn't even see it. In such cases God will usually send a prophet into the situation to bring the problem to light. The prophet will face the issue head-on with the congregation, elder board, pastoral staff, or whomever, by calling the sin into question.

I recall once talking to a woman in an Asian country with a strong prophetic call. She was part of the senior pastoral staff and saw that one of the pastors was in personal sin. She went to the senior pastor and told him this must stop. The pastor's response was, "But, what if he leaves the fellowship?" She responded, "Then let him leave!"

This is a good example of the pastor's mercy and concern for the individual and his flock along side the prophet's willingness to accept whatever consequences are necessary in order to

deal with sin. Happily this particular senior pastor knew she was right and the problem was worked through satisfactorily. This is an example of the prophet pressing an issue and the pastor responding properly.

A word of caution here: the mature prophet is willing to push an issue if the Lord is directing him to do so. The less mature prophet is often anxious to push it. There is a big difference.

Prophets Teach

Often today in the body of Christ a called prophet will also be a gifted and respected teacher. The prophet, if he is truly hearing from God, will operate the prophetic gift only occasionally. He may move prophetically several times in a short period, then not move again in his office for an extended period of time. One of the ways for a church to gain the continuing benefit of a mature prophet is to make available a teaching or preaching platform for the prophet if he is so gifted.

OBSERVATIONS OF A MATURE PROPHET

I have just described the personal characteristics of a prophet. Now I would like to make some general observations about the mature prophet.

First, it takes years to develop a mature prophet. The prophetic call is one thing - a mature prophet is quite another. God moves the prophet along in growth but that person must also be willing to undergo the difficulties, criticisms, lack of understanding, etc. that accompanies the development of a prophetic call. But once the prophet is mature, he or she is extremely valuable to the body of Christ. The prophet accomplishes a work for God that no other office is capable of doing.

Second, the mature prophet identifies with the people. Ezekiel demonstrated this for us when he said, "...I sat where they sat..." (Ez 3:15 KJV). This identification with the people to whom he is to minister is absolutely necessary for the prophet if he is to have a proper relationship with God's people. It is only by so doing that he can feel their hurts and know their pain. If you ever hear a prophet beseeching the Lord to "show them their sins" you can be fairly sure that prophet has not yet fully identified with God's people. We see Jeremiah continually identifying with his people as he prayed: "...we have sinned..." (Lam 5:16 NIV).

Third, a spiritually mature prophet will move in great love for God and His people. Remember, we've already seen that this doesn't mean he or she is tentative, always soft-spoken, or wishy-washy when moving in his call. Don't be deceived. Your spirit will tell you if the prophet has the love of God and His people as he moves, whether he moves with gentleness or firmness in any given situation.

Fourth, the mature prophet will esteem other prophets and not be jealous of them, whereas a less mature prophet may be jealous of others with the same calling. A truly mature prophet will rejoice when God uses someone else rather than himself.

Fifth, a mature prophet will be willing to submit to the spiritual authority in place. As we noted previously, a mature prophet and a mature pastor are mutually submissive. A mature prophet will also be willing to submit to others if they have a word of correction for him or feel the need to exercise authority

over his prophetic ministry.

Note: The exception to this submission is found when there is unrepentant sin in the church leadership. In such cases the prophet will not and should not submit. Then he should fearlessly speak the word of God as God directs.

Sixth, the mature prophet's office is a hard place. It is very hard to be the vessel of correction, etc. Remember, the mature prophet loves God's people and is not anxious to deliver hard words. It is also a difficult place because of the human tendency to "kill the messenger" rather than deal with the facts. Many a prophet has lost a friend, pastor, or a whole congregation because he was God's faithful messenger.

Seventh, a mature prophet will not believe that every thought that comes into his or her head is "from the Lord." He will also come to recognize the difference between the maturity of his discernment and a true prophetic word to be delivered. A mature prophet will have great discernment and understanding concerning the things of God. But this understanding and these thoughts, while from the Holy Spirit, are not true prophetic words.

I personally do not believe the Lord has a true prophetic word for a church every Sunday morning. A genuinely mature prophet will not feel he must prophesy every Sunday. For to do so will dilute the receptivity to the prophetic word and reduce it to common place.

Eighth, a mature prophet realizes that there are times when the Lord speaks a word to him and him alone. That word is not to be spoken publicly. This can be true even though the word is regarding the body of Christ, the local church, or whatever group the prophet finds himself involved. The mature prophet will check with the Lord in his spirit to see if what he has received should be prayed about, spoken aloud, preached or held.

Further, the prophet may see evil or a demonic presence in a situation or a person and know that he is to do nothing and say nothing about it. At times the Holy Spirit lets the prophet see a reality in the spiritual realm but that knowledge is to be held privately, at least for a while...and possibly always. Of course this kind of knowledge is common to all mature believers, not just the prophet.

Ninth, let me describe the kind of church a prophet is likely to have if that prophet is also a pastor. Chances are it will be a small church. Why? Because a prophet-pastor tends to deliver strong, unyielding messages and continues to mercilessly hold out the plumb line with which he measures himself and his poor flock. Many Christians do not want this kind of pastor. Many simply cannot grow and thrive in this setting for they need the mercy and the "gray" in which to grow. One of the primary gifts of a "successful" pastor is mercy, something the prophet generally has in rather short supply.

However, those who do stick with the prophet-pastor will be the 100% committed Christians and, more often than not, many of his church members will also have a prophetic call on their lives. Thus, such churches are usually more representative of the prophet of the Old Testament with his disciples rather than what we think of as a modern day church.

Tenth, prophets belong to the church at large. Because of the difficulties encountered when a prophet is also a pastor, it is my opinion that, as a general rule, prophets should not be long-term pastors. However, if there is a deeply rooted sin in a congregation, God often sends a prophet to pastor that flock for a season. In very short order the prophet-pastor will flush the sin out into the light. Once the sin is dealt with his job is done and he is ready to move on.

Unfortunately our western church is so structured that a prophet is usually forced into a long-term pastorate for economic reasons. Prophets are like everyone else in that they need food and shelter which costs money. This economic burden all too often shackles the prophet to a single church thereby largely depriving the church at large of his badly needed ministry. A better place for a prophet is in a para-church organization. There he can earn a living in a Christian setting while being free to travel and minister to the church at large. This arrangement also means he is not trying to pastor some poor congregation struggling to measure up to the plumb line week after week.

Finally, the most important observation of the mature prophet is that all he says and does, as he moves in the capacity of his office, always points to Christ and away from himself. At those times the prophet is truly God's servant to proclaim God's will and God's purposes among us.

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