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 Title: What Is Biblical Prophecy and How is it to be Expressed and Received in the Local Church?
 Text: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 (Misc.)
 Theme: Biblical prophecy is a grace gift from God and is to be celebrated as a means through which the Holy Spirit makes known the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Introduction:

Why am I preaching this?

Because we have misunderstood what constitutes the gift of prophecy and the role of the prophet in the local church, we fail to celebrate all that He is for us in our midst.

Does it have “death” value?

It is the gift of prophecy/teaching/wisdom/understanding that can bring words of comfort and encouragement to the dying and the living.

What is a present danger as it relates to the role of prophecy in the local church?

There are two extremes. The first are the charlatans who make merchandise of God’s gifting. They are no different than Simon of Samaria in Acts 8. The other extreme is the attempt to figure all this out so neatly that nothing can happen outside of our preconceived ideas and assumptions. All that the Bible says is true, but not all that is true is in the Bible.

ILLUSTRATION:

Most science discovery, historical events, and mathematical equations are not in the Scripture, but these things are no less true than if they were. Simply because the Bible does not address a specific issue, does not mean we cannot explore the idea.

The Bible is a very thin record, (albeit an inspired, inerrant, and infallible record), of what God wants us to know in this matter. Many times what it has to say is in principle. Sometimes those principles are large, sweeping, and general. The idea of prophecy in the church today is one of those large, sweeping, and general principles, the details of which we do not know.

What are the common seductions and distractions?

Perhaps we might wish to live by, “If in doubt, don’t.” Such precaution might be keeping us safe, but it is hardly letting the church live. As an individual and as a fellowship I do not wish to play it safe. I would rather experience the complete exhilaration of trusting God than to box myself in by what God has not said, only assumed. Friend, it has been said, “When it comes time to die, make sure all you have to do is die.” Well, when our final chapter as a fellowship has been written, may it be said of us, “they risked everything for the call of Christ to the nations.”

So let us begin by defining what biblical prophecy is.

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. Matthew Henry notes how prophesying is simply defined as “explaining Scripture.”

“Prophesying, that is, explaining Scripture.” (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:1)

Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary defines “Prophecy or prediction was one of the functions of the prophet. It has been defined as a ‘miracle of knowledge, a declaration or description or representation of something future, beyond the power of human sagacity to foresee, discern, or conjecture.’”

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 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.

From 1 Corinthians 14, I would like us to consider four ideas as they relate to biblical prophecy. However, before we begin there are certain qualifiers.

- First, biblical prophecy is not defined in our passage or in 1 Corinthians.
- Second, Paul’s treatment of biblical prophecy is in response to a problem. This is his specific answer to a specific problem.
- Third, the abuse of a gift does not negate its availability or its use.
- Fourth, I will seek to stay in 1 Corinthians. I have not found what Paul wrote here in conflict with what might appear elsewhere.
- Finally, let us struggle past our preconceived ideas as to what constitutes biblical prophecy and let us simply wrestle with the text knowing that many of our questions will be left unanswered.

In our desire to see this grace gift used for the glory of God in and through His church let us note four simple ideas. First, biblical prophecy is desirable.

I. Biblical prophecy is desirable (1 Cor. 14:1, 5, 12, 39).

Our chapter begins with two imperatives, “pursue” and “desire earnestly.” Paul’s first word choice is that of pursuit, of hunting after. It is a graphic word. We are to pursue love, to track it down, to chase after it.

His second word choice means to burn hot with zeal, to boil over. His exhortation is for us as a fellowship to actively seek the use of the spiritual gifts. Why? Paul wants us to pursue spiritual gifts because they are expressions of the Holy Spirit and manifestations of Jesus Christ. It is as we serve one another that God is manifested through us and to us.

In this verse the contrast is between tongues and prophecy, not necessarily between biblical prophecy and all other expressions of spiritual gifts. In light of the contrast between prophecy and tongues he adds “especially” or “to a greater degree” eagerly desire the spiritual gift of prophecy. Regardless as to the contrast, biblical prophecy is a gift to be pursued. This same structure is used in verses 1 and 5 (“especially, to a greater degree”).

The language of verse 12 also shows the mandate to use gifting for the building up of the body of Christ. His statement “try to excel” is a phrase that puts two ideas together. The first is “seek to find.” It carries the thought of discovery. The second is “to overflow the boundaries, to exceed the borders.” When it comes to the expression of spiritual gifts, the thought is to excel in those gifts that build up the local body of Christ.

Verse 39 ends where he began in verse 1 with “eagerly desire to prophesy.”

Although all grace gifting is sourced in the sovereign choice of the Holy Spirit, this does not prohibit us from wanting this grace gift to be expressed where appropriate in our fellowship.

This brings us to our second point in our study.

II. Biblical prophecy is profitable (1 Cor. 14:2-3, 12, 26, 31).

Paul uses a compound word for building up or to edify that speaks of building a house or family. He uses this particular word four times in 1 Corinthians 14.

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to **edification**, and exhortation, and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3).

“I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive **edifying**” (1 Cor. 14:5).

“Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the **edifying** of the church” (1 Cor. 14:12).

“How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto **edifying**” (1 Cor. 14:26).

Paul’s desire is that we use our spiritual gifting for the building up of this family, this house. What we do and say should be contributing to the overall growth of another individual.

In verse 3, he also uses the words exhortation and comfort [consolation]. The word exhortation comes from a familiar word, “To call alongside” (paraklesis [this same word will occur in verse 31]). The word comfort means “to encourage, to console.” Notice the flavor of what Paul is saying should be the impact of what we are doing toward one another.

Verse 31 also uses the word “learn.” Part of the disciple making process is the giving and receiving of spiritual gifting. We are not disciples, if we are not serving. Again, this is not optional; it is a natural expression of the Christian community.

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

APPLICATION:

What would happen in a world where complements and encouragements are the order of the day? What would happen if what we said was always edifying? Think of the Proverbs. Out of the mouth of the wise flows wisdom, their tongue is like choice silver, and their speech is a tree of life. Always the language is very picturesque, it is not simple imagery that has no tangible expression or felt impact. How have you built someone up in the last hour, day, week, month, or year? Who within this fellowship can you extend your gifting toward?

There is a real value to having the biblical gift of prophecy expressed in the local church.

In light of our first point and then the second, Paul provides some guidelines for its expression in and how it is to be received by the local church.

- A. The gift of prophecy appears to be without gender qualifiers (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:4, 5; see also 14:34-36).

'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR **DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY**, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS" (Acts 2:17).

⁸ “On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. ⁹ Now this man had four virgin daughters who were **prophetesses**” (Acts 21:8, 9).

⁴ “Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. ⁵ But **every woman** who has her head uncovered while praying or **prophesying** disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved” (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 gift of prophecy does not.

B. There appears to be guiding principles 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 and the gift is subject to the prophet (1 Cor. 14:29-33, 40).

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.

Verse 33 contrasts confusion or disorder with peace. He connects the two with a strong contrasting conjunction. Verse 40 uses the words “fitting” and “orderly way.” The word “orderly way” means “fixed or arranged.” It speaks of dignity and decorum. When the saints gather and gifts are exercised, correctness should be exhibited. There is appropriateness and suitability to a properly functioning body.

APPLICATION:

If we assume that biblical prophecy exists and that it is being exercised and received in the local church, then in any local church you have many teachers and prophets regardless of gender, but there must be order in how those gifts are expressed and received. For us, we have a morning service where a distinct order is followed for the expression of gifting. Our morning service is followed by a context where multiple gifting is taking place and expressed as it relates to teaching and prophesying regardless of gender.

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. 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.

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.

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.

This brings us to our third point in our study.

III. Biblical prophecy is communal (1 Cor. 14:4, 12, 22, 26).

Notice the following verses in 1 Corinthians 14 that speak of gifting as it is exercised in the local church:

“He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the **church**” (1 Cor. 14:4).

“I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the **church** may receive edifying” (1 Cor. 14:5).

“Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the **church**” (1 Cor. 14:12).

“Yet in the **church** I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (1 Cor 14:19).

“If therefore the **whole church** [this can only be true of local churches not the church universal] be come together into **one place**, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” (1 Cor. 14:23).

“But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the **church**; and let him speak to himself, and to God” (1 Cor. 14:28).

“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all **churches** of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33).

“Let your women keep silence in the **churches**: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law” (1 Cor. 14:34).

“And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the **church**” (1 Cor. 14:35).

These passages are not referring to the church universal, but to the local church. The gifting of God is individually received, but it is corporally expressed. My gifting might benefit the larger church universal, but its targeted audience is the local church in which I am a part of. This qualifier protects the larger church universal from charlatans and hirelings who come in to destroy and exploit.

How can you tell the biblical gift of prophecy from that exercised by a charlatan? There is a simple question that can help; whose name is bigger? Is the name of Jesus in the forefront or that of the prophet? This is a real problem in today's church. I struggle with putting our personal names on ministries. There is a fine line between merchandise and ministry.

This brings us to our fourth point in our study.

IV. Biblical prophecy is instrumental (1 Cor. 14:22-25).

The grace gift of prophecy is a tool or instrument for Christ to be preached for the edification of the believing and for the evangelization of the unbelieving.

The word used for "sign" in verse 22 is the word used throughout the Gospels for miracles and the book of Acts for "signs and wonders." As noted in our last study. When the body uses their gifting, this is a sign and wonder to the believing and the unbelieving. When grace/spiritual gifts are exercised and received in love for the building up of the body, it is a powerful sign and wonder to the community at large. This is an unavoidable conclusion. There is this desire to see God work, and we are expecting to see the irrefutable and the grandiose, but God is working in a large way when we set aside our pettiness and seek the larger good of the body of Christ. When a body is united in diversity by an unconditional love, God is glorified and His name is being proclaimed among the nations. This is a powerful display of His kingdom on earth.

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.

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.

Notice the outcome of preaching Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:2) on the unbelieving/unlearned (Greek - idiot) as seen in 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25.

- Convicted by all/called to account by all (v. 24).

Probably two parallel statements. When the unbelieving or unlearned come into our fellowship and see the body serving one another and celebrating Christ in the diversity of the membership, they are convicted by the “signs and wonders.”

- The secrets of his heart are disclosed (v. 25a).

Through the serving of one another, their unbelief comes to light and they will fall on their face and worship God and declare that God is certainly in this place.

- He will fall on his face and worship God (v. 25b).
- He will declare that God is certainly among you (v. 25c).

This is an open declaration. They are so overwhelmed by their conversion that they openly testify of God being in this place. Church is for the believer. But by preaching the text of Scripture and by serving one another through the gifting we have received, the Holy Spirit uses these instruments to draw the unbelieving to a genuine salvation encounter. Is this not wonderful?

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here? What is the NEXT STEP?)

In light of these areas, what observations can we make 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 hardpressed 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).

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.

Application:

1. The gift of prophecy and of teaching could be synonyms. Although each is different from the other, they do have a large area of overlap.
2. When grace gifts are exercised, the Holy Spirit is working and Christ is manifested. Embrace this idea with your mind, your will, and your emotions.
3. Listen to those who bring you the Word of God. Find out what God is saying against what He has said. Do not quench the voice of the Holy Spirit by rejecting His written, preached, taught Word.
4. Although you might not have the grace gift of biblical prophecy, to whom can you bring the Word of God? How can you minister to someone today? What can you do to encourage the body of Christ?