

NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Steve Williams

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Many years ago when all the elders of a church but me were on holiday, I was asked to host meetings being led by a couple from America who “specialised” in words of knowledge and prophecy. They were invited to the church (not by me, I might add) for several days and many hundreds of people showed up to see them in action. The first night began with them asking anyone wearing green to stand up. Amazingly people wearing green stood up, and they had a prophecy for then. The next question was “who has had a disagreement with their partner today”. Even more amazingly, and casting shame to the wind, some stood for whom another prophecy was supposedly given. One young boy was told that he would be a racing driver. One young lady who was due to go to hospital (though the couple in question did not know) for an operation the following week, was told she would be healed and would have no need to keep the appointment. She was not healed, and later went into hospital for the operation. My feelings, still relatively inexperienced in such performances, were those of sorrow and anger.

The next evening, with several hundred people present, they made their way toward me armed with a word. Apparently I was such a gifted preacher that I was destined to preach all over the world. I neither thought that, nor have I preached all over the world, though if I had received “the word” such was the accolade, I would not have been able to wait to hear myself preach. However I was thankful that God was showing me something, and teaching me a lesson. My ego, my pride, was being appealed to, I was being flattered and that was the last thing I needed. The meeting continued, and at the end of the week I addressed the congregation with the words of John: 4:1 **“Beloved believe not every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of God”**. This was met with some annoyance from the couple, who said that questions and answers about their ministry could be found in a pamphlet at the back of the church, and beyond this they did not answer any questions...

Why have I told you this, because I want to ask a question “what is true New Testament prophesy” Let’s begin to try and answer using God’s word alone

It seems clear to me that prophecy in the Old Testament, in many ways at least, was and is distinct from that in the New Testament.

Turn with me to Hebrews 1:1-2

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son”

God spoke in “various ways”. Of course this epistle is written to Hebrews and records what God had spoken to them, “to their fathers”. God is recorded as having spoken first through angels then through leaders, such as Moses and Joshua, then through the prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah. Different messages for different times Israel needed to hear. But now He has finally spoken by Jesus who is better than angels, leaders and prophets since He is the very Word of God. Jesus is God's final word to mankind. Indeed there is a solemn word in Revelation about adding or taking away from this Word. Jesus is God's final and complete revelation and the last word to humanity.

Now come with me to Acts 2:1-12

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all ^[a]with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance

⁵ And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. ⁷ Then they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each in our own ^[c]language in which we were born? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and ^[d]Arabs—we **hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.”** ¹² So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “Whatever could this mean?”

¹³ Others mocking said, “They are full of new wine.”

What were these folks speaking about heard by the crowd in their own language “**the wonderful works of God**”. It was all about God, no one was foretelling the future, they were fulfilling the prophecy of Joel which Peter refers to in the following verses in response to those mocking that they were drunk.

Vs 14-18 “¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. ¹⁵ For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only ^[e]the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:¹⁷ ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; **Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.¹⁸ And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; **And they shall prophesy.**”**

There is the short and definitive answer as to what is New Testament prophecy. It is to speak “**the wonderful works of God**” Its God centred not man centred. Many a so called prophecy has been spoken over people which has not come about, to the disappointment of the recipient, not to mention their confusion, which is the very work of Satan who would have us doubt God’s word. I am aware of a number of examples of this.

Let’s move on to another passage later on in Acts 15; 22-29

Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, ^[g] and Silas, leading men among the brethren²³ they wrote this letter by them:

The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

²⁴ Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, ^[h]saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment— ²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one ^[i]accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary

things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual^[1] immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

There were people who were upsetting and disturbing God's people with their messages. They were adding a list of Jewish rules to gospel. A decision was made by the apostles and elders to send two men with discernment to clear up the confusion. Two prophets are chosen to go with God's word, Judas and Silas. We know they were prophets from verse 30-32 of Acts 15 "**So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. ³² Now Judas and Silas, themselves **being prophets** also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words"**

People had been listening to false words about needing more than Jesus alone e.g. Sabbath, circumcision, etc. But now they were hearing the word of God which brought them joy and encouragement. There is another clue about the purpose of prophecy. They were encouraged, they rejoiced, they were comforted. No sign of foretelling the future or promising them they were going to do great things for God. Note also how Judas and Silas exhorted and strengthened them with "**many words**". There is another clue, the prophecy exhorted and strengthened them. There was no quick word for some person or other, no predictions, no personal promises or looking into the future, but there was a lengthy message. I think I know what that message contained "**the wonderful works of God**". His cross, His life, His resurrection, Pentecost, His ascension His glory. Be careful not to restrict the preacher just to short messages!! I once spoke at a wedding at St Alphege church in Solihull and was given 4 minutes, after which I was warned the lectern would explode. I finished in three and a half

It's important to know that in those days people met in houses. No mega churches, no Zoom, just a few folks meeting together in homes, sharing the word of God speaking of the His wonderful works, encouraging, exhorting etc.

Now the passage that is used at so many weddings, though the love mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13 is agape love that is the love of God. Please look at verse 2

"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing"

Suppose says Paul you had such a gift of prophecy that you could understand every word of scripture and knew all the mysteries there and had unlimited knowledge, you

could literally say to a mountain “move over there”. See how prophecy is described as the understanding of mysteries and knowledge. To prophecy is to share the mysteries of the gospel and the knowledge of God’s word. It’s the application of the word of God to a situation in the body of Christ. It’s not fortune telling. It’s to strengthen and encourage with God’s word.

Come with me to 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. ²For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. ³But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. ⁴He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; ^[a]for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Did you note the purpose and effect of prophecy?

1. EDIFICATION TO BUILD PEOPLE UP
2. EXHORTATION TO SPUR PEOPLE ON
3. CONSOLATION TO BRING COMFORT TO THE HURTING

Come with me to 1 Corinthians 14:24-25

²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. ²⁵And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

Think again of a small group of people in a house. They study together they talk together, each apparently may prophecy (“**But if all prophesy**”) Each with some insight, with a scripture, or a thought from scripture which they share with the group, and in doing so they edify, exhort or bring comfort. Maybe someone this week has made contact with Mabel and comforted her in this way. Imagine an unbeliever comes in and sees what’s happening to this close loving group and wants to be a part. He/she knows this is something he/she has not seen before and is convinced and convicted and worships God.

Vs 29-33 ⁹ **Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. ³⁰But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be**

encouraged. ³² And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. ³³ For God is not the author of ¹¹confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

There must be order in the church, and words spoken must be discerned and judged in accordance with the word of God. If one of our number said in a meeting, for example, (highly unlikely I grant you) that Jesus does not forgive sins, we would judge that to be an error and take action. There was to be this kind of judgment in that group setting. Paul goes on to tell us that the person who gives the prophecy is in control of himself. He does not get taken over but **“the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets”** Another mark of real prophecy is patience. If someone is to speak by revelation, wait so all may learn and be encouraged

I was brought up in the open brethren (not those strange exclusives I hasten to add) Each Sunday morning (Eddie and Sheila and David and Wendy will remember this) we gathered around a table on which was bread and wine. There was no chairman or apparent leader, though there were elders present. Any of us (sadly only the men in those days, that's another study for the future) could share. This is where I cut my teeth, and began as a teenager to share regularly in that meeting. I'm glad, in retrospect, that I was given that opportunity.

Our Sunday morning meeting does not lend itself to that kind of sharing but rather a time when we can sing and pray together and listen to teaching which by its nature, is prophecy. The word of God is shared and we are built up, spurred on, and comforted.

New Testament prophecy is about the mighty works of God, it does not embarrass or put pressure on a person. It is for the benefit of all. May we exercise the gift more and more and take opportunities in house groups and other forums to declare together the wonderful works of our glorious God.