

What Does the New Testament Really Say About the Gift of Prophecy?

New Testament prophecy has its roots in Old Testament prophetic ministry. In the Old Testament, God raised up certain individuals to be His mouthpiece and speak His heart and mind to the people of Israel. These individuals were known by the Hebrew word *nabi*, which the Greek Septuagint translated as *prophetes*, and our English Bibles translates as “prophet.”

They were not fortunetellers. Their purpose was not to satisfy human curiosity to know the future. Their purpose was to speak the heart and mind of God to the people. In carrying out their assignments of speaking God’s word, their prophecies at times revealed future events, but that was not their purpose.

The *nabi* did not choose this prophetic vocation, but it was given to them by God. This is obvious in the answer of Amos to King Amaziah, who had ordered him out of Bethel and commanded him to never prophesy there again. To emphasize that his prophetic calling was not of his own choosing, Amos replied: “I am no prophet, and I am no prophet’s disciple. Rather, I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. But the Lord took me away from the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel’” (Amos 7:14-15).

Not only did the prophet or prophetess not choose their calling or vocation, neither did they choose the messages they were to deliver. The messages came to them spontaneously according to God’s determination. This is obvious from statements such as “the Spirit of the Lord came upon ” (2 Chron. 15:1; Isa. 61:1), “the hand of the Lord was upon” (Ezek. 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1) and “the word of the Lord came” (1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 24:11; Hag. 1:1), all indicating

the onset of the prophetic message apart from the initiative of the person prophesying.

In the Old Testament, the prophetic vocation was very limited, but with the coming of Messiah Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Old Testament prophetic franchise, instead of being ended, was expanded to include all of God's people. In this new and better covenant, the gift of prophecy is available, at least potentially, to all of God's people.

New Testament Prophecy

In the New Testament, prophecy is a translation of the Greek word *propheteia* and refers to an unrehearsed, Spirit-inspired utterance in the language of the speaker and of those to whom the message is being addressed. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee describes the gift of prophecy as "spontaneous, Spirit-inspired intelligible messages, orally delivered to the gathered assembly, intended for the edification and encouragement of the people." C. K. Barrett says that Paul's instructions on the operation of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:29-30 reminds us that it is not prepared sermons that are in question but "supernaturally inspired speech."

In defining New Testament prophecy, it will be helpful to also define what it is not, especially since there are so many counterfeits today in both the church and the world.

1. It is not the ability to predict the future.
2. It is not a sanctified form of fortune-telling or psychic reading.
3. It is not a permanent gift that one carries and operates at his/her own initiative.

Genuine prophecy is not for establishing doctrine, predicting the future or giving personal advice and direction. It is given to confirm, encourage and edify and will always occur in

a context where the lordship of Jesus Christ is recognized and honored, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

Revelation 19:10, in fact, says, "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." We should avoid anyone who uses prophecy to promote themselves or their ministry. We should also avoid any place where prophecy is used as a form of entertainment. True manifestations of the Spirit will always draw people to Jesus.

Prophecy: A Gift of the Holy Spirit

New Testament prophecy is listed as one of nine spiritual gifts that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. Interestingly, he introduces these gifts in verse 1 with the word *pneumatikos*, which means "things from the Spirit" or "things pertaining to the Spirit." *Pneumatikos* is made up of *pneuma*, the word for spirit, and the suffix *tikos*. Although some think it refers to "spiritual people," the fact that it is used in 1 Corinthians 14:1 in a direct reference to prophecy and other spiritual gifts, indicates that it is an over-arching designation for spiritual manifestations, gifts and "things from the Spirit."

It is unfortunate that so many translators have translated *pneumatikos* as "spiritual gifts" for it has left the erroneous impression that these are permanent gifts that one receives and then carries and operates at his/her own initiative. They are, instead, things that proceed or flow from the Spirit. They are not so much given to us as they are given through us.

It is somewhat like a mother who freely shares her knowledge with her child who is struggling with his homework. She does not share all her knowledge but only what is needed for that particular moment. The child may need her help again later that same day or the next day. In a similar way, these gifts of the Holy Spirit flow forth from the Holy Spirit for

particular needs and occasions. The initiative for their operation lies with the Holy Spirit as is obvious from passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:11, which states that these *pneumatikos* operate “as He [the Spirit] wills.”

The Confessional Context of Spiritual Gifts

Right up front, Paul makes it clear that these *pneumatikos* or gifts of the Spirit function in a context where Jesus is recognized and confessed as Lord. In 1 Corinthians 12:2-3, Paul reminds the Corinthians of their pagan past and the new reality of their lives as followers of Jesus Christ. He says: “You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed!’ And no one can say, ‘Jesus is the Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

Paul’s statement that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed is, no doubt, a reference to their pagan past, where inspired speech or prophecy was a common part of the cults and mystery religions of the ancient Greco-Roman Empire. Only a short distance from Corinth was a temple dedicated to the Greek god of healing known as Asklepius. People visited this temple from many parts of the empire to receive healing, and when modern archaeologists uncovered its ruins, they discovered testimonies of healing inscribed on its circular inner wall.

Those in need of healing were encouraged to sleep in the temple. During the night, they might be visited in a dream by Asklepius or by sacred dogs or snakes that occupied the temple. There were also oracles or inspired messages spoken in the temple.

With Christianity spreading throughout the empire, and Jesus being preached as the Healer, the devotees of Asklepius were put on the defensive, for they saw Jesus as a threat to their

god. They were, therefore, especially hostile to Christians and the preaching of the gospel. It is not a stretch to think that some of the Corinthian believers, in their pagan past, had heard Jesus cursed by those claiming to be speaking by inspiration.

Paul's point is that the Spirit of God would never in any way speak derogatorily of Jesus. On the other hand, Paul says that no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. He doesn't mean, of course, that it is impossible for someone to mouth those words. Instead, just as they had been carried away to dumb idols, the Spirit of God would now lead them to a recognition and confession of Jesus as Lord.

This is significant for *kurios*, the Greek word translated as "lord," is the word used by the Septuagint to translate *Yahweh*, the Old Testament personal name for God. For Greek speaking Jews, as well as for pagans, this amounted to a confession of the deity of Christ. Gordon Fee says: "The use of 'lord' in such a context meant absolute allegiance to Jesus as one's deity and set believers apart from both Jews, for whom such a confession was blasphemy, and pagans, especially those in the cults where the deities were called 'lords.'"

4 Descriptive Words

In introducing these gifts or things that proceed from the Spirit, Paul uses four words that shine light on their character and function. The four words are *charismata*, *diakonoi*, *energēmata* and *phanerosis*. These words all apply to the gift of prophecy, which is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:10.

Charismata is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:4 where it is translated as "gift," which is a good translation here. *Charismata* is derived from the Greek word *charis*, which is the word for "grace." Paul's use of this word indicates that these *pneumatikos* are not given as good conduct awards or

badges of achievement. They are not marks of holiness or spiritual maturity. They are given out of the goodness of the donor and say nothing of the maturity or status of the one through whom the gift is expressed.

In other words, these gifts are not the province of the professional evangelist, pastor or Christian leader. Even baby Christians can be used in these gifts of the Holy Spirit. I recall ministering in a meeting where a young Chinese man from mainland China, who was a student at an area university, was brought to the meeting. At the invitation for people who wanted to receive prayer, he came forward and accepted Christ for the first time. I then asked him join me in praying for people who had come forward for healing and other needs. The first person on whom he laid his hands fell to the floor, overwhelmed by the presence of God. Never forget that these are *charismata*—grace gifts.

Diakonoi is another Greek word Paul uses of these gifts in verse 5 (NASB) where it is translated as “ministries.” *Diakonoi* is the plural of *diakonos*, which means “servant.” Paul’s point would be that these gifts are not to be used for obtaining power or control over people. Neither are they to be used for self-aggrandizement or self-promotion. These gifts are given to serve the body of Christ and build it up. Those who would be used in these gifts of the Holy Spirit must approach this ministry with a humble attitude and servant-like heart.

Energemata is the word that is translated “activities” in 1 Corinthians 12:6 (ESV). It is the word from which we get “energy” and “energetic” and refers to the working of divine energy or power in these gifts. This word highlights the fact that these are not natural talents or honed skills, but divine endowments from the Spirit of God.

Phanerosis is used by Paul in verse 7 (MEV) where it is translated as “manifestation.” It literally means “a shining

forth” and refers to something that has been hidden being brought out into the open. The Holy Spirit is invisible, but when He manifests one of these gifts there is a manifestation; something comes out into the open that can be ascertained with the physical senses.

The use of *phanerosis* highlights the fact that these gifts reside in the Holy Spirit, not in the person. They are manifested by the Spirit, not the individual. If you are a child of God with the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, all these gifts are available to you for they reside in the Spirit who is in you. By using this word, Paul highlights again that these are things that proceed from the Spirit. We cannot push a button and make them work. They are manifestations of the Spirit and are brought forth as He wills.

Prophecy Involves a Cooperation Between the Spirit of God and the Human Vessel

God does not physically move one’s tongue and vocal cords in prophecy. Prophecy is a cooperation of the human vessel with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will never make you into a robot or automaton that He operates mechanically. He will not physically move your tongue in speaking a prophecy. I have experienced the Holy Spirit resting on me powerfully to give a prophecy, and I would mull over how I would express it. I knew the message, but I was free to choose the words by which I would express it.

Neither does prophecy have to be prefaced by a “thus saith the Lord” or “the Lord would say unto thee.” A Spirit-inspired message can be delivered in normal language over a cup of coffee with a friend, or with a stranger for that matter. I can’t tell you how many times Sue and I have experienced the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, outside the four walls of a church building in restaurants, in homes and even in our cars. My point is: Don’t confine prophecy inside a charismatic religious box.

Nurture a Sensitivity to the Spirit

Remember that the Holy Spirit is a person, and is God. He is not some impersonal cosmic force floating in ethereal space that we can learn to tap into and use. It is not a matter of us learning to use Him; it is a matter of Him being able to use us. We must, therefore, develop a friendship with and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit so that we can respond to His slightest leadings and promptings.

Remember the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:14 where in trinitarian terms he says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." The word "communion" in this verse is from the Greek word *koininia*, which means "intimate fellowship." Paul would have us enjoy intimate fellowship with the Holy Spirit. As we do, prophecy and other gifts of the Holy Spirit will flow. {eoa}

*This article is derived from **Eddie Hyatt's** soon-to-be published book, The Prophethood of All Believers. Watch for the announcement of its release. In the meantime, check out books and articles on his website at .*