

Holy Spirit, Is That You?

Many people claim to speak for God these days, but how many of them really do speak for God? A lot of people claim to have a prophetic gift and give out words introduced by “the Lord told me.” The question is, how many of these words are truly from the Lord? Should it bother us that so many words do not come to pass which were prefaced by “the Lord told me”? And what do you suppose God in heaven thinks of all this?

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Why is this important? When a word does not come to pass that was introduced by “the Lord told me,” obviously something has gone wrong. It dishonors the name of the Lord. It brings discredit upon the gift of prophecy generally, giving cessationists ammunition for their unbiblical hypothesis. Moreover, if the prophecy is not fulfilled after being told “the Lord told me,” it is bearing false witness.

Should the people who claim they have a word from the Lord apologize if it does not turn out as they promised? I hate to say it, but few do. Many do not have the humility to admit it when they got it wrong. When people are not gracious enough to admit when they got it wrong, it smacks of a lack of integrity. The matter could be largely resolved if such people would stop saying “the Lord told me” when making a pronouncement.

Why is it that people keep saying “the Lord told me” when they keep getting it wrong?

Nathan prophesied to David that he could build the temple, but he had to come back the next day to admit he jumped the gun

and that his word was not from God. He then told a disappointed David—who took it humbly—that Solomon, not David, would build the temple (2 Sam. 7). Samuel was convinced that Eliab would be the next king, but he climbed down before Jesse and all his sons and anointed David with oil (1 Sam. 16:6-12). We need more Nathans and Samuels today.

But does not God sometimes truly speak to us? Certainly. Then should we not attribute such a word to Him? Is there a right time for saying “the Lord told me” when one has a word they feel is truly from God? Is it not an encouragement when a prophetic person who has a solid reputation says, “The Lord told me”?

Saying that “the Lord told me” is a habit that prophetic people find hard to break. Some feel it is almost impossible to break that habit. I pleaded with one of them to stop it. He tried. He couldn’t. But he kept getting it wrong too.

I will come clean. Although I don’t claim to have a prophetic gift, I have still made the same mistake thousands of times, whether it be to a person—“The Lord gave me a word for you”—or when preaching, “The Lord gave me this sermon” or “The Lord gave me this insight.” When I do this, I am claiming that God is behind all I say and that the people had better take it—or else. It must make the angels blush.

6 Levels of Prophecy

Prophecy—if it is a true prophecy—is a word directly from God unfiltered by human embellishment, whether it refers to the past, present or future. That said, there are levels of prophecy. Not all prophecy is of the same caliber or type.

Picture a pyramid, starting at the bottom:

General exhortation or encouragement to an individual or congregation. This is the “lowest” level of prophecy. The possibility of prophesying like this is offered to all

Christians. When Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to value the gift of prophecy more than speaking in tongues, he was not challenging them to be an Isaiah or Elijah (1 Cor. 14:3). God may indeed give a word of encouragement that should be shared with one or many.

Specific warnings. This is a higher level of prophecy. Agabus, referred to as a prophet by Luke, foretold that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world, which came to pass (Acts 11:27-28). The same Agabus warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Agabus took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this manner the Jews at Jerusalem shall bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:11). Two things should be noted: First, Agabus said, "The Holy Spirit says," which is tantamount to saying, "The Lord told me." Second, when you examine what happened to Paul later in the book of Acts, you will find that this is not what happened. The general warning that Paul would be in trouble with the Jews came to pass, yes, but Paul actually thwarted the Jews' plans—which, in any case, were certainly not handing him over to Gentiles. Moreover, Paul went to Rome because he himself demanded to be tried by Caesar (Acts 25:12). This meant that Agabus got one out of two prophecies right, but the one where he got the details totally wrong was when he said, "The Holy Spirit says." This is not exactly a good precedent for us to say, "The Lord told me."

When called before the authorities for the sake of Christ. Jesus said, "You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought of how or what you will speak. For it will be given you at that time what you will speak. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks through you" (Matt. 10:18-20). This is yet a higher level of prophecy than the previous two levels. We have a promise of genuine prophetic utterances should we be

called to stand before the authorities for what we believe.

Preaching in the Spirit. This is the way I would describe Peter's word that, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). This is surely an encouragement to those of us who are responsible for preaching the Word of God. We are actually encouraged to preach as if God were speaking through us. When I read these words, I say, "If only!" I have been preaching for over 60 years. I think, just maybe, I have fulfilled 1 Peter 4:11 twice.

In any case, we as ministers are encouraged to believe that we should speak as though it were the Holy Spirit speaking through us. It would seem, therefore, that expository preaching should do that—that is, if our unfolding of Scripture is absolutely what God would dictate and not our private views. In a perfect world, all preaching would be uttering the very oracles of God, but I fear we ministers all sadly come short of this.

The noncanonical biblical prophets. This level of prophecy would include prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Nathan and Gad. "Noncanonical" means these prophets do not have a book with their name on it, like Isaiah, Daniel or Samuel. This is a very high level of prophetic utterances indeed. But even they were not perfect. Possibly the greatest anointing of the Spirit ever was on Elijah when he confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel: "How long will you stay between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him, but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Elijah and the true God were openly vindicated before all those present when the fire of God fell before their very eyes (1 Kings 18:38). And yet in all this, there was a frail, self-centered Elijah who made a claim that was utterly false: "I alone remain a prophet of the Lord" (1 Kings 18:22). Pigeon religion crept in even under such an extraordinary anointing. What Elijah said was patently false. Only days before, Elijah ran into Obadiah, who had hidden 100 prophets in a cave to protect them from the wicked

King Ahab (1 Kings 18:4-7). Elijah was not the only prophet left. He took himself too seriously.

The relevant question is: Could there be noncanonical prophets like Elijah or Elisha today? I suspect there have been a few—very few—who have uttered words that are virtually as astonishing as some of those spoken by noncanonical prophets of the Old Testament. Though some of these men (some alive, some deceased) have uttered phenomenal words and have seen miracles as well, they are frail men of dust. This is partly why James said that Elijah was “a man subject to natural passions as we are” (James 5:17).

But would a prophet speaking at this level not have the right to say, “The Lord told me” or “Thus saith the Lord”? No. First, who is going to claim he or she has this “fifth level” of prophetic anointing? That would be pompous. The problem is, some will claim they have the authority of an Elijah or Elisha! They will make themselves exceptions to the principles I am suggesting in this chapter and claim the right to say, “Thus says the Lord.” If one needs this prop to bolster his authority, he is not fit to prophesy. Elijah did not use the Mount Carmel platform to say, “The Lord told me to say this.” If he had, he would have brought the Lord down to his fleshly level when he said, “I alone am left.”

Prophets need to be humble. Some of them love the limelight. They want to be seen. They love attention. The dove—the true symbol of the Holy Spirit—does not seek or want attention.

Holy Scripture. This is the peak of the pyramid. This is supreme. The Bible is the highest level of prophecy. Moreover, this level is God’s final revelation. There will never be a level of prophecy or an anointing of any prophet that will surpass or even equal the Bible. Like it or not, you and I must believe that. Otherwise, the floodgates will be opened to every Tom, Dick or Harry who falsely claims to be a mouthpiece of God.

You can expect false prophets. How do we know the false from the true? The Bible. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones frequently said, "The Bible was not given to replace the miraculous; it was given to correct abuses."

The Bible is God's ultimate and only infallible revelation. Any true prophet will *gladly* submit himself or herself to Holy Scripture. If they will not, reject them!

The entire Bible may justly be called prophecy. "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of the Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. For no prophecy at any time was produced by the will of man, but holy men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). This refers to every word of the Old Testament. Paul said virtually the same thing: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). "All Scripture" means the Old Testament. What about the New Testament? The same thing is true. Peter affirmed Paul's writing as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Paul equally claimed the same authority (1 Cor. 7:10, 14:37).

You and I will never outgrow the need for Scripture. The fastest way to become "yesterday's man or woman" is to fancy that we don't need to submit to Scripture. Remember, King Saul felt compelled to go against Scripture (1 Sam. 13:12). In that moment, he became yesterday's man. The same will happen to you and me if we repeat Saul's folly.

The Bible is God's final, perfect and infallible revelation of Truth. It will never be replaced or superseded before Jesus' Second Coming.

Limits of Prophecy

Every anointing has its limit. One of the most humbling things about the anointing is coming to terms with your limitations.

Romans 12:3-6 is an extremely relevant passage. When Paul says "if" a person's gift is prophecy, that is an important "if." Paul teaches that one must (1) discover what his or her anointing is, then (2) if it is prophesying, remember these words—"according to the proportion of faith."

There are two ways of interpreting proportion: extent or analogy. If Paul means the extent of faith—which he certainly does—one must prophesy within that limit of faith. We all have faith in measure. That means there is a limit to our faith. Only Jesus had the Holy Spirit without limit. Only Jesus had a perfect faith. Some people with a true gift of prophecy go beyond the limit they are given—and get into trouble. Sometimes a person will get a true word from God but will then embellish it. If we stay within the limit of our faith, we will be safe.

But if Paul means analogy—which he also certainly does—one must prophesy according to sound theology. The Greek in Romans 12:6 is literally to be translated that we prophesy according to the "analogy of faith." This means comparing Scripture with Scripture. If we accept that Paul meant *both* "extent" of faith—that is, a limit—and "analogy" of faith—that is, sound teaching—then we have the balanced picture. In a word: prophets must stay within the limits of their faith but be sure they are sound in their teachings. If what they prophesy goes against New Testament teaching, their prophecies are to be rejected.

A true prophet will proclaim what is within the circle of orthodoxy. There are prophetic people at large who say weird things—"off the wall" teaching that is heretical and embarrassing. Fancy this: An angel tells a prophet that there is "no need to talk about Jesus—everybody has heard about Him. You should talk about angels." This is an extreme example, of course, but it does show how far away some prophetic people are from solid New Testament teaching. I am not saying that a prophet needs to be a learned theologian. But I am saying he

should be sound in what he believes about God, man, sin and salvation.

Paul said, “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part” (1 Cor. 13:9). Think about that for a moment. How humbling—we know in part. We don’t know everything! No prophet knows everything. No theologian knows everything. Paul did not know everything. Satan does not know everything. Only God knows everything. And He may choose to reveal some things to some people. But if He withholds information or revelation, there is nothing anybody can do about it.

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