

Are Prophets Still Important?

Even if we've been burned by misguided prophetic words, we can't afford to dismiss prophecy or the office of a prophet. Here's why.

Mention the word *prophet* to some people and their palms get sweaty, a lump develops in their throat and they begin eyeing the door. For many, it's not because they don't believe in prophecy; it's because they're fed up with being burned by overzealous prophets and unbalanced prophecies, and they're ready to throw in the towel.

No matter how we feel about prophets, however, one thing is certain: They are God's idea—yes, even when they mess up, cause havoc or make life difficult for a church's senior leaders. God designed the church to need this crucial office.

He also knew the church's desire to completely wipe its hands of prophets and prophecy. For this reason, He commanded us in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies." Notice that God links the Holy Spirit's ability to move freely among believers—and not be suppressed or snuffed out—with the prophetic. The word *despise* comes from the Greek word *exoutheneo*, meaning "to make of no account, to regard as nothing, to despise utterly, to treat with contempt." Verse 21 goes on to say: "Test all things; hold fast what is good." This is a needful caution when dealing with the prophetic.

Indeed, God knew from the beginning that using inherently broken people to serve as His mouthpiece would result in more than a few broken transmissions—and yet this was His perfect plan. Today that plan continues as He brings reformation to the prophetic office and realm. The word *reformation*, defined as "to straighten out thoroughly," comes from the Greek word *diorthosis*. In a physical sense, it refers to making straight,

restoring to its natural and normal condition something that in some way protrudes or has become out of line, such as a broken or misshapen limb. To some, the prophetic has certainly become like a broken limb to the body.

By the same token, we must understand the weightiness of what it means to be a prophet. Can you imagine the responsibility to speak for God—to hear, see and interpret the heart and mind of God for your generation? Can you fathom having the courage to then speak this out loud in a culture in which one mistake can seemingly disqualify you for life, regardless of your track record?

I am an advocate of prophets. I'm not blind to the mistakes they've made in the past, and I'm aware of their challenges today. But the church should extend the same mercy and grace it gives to a pastor who preaches a lousy sermon to a prophet who "misses it." The church is not a material building but a spiritual house built of living stones—we who are to be built as the habitation of God by the Spirit. Today, even through all the scars and wounds caused by prophetic misfires, Christ is still building His church by the power of His Spirit through prophets and prophetic ministry.

Yet if the church is to mature into the fullness God desires, it must utilize and properly position prophets and prophecy. To eliminate prophets from the building process of the church is to take away the key of knowledge, which is one of the most vital tools in building strong New Testament churches. It isn't possible to lead a Spirit-empowered church or a ministry without direct leadership of the Holy Spirit in the daily flow of the church. Prophets are essential to the maturing of the church because they have been gifted with an ability to hear relevant wisdom and insight from God.

Proactive Prophecy

God intends for the New Testament church to be blessed with

the gift of prophecy. When the body of Christ properly positions prophets and prophecy, we are empowered to accomplish more while expending less energy.

If you study how prophecy is addressed throughout the New Testament, you'll find that every word relating to prophetic gifts and their operation in the church requires the believer to take initiative and responsibility in how this gift functions. The apostle Paul—who certainly had the most to say about prophecy's role in the church—admonishes believers to desire, covet, stir up, seek and excel in prophecy for the edification of the body of Christ.

Christianity is mostly proactive. If we want to see the power of God released in our generation, we must learn to take the initiative and to excel. To excel is to be pre-eminent. Scripture says the prophet Daniel was 10 times better than the magicians of Babylon (Dan. 1:20). There must be a level of excellence in prophetic ministry.

Many times Christians trust the sovereignty of God in a non-biblical manner. They believe that if the Lord wants to give them a prophetic word, He'll simply deliver a word as if it fell from the sky. Though God obviously is able to give anyone a prophetic word, this "accidental" prophecy perspective isn't the full pattern of Scripture. Pre-eminent prophets are those who have learned to co-labor with Him.

We must "covet to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:39, KJV). *Covet* is a passionate, active word from the Greek word *zēlōtē*, which means one burning with zeal—a zealot. To covet means to be eagerly desirous of or zealous to acquire something. It also means to defend or contend for it.

Developing the Gift

Paul admonishes Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:14-15 not to "neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on

these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all" (NKJV).

If you are going to be excellent in ministering spiritual gifts, you must give serious attention to the development of those gifts. The Amplified Bible's translation of this verse says we should "practice and cultivate and meditate upon these duties; throw yourself wholly into them [as your ministry], so that your progress may be evident to everybody."

One of the most effective ways to cultivate the gift of prophecy is to study the biblical definitions on how the gift functions and what role it plays in building the church. It's important to study the foundational principles of the prophetic found in the Bible so that we are grounded in truth. Paul wrote that we should not be ignorant of spiritual gifts (see 1 Cor. 12:1). I believe ignorance is the primary reason the church is not walking in the fullness of the Spirit.

Hosea 4:6 reveals that God's people "are destroyed for lack of knowledge." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines *ignorance* as "the condition of being uneducated, unaware, uninformed and inexperienced." It is the lack of a workable knowledge, information or education. Ignorance destroys the proper placement of prophets and prophetic gifts in the body of Christ.

Words of Life and Light

Prophets are among the greatest gifts the Lord has given the body of Christ, partly because of their God-given ability to build with words. Words spoken in the correct setting can bring forth life and healing to the human heart. Proverbs 25:11 says, "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances" (NASB). It only takes one word fitly spoken to a hurting soul to introduce or reintroduce Jesus Christ into that life.

People are controlled with words. Dignity is restored with

words. Love is communicated through words. And our worlds are framed and created by words. Many believe that prophets are called to uproot and tear down. Though that's a vital part of the prophet's ministry, the ability to build up and create is also a vital function of the prophetic office. One God-empowered word can bring light, structure and fulfillment into a life that is dark, void and without hope, purpose or form.

Genesis 1:3 marks God's first recorded words as "Let there be light." God wasn't simply foretelling light; His words were literally creating light. A prophet's first devotion should be to release light and, by doing so, expose darkness. It is time to bring restoration, not devastation.

It takes little effort to uproot and tear down, but it takes love, patience and wisdom to plant and build. Many immature prophets—especially those with strong deliverance backgrounds—are quick to identify the devil's work in a person without any concern for the human soul. They can accurately identify problems yet fail to give solutions.

A mature prophet, on the other hand, offers what I call prophetic prescriptions. He or she doesn't give blanket prophecies, but instead truly listens to the Holy Spirit regarding the condition of each human soul. True prophetic ministry imparts grace and truth that sets people free, showing them the way out of their sin or to higher levels of spiritual maturity.

From Foundation to Revelation

The primary directive of prophetic ministry is to cause believers to build their lives on the foundation of Christ. Prophets help to lay this foundation into the very nature and life of believers by speaking divinely given words that are based upon God's purpose and destiny of each life. We know that the Holy Spirit always testifies of Jesus, so the essence of prophetic ministry, then, is the revelation of the person,

power and work of Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 29:18 says that, "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law" (NKJV). Revelation is the revealed will of God for your life—the prophetic vision, in other terms. So where there is no prophetic vision, the people are unrestrained, which means they will be untrained in the ways of God, living life without the discipline of God.

We are called to be disciples of Christ. A disciple is a disciplined learner. The prophetic ministry equips you with the advantage of living under the discipline of God. When we don't have this prophetic vision guiding our lives, we tend to live in a vacuum.

One translation of Proverbs 29:18 puts it this way: "Without prophetic vision people run wild" (GW). In other words, we live our lives with no control, direction, rhyme or reason. The prophetic word brings order and structure in life, while also reminding you of a higher vision. God wants your life to mean something, and the prophetic word causes you to live for something greater than yourself. It stirs you to look for eternal purpose and not instant gratification. It changes your value system. Once the revealed purpose of the Lord is known, it causes you to set your affections on things above, transcending this temporal world.

Many people—including believers—live their lives never knowing and obeying the prophetic purpose of God. The graveyard is one of the richest places on the earth. It's filled with those who lived with so much potential for greatness yet never impacted the world around them. Don't let your epitaph read, "It was as if he were never here," or "She settled for too little," or "He never discovered the treasure inside of him."

Life without Christ can be like having the wind knocked out of you. The prophetic word provides spiritual oxygen for life and

eternal destiny. Prophecy is the Holy Spirit's breath of life being released back into you. When God breathed into Adam, He released life and prophetic purpose into him.

God's Road Map for Your Life

God desires to give us pictures, maps and directions as to how we are to live. He wants to lead us through every turn and season of life. We can discover His will for our lives, and this is often revealed by prophecy. Everything in the world tries to keep us from the original purposes of God for our lives. It dangles every kind of glittery enticement in front of us, and its ultimate goal is to lead us down paths of destruction.

But God, in His love and mercy, sends prophets and prophetic people with insight and direction. We must then make a decision whether we'll follow and align our lives with a revealed, tested prophetic word.

The moment you choose to align your life with the prophetic purpose of God, you'll discover that the Lord responds—and often quickly. He sends every resource you need to accomplish His prophetic purpose for your life. You're not in this world by chance, nor has God left you without His guidance. Regardless of your past experiences, embrace the prophetic anointing that gives you an advantage to live a rich and full life.

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