

Should Personal Prophecy be Released Privately or Publicly?

In the contemporary British Pentecostal and charismatic scene, there has been a growing trend over the last decade or so for leaders to adopt the strategic “attractional” model for church worship services.

Often, to ensure that the meetings are ‘seeker-friendly,’ it can mean that classical Pentecostal spiritual phenomena, such as tongues and prophecy, are actively discouraged in the public setting, based on the assumption that the visitor will find these spiritual gifts too bizarre. Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian charismatics to “calm down” so that the guests at church won’t think that Christianity is utter madness is brought to the forefront (1 Cor. 14:23), although it would seem that the apostle’s desire is for intelligibility rather than any embarrassment over spiritual phenomena, such as might be the case today. For Paul, authentic and accurate prophecy deployed in mission was most definitely “seeker” aware (1 Corinthians 14:24).

Defending their charismatic pedigree, these leaders insist that the prophetic gift has certainly not been axed from the church’s DNA and is actively at work in small groups, prayer meetings and often during “altar time” on Sundays. However, what can be observed is a very distinct and fundamental change in the practical outworking of the prophetic in the contemporary church, and one that does not often allow for significant evaluation of the words being spoken. In the old model, certainly among the British Pentecostals, the prophetic word would be spoken out by a church leader or member for the whole church to hear, either spontaneously or through the church microphone if approved.

This “corporate moment,” where all were able to hear the word, often meant that the nature of the prophetic message was somewhat broad—it was, after all, intended for the larger congregation to hear. Thankfully, any dubious theology or over-stepping of the mark by the “prophet” (e.g. harsh rebuke, or fortune-telling style guidance) could be instantly corrected by a mature leader, helping to bring the “judging’ or ‘evaluating” element to bear upon the spoken word, in line with Paul’s Corinthian command (1 Cor. 14:29). It is clear that at Corinth this was the approach and the speaking prophets were limited to three messages, probably due to time constraints.

As we jump forward to the 21st century, with its “ministry teams” ready to pray and sometimes prophesy over people during the Sunday morning “appeal,” we see a very different model at work. Certainly, there could be more than three prophetic words shared, due to the nature of the event, but much more significantly, the prophetic gift is sometimes being used for *personal* instruction and direction, and in a very *private* context.

Similarly, in the house, prayer or small-group setting, the presence of a mature leader, able to discern, correct or helpfully evaluate prophecy, is not necessarily guaranteed; even to suppose that prophetic words would be delivered corporately into that smaller setting if it is not being “modeled” by the leaders of the larger church service. In short we have moved prophecy from mostly public to mostly private—from the dynamic declaration to the whispered word.

Now, this is not to suggest that personal prophecy has no New Testament foundation whatsoever, but it should perhaps be considered to be extraordinary rather than the standard practice. It certainly isn’t private.

Agabus is our primary example, but he is a designated, Ephesians 4:11, capital “P” Prophet with a track record of

predicting future events (Acts 11:28). Even when he does speak specifically over Paul's life (Acts 21:11), the surrounding context of the passage shows that it was not a private moment, but one in which other Christians were obviously present and listening.

Similarly, the prophets at Antioch who provoke the timing of the missionary launch of Barnabas and Paul are clearly operating in a setting that at least includes all of the church leaders (Acts 13:2), if not the broader Antioch Christian community. These leaders rejoice at the word and commit any action to prayer (Acts 13:1,3).

This would appear to be the standard pattern for a New Testament prophetic ministry: prophets, of varying kinds, may speak, but never 'in a corner," and firm decisions are made by leaders (aided by prophecy perhaps), but never by the prophets themselves. Notice: Agabus' incredible prediction of a coming famine leads to a decision made by others, not actually by him (Acts 11:27-30). Isn't that interesting? He was a guide but no means was he the governor.

So here is my word of caution for leaders who, with all good intention, seek to retain the spiritual gift of prophecy within a seeker or attractional context—let's be careful that in gagging the un-interpreted tongues-speakers to seemingly obey one part of Paul, we don't unleash an equally unbiblical charismatic practice. Arguably, prophecy without evaluation is no better than public tongues without interpretation, with the "distinguishing of spirits" the possible support gift to the prophetic in Paul's mind.

No senior pastor wants church people subject to untested, secret, personal guidance from a would-be Isaiah this coming Sunday morning or on Tuesday evening at lifegroup. While we as the shepherd lovingly seek the 'one' lost sheep in mission, let's not feed the 'ninety-nine' to the prophetic wolves, albeit well-meaning wolves who may not realize the danger of

their open mouths or the sharpness of their teeth.

I am certain that the Holy Spirit can help us to do all things well but it may be time for a re-think about how best and biblical to incorporate prophecy in attractional church models that keeps close to *all* the wisdom and direction that flows from 1 Corinthians' wonderful fourteenth chapter.

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