

*“What Is Biblical Prophecy  
And How is it to be Expressed and Received in the Local Church?”*

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[I would encourage you to pick up the Sunday Morning Study Manuscript {February 18, 2007} that will compliment this article. This is not an exhaustive study. It is, however, an attempt to do biblical theology and not simply systematic theology. I trust you will enjoy the hunt. ]

Biblical prophecy is a communication from God about God. It targets who God is, what He has done, and who and what His people are and should be. Biblical prophecy is revelatory in its communication and encouraging in its content. By showing who God is and what He has done, His people are encouraged to continue in obedience, and to repent from non-conformity to His expressed will.

Biblical prophecy is not about the vessel through which the information comes, but about the God who is. Biblical prophecy exists to edify and build up the local church. If it divides the local church, then it is not being exercised and received properly.

Biblical prophecy is not about me having a gift, but of God making Himself known. God is among His people. God is present, showing Himself mighty so that they might be encouraged. God is communicating who He is to those who need Him most.

The intent of this study is to look at the word prophet/prophecy and to make observations and conclusions based on the biblical evidence. I have only considered the New Testament canon. I have also excluded some references from the group as necessary to keep it focused on the larger expression. There are several areas we will consider concerning the idea of biblical prophecy.

1. Prophecy involves the foretelling of events (Matt. 1:22; 13:14; 15:7 [throughout Matthew’s Gospel the word “fulfilled” is used to describe this aspect of the prophetic word in the Old Testament and its New Testament fulfillment]).

When Jesus was being mocked by His tormentors, while blindfolded, they taunted Him to tell them who His tormentors where (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64; Matt. 26:68, “Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?”). Little did they know that He knew them before they were formed (Psalm 139). In the New Testament there are at least eleven individuals identified as prophets or prophesying.

a) Who was considered a prophet?

- i. Isaiah (Luke 3:4).
- ii. Jonah (Matt. 12:39; 16:4).
- iii. Daniel (Matt. 24:15).

- iv. Elijah (Luke 4:27).
- v. Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets (Luke 13:28).
- vi. Jesus (John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40).
- vii. Joel (Acts 2:16).
- viii. David (Acts 2:25, 30).
- ix. Early church leaders (Acts 13:1-4)
- x. Samuel (Acts 13:20).
- xi. Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32).
- xii. Agabus (Acts 21:10).

What they foretold fell into two broad categories. Things other than this were communicated (Acts 21:10), but for the most part prophetic utterances fell into two broad categories.

b) What did they foretell?

i. The coming of Jesus Christ

First Peter 1:10 speaks of the prophetic word having God's redemptive activity as being the content of biblical prophecy (see also Luke 10:24; 18:31; 24:25, 27, 44; John 1:45). Jude also speaks of Enoch prophesying of our Lord's coming (Jude 14). Acts 8 celebrates the centrality of Christ in Isaiah 53 in the dialogue between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

First Corinthians 2:6-16 refers directly to the immediate audience of the New Testament writers, there is perhaps a secondary application to us. However, we cannot overlook the idea as it relates to both the Old and New Testament writers. Such thinking as that expressed in 1 Corinthians 2 is consistent with what we read in the Old Testament and the New Testament's commentary on the Old Testament writer. This would also be consistent with John 15:15.

Our last thoughts in the book of Acts concerning the apostle Paul are centered on the preaching of Christ from "the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening" (Acts 28:23).

The prophets/prophetic word preached Christ (Acts 3:18). This idea includes the program of God for the people of God in and through the Messiah.

ii. The restitution of all things (Acts 3:21-25).

- 2. The gift of prophecy also includes exhortation (i.e. forth-telling [Luke 3:4; Heb. 1:1]).

Foretelling is an aspect of biblical prophecy, but it is not the only expression of it. There is also forth-telling. The forth-telling is immediate and direct. Its content is not eschatological, but present. The Mosaic Law is identified as having prophetic elements (Matt. 11:13).

This would suggest that biblical prophecy is not only foretelling but also forth-telling. Foretelling communicates information about the future and forth-telling communicates instruction for the present.

3. Prophecy is a gift within the New Testament Church (Acts 11:27; 13:1; Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10).

Ephesians 4:11 also leads us to believe that the offices/gifting are still provisionally necessary to the existence of local churches. In Ephesians 2:20 the idea of apostles and prophets being foundational to the forming of the church is strong. Perhaps this communicates not only in the churches inauguration, but in its ongoing continuation throughout the age of “the church.”

4. The prophetic expression, in contrast to love, is provisional in its necessity (1 Cor. 13:8).

This does not mean it will cease, only that it is not always necessary. The context will determine whether or not it needs to be present in a fellowship and how it will express itself. Perhaps where the written Word is available and the gospel has made a stance in the darkness, then the gift of prophecy is not necessary as it relates to foretelling.

5. Prophecy is not to be despised (1 Thess. 5:20).

In this passage, the prophetic word and the work of the Holy Spirit are inseparably linked. You cannot have one without the other. The written word of God is this prophetic utterance and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

6. A prophetic word was a part of Timothy’s initial call and ministry appointment (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14).

By narrowing the idea of biblical prophecy only to foretelling, we make it unbiblical. The gift and the office are ministry focused. It is much larger than foretelling and might not include the idea in its expression. The historical and theological context will determine how the gift and office are expressed.

7. A prophetic word is to be consistent with the larger body of biblical truth (2 Pet. 1:20).

No prophecy is biblical that contradicts the written word of God.

8. Prophecy comes through holy men who are moved by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:70; 2 Pet. 1:21).

In Luke 1:64, the prophetic expression and the work of the Holy Spirit are coupled together when the father of John the Baptist, Zacharias, prophesied. This is no less true in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, 20.

This same idea is present with Paul and the church of Ephesus in Acts 19:6, “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.” The issue is not that Acts 19:6 is normative for today, only that the Holy Spirit and prophecy are connected.

Although holy men were used, God is not bound by this idea. This is seen in Caiaphas (John 11:51) and in Balaam (Num. 23).

9. The book of Revelation is a prophetic word (Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19).

The book of Revelation is not just foretelling, but has an immediate and direct significance to the present reader. By making it only eschatological we can minimize its impact for the present audience.

10. The prophetic word is to be obeyed (Rev. 22:7) and is not to be altered (Rev. 18, 19).

The prophetic word, when verified, is authoritative and binding. In the book of Revelation, the prophetic word that is authoritative becomes inspired when it was written down. Both are binding, both come from God, but only the written word is categorized as inspired (2 Tim. 3:16).

11. The expression of prophecy is no guarantee that the individual prophesying is a believer (Matt. 7:22).

Balaam (Num. 23) is a vivid case in point. This is frightening in so far that there are many charlatans who make merchandise of God’s gifting and pay for it with their eternal soul.

12. In the end time, prophecy will be a common expression of God’s work (Acts 2:17, 18).

This does not mean it is not present now, only that it will be present then.

13. The gift of prophecy appears to be without gender qualifiers (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:4, 5).

The gift of prophecy makes one a prophet and there is a position of leadership within the church that is identified as that of prophet. This does not mean that all prophets hold positions of leadership within the local church. Leadership in the local church does appear to be gender qualified (1 Cor. 14:34-36), but the office of prophet does not.

14. There appears to be set guidelines as to how prophecy is to be expressed (1 Cor. 11:4, 5).

1. Men should have their heads uncovered (1 Cor. 11:4).
2. Women should have their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:5).
3. There is orderliness to the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:29, 31).

4. The gift is subject to the prophet (1 Cor. 14:32).

This would suggest prophets do not go into unmanageable and uncontrollable states. Just as a gathering of God's people has order in the communication of His Word, so also should there be a similar order when biblical prophecy is present.

15. The gift of prophecy is a part of the whole. It is not the whole (1 Cor. 13:9).

No local church exists around a singular gift. No one gift makes a mature church.

16. The gift of prophecy is a valued gift (1 Cor. 14:1, 5, 39).

It is hard to see whether or not Paul was placing the offices in a priority order or simply listing them in 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29. In Ephesians 2:20 the idea of apostles and prophets being foundational to the forming of the church is strong. The priority of biblical prophecy is necessitated by the historical and theological context of the audience.

17. The gift of prophecy is for the benefit of the body (1 Cor. 14:3-5, 22).

The gifts of the Holy Spirit drive us to body unity. If the gift divides the body, then the exercising of it is wrong.

18. Those who are regarded as prophets often met fierce persecution at the hands of those to whom they brought the Word of God (Luke 11:47, 49, 50; 13:34; Acts 7:52; James 5:10).

Jesus said those who are prophets have no honor in their own country (John 4:44). Prophets often brought the Word of God to a rebellious people and thus the message met resistance. This does not exclude its profitability to the body, but sometimes its value is seen after the fact.

In light of these eighteen areas, what observations can we make, what questions might arise, and what conclusions can we come to?

Observations:

The prophet has always existed in the outworking of God's program. From the biblical evidence it would be hard pressed to conclude that the prophet does not exist during this era of God's kingdom program in and through the local church. If there are prophets, it is probably within the evidence to conclude that there is prophecy. Unfortunately, its abuse has made the biblical gift undervalued and underappreciated. Charlatans abound. They make prey of God's people. The false expression of the gift is never victimless.

Biblical prophecy celebrates the person of Christ, His redemptive activity, and the application of this to His people, both in position and in practice. This can

be expressed in “reproving, rebuking, and exhorting, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Questions:

Q1 - Are the office and/or gift of prophecy in the Old Testament different than that of its New Testament counterpart?

A1 - In considering this question I personally believe all expressions of the believing life in both Testaments are a fruit of the Holy Spirit and not a work of the flesh. Since the gifts listed in the New Testament are not exhaustive, I must conclude there are more expressions of His working than are noted. If the gifting/fruit in the New Testament is only because of filling, then from where did the gifting/fruit in the Old Testament come?

The Greek words apostello (Numerous) and apostlos (1x) and apostola (7x) are used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint [George Morrish, A Concordance of the Septuagint]). The word apostello occurs throughout for the Hebrew word shalach, “to send.” All three occur, but the one occurring most is apostello. This is not to imply that how it is used in the Gospel and Letters is the same, but there is strong evidence to believe it was possible. This would seem to suggest that there were apostles in the Old Testament.

Can the Old Testament office/gift of prophet/prophecy be used as evidence to explain what this office/gifting looked like in the New Testament? If I was reading my New Testament in (@AD300) or heard the word used in the first 100 years of the church, would I have any reason to concluded that the office/gift was different now than what I had read in the Old Testament?

I do not think the people of Ephesus or Corinth would have thought the idea of prophet/prophecy was different than what they were taught from the Old Testament text. This is something to think about.

I would probably conclude that the way the office/gift was expressed in the development of Scripture is very different than how it looks today after the canon has been closed. But I have expressed this idea already. Would I believe we, in our culture, at this time, expect to have a word of revelation from God or something said to become Scripture? No.

Q2 – Did all of the gifts noted in the New Testament exist in the Old Testament?

A2 – Not necessarily, only because the gifting is appropriate to the stage of God’s Kingdom program. Some gifts might exist in both Testaments but be expressed differently in either a restricted way or a fuller way. This, however, is an assumption. We really do not know what gifts were expressed in the Old and New Testament that are not recorded. Perhaps some gifting was present that was not stated.

Q3 – What about sign-gifts in the Old Testament? Where the “non-sign gifts” existing in the Old Testament?

A3 – I think we are restricted from identifying some gifting as sign gifts and others as non-sign gifts. What gift is not a sign of the Holy Spirit and of Christ and what gifts are? This idea limits what is or is not directly addressed in the New Testament.

Q4 – Is the office/gift of prophet/prophecy unique to the outworking of God for Israel or was it also open to the early church in the outworking of God’s program?

A4 – I am not quite sure why it would be? Regardless as to permanent indwelling, those who believe in either Testament lived changed lives. Was the expression of this changed life a work of the flesh or a fruit of the Spirit? The primary area of distinction in the ministry of the Holy Spirit between the Testaments is that of His baptizing ministry into the body of Christ. I believe this is uniquely New Testament.

Q5 – Is there a distinction between apostles and prophets?

A5 - The New Testament seems to make a distinction in Ephesians 2:20. However, at this time, I would be hard pressed to make the distinction so hard that there is no overlap in the gifting.

Conclusions:

As a provisional gift, its expression is primarily in those areas where the church is not present and the written Word of God is not available. Where the church and the Word are present, the expression of the gift is very different. Prophets are still present, but how the gift is expressed and what is communicated is significantly different.