

Prophecy and the word of God

This morning we need to wrestle with these words from Paul.

‘Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1).

Is prophecy extinct today? If so, how do we understand these words? If not, then how is prophecy expressed today? These are the issues we need to work through.

It has been quite a journey to get to this section. As you can appreciate, we really cannot engage this topic until we have set a proper understanding of the term ‘prophecy’ as given to us in the scriptures. The vantage points of both Old and New Testament prophets are also important as the prophetic words of God must speak to the progress of God’s revelation. They also need to set out the purpose of God and the direction God moves to accomplish that purpose.

Since the prophetic word is the word of God, therefore one cannot have the gift of prophecy without first encountering the Word, not only the written word, but more importantly in our day, the living Word, Jesus Christ.

This is the last in our short series on ‘Prophecy and the Word of God’. I need to repeat that the understanding of the term prophecy in the scriptures is unique. It is the word of God given to the people through human instrumentality, the prophets. To put it into the perspective of the usage of the words, ‘forth-telling’ and ‘fore-telling’, it is firstly the forth-telling, i.e. telling forth the words of God, that leads on to the fore-telling. The prophets did not foretell without a basis as if they could see into the future unrelated to what has gone on. They looked to the commandments and promises of God, and from there they were given revelations of (or they could see) what God would do. We have made that point in a previous study. The words of God reflect who God is, i.e. the image of God. The prophets are chosen by God to speak His words in order to fulfil the purpose of God, i.e. the restoration of His creation. Thus, all prophecy has its beginning in the promises of God.

We have also noted that the point made by the prophets in the Old Testament was the way God sought to redeem a rebellious people. The prophets herald this story and we have seen that this story culminated in the coming of the prophet *par excellence*, Jesus Christ. He is the finality in the story of the prophets. Just as the prophets of old looked back to the exodus and Sinai, we look back to the cross. Just as the prophets of old looked forward to the coming Messiah, we look forward to the return of Christ. The promise of the Messiah brought in the end period and the fulfilment of God’s purpose in redeeming His people. The return of Christ will see all things promised come to pass. We need to distinguish the different vantage points in the periods before and after Christ. After all, prophecy is about God speaking His words to His people and telling them the purpose He has planned for them. Though our vantage point has changed, as it must with the progress of the revelation of God’s purpose in redemption, yet the basis of prophecy as the spoken words of God to His people remains unchangeable.

This study has its problems because of the differing ways people understand prophecy today. That is why a definition of the term ‘prophecy’ in both the Old and New Testament periods is so important. The text I want to use for this study is in 1 Corinthians.

¹ Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1 Cor. 14:1-5)

The Corinthian church was in turmoil over the exercise of spiritual gifts, tongues, prophecy and so on. Paul urged them to pursue love. Love is of God and the exercise of the gifts is to build up the people of God. In

so doing, they were to desire specially the gift of prophecy. We need to work out what did Paul mean here.

Paul stated very clearly here that prophecy, or the prophetic word, is for the upbuilding of the church. We can look at the way some other translations render the word 'prophecy' in 1 Cor. 14:1. The Amplified Bible puts it as, 'prophecy [to foretell the future, to speak a new message from God to the people]. The J.B. Phillips translation puts it as, 'The highest gift you can wish for is to be able to speak the messages of God'. The above translations fit with the way we have understood the term prophecy in our previous studies. This is in keeping with what Paul said subsequently, 'the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation' (1 Cor 14:3). We noted in our last study that Christ has come and the New Testament prophets looked back to Him and looked forward to the marriage of the bride and the lamb. So, it makes sense to see that the purpose of prophecies in the New Testament is the preparation of the bride for this grand event. This is the building up of the church which is the people of God. We have noted that the vantage points of the prophets are different in the Old and New Testament periods.

Christ has said that it is He who builds the church, 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Matt. 16:18). And this rock is Peter's confession of the Messiah, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:15). We have noted in a previous study that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Himself being the cornerstone.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

The foundation of the church was the prophetic utterances of the coming Messiah who is now the cornerstone of the church. We are being built into it by the Spirit. We said this regarding the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The gift of prophecy by the Spirit is now directed to this end, the salvation of God's people.

Continuationist or Cessationist

The dividing issue before us in this study is whether there is continuation of prophecy in our days. Firstly, we noted that Jesus said, 'The Law and the Prophets were until John' (Lk. 16:16). Paul also said, 'As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away' (1 Cor. 13:8). This seems to infer that the gift of prophecy has ceased. However, Paul exhorted the Corinthian Christians to 'earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy' (1 Cor. 14:1). Obviously, Paul was not inconsistent here. He was referring to different scenarios. We need to make clear what he meant when he used the terms 'prophecy'.

Jesus had made it quite clear that 'the Law and the Prophets were until John'. There is no question about that. Now that the final authoritative word (Son of God) had come, there is no need for prophets and prophecies to point to Christ. We have also made that point from Hebrews 1:1-4. The Son of God has come and He indeed is the final word from God, the Prophet *par excellence*. In that sense prophecy has ceased.

However, the vantage point of the New Testament prophecy is different. We look back to the Prophet *par excellence* and forward to His return. We are still anchored to the word and what we have now is the written word made alive by the living word, Jesus Christ. We do not work from the law and the promises of God to make out what is to come like the Old Testament prophets. The fulfilment of all prophecies has arrived and we are living in Him, an intimacy that none of the Old Testament prophets had ever experienced. Jesus is the word of God and as we bring forth the word, we are holding out Christ to people so that they may be saved. This is precisely what the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was supposed to achieve, the salvation of God's people (Acts 2:21). We saw that in our study last week. So, the Spirit of God as the *alter ego* of Christ continues to build the church, to adorn the bride for the grand marriage. As such, prophecy today is directed towards this end. This is the way Paul redefined prophecy for the church. He said,

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. (1 Cor. 14:3)

It has been commonly said that prophecy has ceased in the church until the Pentecostal movement a hundred years ago when they highlighted this gift and its exercise became more common. Is this true? The word of God has continued to be preached over the past 2000 years and the church has been built up. The Spirit of God was not kept in abeyance as if He is dependent on what we understand and do. No, the prophetic word continues and the Spirit of God has been active.

There also have been debate as to whether we are cessationist or continuationist. Cessationist maintains the gifts of tongues and prophecy have ceased after the apostolic age. This is the common view within the Reformed traditions. Continuationist maintains that these gifts continue to be experienced in the church. The debate really depends on the way we understand prophecy. That is why it is important to see the differing vantage point in both the Old and New Testaments.

The cessationist speaks from the Reformed tradition. They had an issue with authority and the way teachings and doctrines, apart from the scriptures, had been added to the church. It is of necessity that they ensured that this trend do not continue. And so do we. Christ had warned us regarding this.

²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. (Matt. 24:23-26)

There is not another 'christ'. It is the finality of the Word (Christ) that the reformists were talking about. And so do we. The church has been built upon the prophets and the apostles, Christ being the cornerstone. No other foundation than that can be laid. As the writer to the Hebrews pointed out, Christ is superior to all, and thus nothing more can be added to the revelation from God. This is the position of the reformists. So, prophecy cannot be understood as in the pre-Christ period, telling forth that another christ has come. In this understanding, we are all cessationist.

Paul is obviously a continuationist, by our terminology. However, he was not facing the problems our reformists faced though there are similarities. Paul had a new vantage point as we have mentioned before. Thus, there was no issue in desiring the gift of prophecy understood from the new vantage point. Prophecy is no longer serving the function of revelation as the final revelation of the Son of God has appeared. Rather, prophecy is the word spoken for the upbuilding and encouragement of those whom the Spirit has incorporated into the body of Christ. This is in preparation of the marriage of bride and the lamb. Understood this way, we are all continuationists.

The New Testament also warned us of false prophets. The test is the confession that Jesus has come and therefore He is the final chapter of God's revelation.

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6)

The confession that Jesus has come is the test of all prophecies. The coming of Christ as the final revelation of God prohibits us from adding to that revelation. Other than this confession, then we are only speaking from the world, and the world finds comfort with those words. As John pointed in Revelation,

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus

Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev. 1:1-3)

We need to say again that all prophecy is the witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus. Do we have the prophetic word today? Put the question another way. Do we hold out Christ to our people? Or are we giving them the word ‘from the world’? John warned us not to do that.

⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. (1 John 4:5)

So, what does Paul mean when he exhorts us to desire the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1) and at the same time told us that prophecies will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8)? When Paul said that prophecies will pass away, he was referring to the return of Christ, the end time. All things will be fulfilled by then and there will be no need for anything further to be said. Obviously, Paul had a different understanding of prophecy in his day. ‘... the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation (1 Cor. 14:3).

Peter said the same with regards to the gift that God has given to us.

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11)

It is speaking the oracles of God, i.e. the words of God, to serve one another in building them up in the body of Christ. It is not primarily a word for personal direction or need, though sometimes this may propel us into the path of the Spirit. We live in a world where Christianity is fast becoming a matter of personal need. Look back to the prophetic word to Barnabas and Saul by the Spirit in Acts 13. Of course, it is the word to the two individuals, but it is primarily for the building up of the church in Asia Minor. The prophetic word must be seen primarily as a word directed to the church, pointing the church towards Christ and help them to grow towards maturity in Him. Is it a word for the church to better serve God in mission, the gospel to all nations. To sum up, these are the some of the ways in which prophecy is expressed today.

1. Preaching, teaching and proclamation of the word

We have seen in Acts 13 that prophets were also teachers, but there is a difference in the teaching. Bringing the prophetic word to the church is not merely imparting the knowledge of scriptures. It is not giving them something to think about. It is holding out Christ for them to receive. We don't go to church to hear the word, but to receive the word, i.e. to receive Christ, to be built up in Him by His word.

2. Speaking the word of God to one another with the goal of encouragement and discipling

³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. (Acts 15:32)

The words of encouragement strengthened those who are in Christ and this is consistent with the purpose in which the prophetic word is uttered. Though not everyone is a prophet (1 Cor. 12:29), yet we can all give some words of encouragement to others as Paul said to the Philippians.

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Phil. 2:1-2)

3. On occasions, it is a word given to the local church for a specific time or need

²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (1 Cor. 14:29-33)

These words of Paul reinforce our view that the prophetic word in the New Testament (after the coming of Christ) does not carry the same authority as we expect prophecy to. Otherwise, it would be inappropriate for us to weigh up what is said. The purpose of prophecy here is that 'all may learn and all be encouraged'. Let me remind us that the function of prophecy in the period after the coming of Christ is to build up the church. Christ will build His church using His words delivered by His prophets.

To conclude this series of studies, I refer you to the words of Paul to the Thessalonians.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

We should not have any problem with Paul's exhortation if we have understood the way prophecy in the New Testament is used.

In closing, instead of a prayer, I want to use the words of Paul to the Ephesian Christians before he left them.

³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

That is the word of prophecy to us all.