

BILL HAMON: Prophetic Ministry Can Empower or Devastate the Church

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Where are the prophets? In every quarter of the church today we hear that question ringing. Not only in charismatic and Pentecostal churches, but even in the old mainline denominations, Christians are experiencing prophetic ministry, acknowledging prophetic ministers and wondering where the Holy Spirit is headed in these closing years of the 20th century.

I believe that we are actually in the midst of a divinely ordained move of God—what many are calling the prophetic movement. The Holy Spirit has designed this movement to bring full recognition, restoration and activation of prophets and prophetic ministry—within church ministry and structure. The current move of God is in fact an extension of earlier restoration movements throughout the last 500 years that have brought back to the church a number of truths and spiritual experiences that had previously been neglected—in particular, the Protestant, Holiness, Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

Each of these great restoration movements has been more powerful and gained a greater potential for salvation, or self-destruction, than the one before. The process is like the progressive invention of modern warfare weapons, from gunpowder to dynamite to nitroglycerin to nuclear bombs. As the latest and most powerful force and spiritual weapon of warfare being brought forth in the church, the prophetic movement has the most potential for blessing or destruction of any restoration movement during the last five centuries.

If nuclear or laser weapons were to fall into the hands of

unprincipled, self-centered terrorists, they would have no scruples about using this power to destroy many lives in furthering their own selfish ends. They would use these weapons to intimidate, manipulate and control people to build their own dictatorial kingdom. In the same way, if a prophetic minister does not have Christ's character, biblical principles of operation, and a right spirit and motivation, he or she has the potential to control and manipulate people with supernatural knowledge, visions, revelations and miracles. False prophets, wrongly motivated ministers and immature believers misusing prophetic ministry can cause great destruction.

On the other hand, with the right character and spirit, prophetic ministers have great power to influence people for God toward unity, obedience, humility and Christlikeness. Thus prophetic ministry can bring life or death, blessing or blasting. Like atomic or laser power, the prophetic can be used for good or evil.

Swings in the Pendulum

When truth is in the process of being restored to the church, it usually swings extremely to the right, then to the left. At last it finally hangs straight with a balanced message, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, in the middle of the two extremes.

Those who are stuck out on the extreme left become cultic in their doctrines and practices. Those who don't make it back from the extreme right become an exclusive group who separate themselves from the rest of the body of Christ. In between is the group that brings itself together from both extremes to maintain a balance of wisdom and maturity in proper biblical doctrine and practice as God originally intended it to be restored to the church.

At the same time, the "balanced" group may become so

protective of the truth and so reactionary toward the extremists that they keep the original form—yet lose the flow of the Holy Spirit. They may keep the purity of the doctrine yet lose the fresh anointing that restored those truths. They may maintain the proper preaching and practices yet lose God's mighty presence and power that originally accompanied the ministry.

Sad to say, church history reveals that this “balanced” group usually becomes the main persecutors of the next restorational movement of the Holy Spirit. They establish “wineskins” of doctrinal limitations with regard to what, when, where, who and how the truth can be ministered. Their wineskins become dry and set with such limitations that they cannot receive the new wine of restored truth that adds new dimensions to the church.

For that reason, we must keep our wineskins flexible so that we can go from movement to movement of the Holy Spirit, incorporating into our personal lives and our churches all that God wants to restore to His church (2 Cor. 3:18). At the same time, we must not become vulnerable to extremism and fanaticism. As the apostle Peter declared, we must continually “be established in the present truth” without forsaking any of the truths and practices that have already been restored (2 Pet. 1:12). Jesus said that a wise scribe is one who brings out of his treasure chest treasures both old and new (Matt. 13:52).

The true apostles and prophets called to pioneer the prophetic movement will do all they can to maintain balance and to keep prophetic ministers from doing foolish things that bring reproach and disgrace upon the movement as a whole. But none of the past restoration movements were able to prevent abuses and extremes totally, and neither will we be able to do so.

In the Protestant Reformation, for example, some groups reacting to Catholic control became extremely lawless. In the

Holiness movement, some extremists succumbed to the bondage of legalism. Among the early Pentecostals, some went so far as to teach that speaking in tongues was necessary for salvation. And most of us are familiar with the past charismatic extremes in demonology, discipleship and prosperity teaching.

Every movement will manifest some people who are biblically uneducated and who never become birthed in the present truth. There will always be those emotionally unstable and spiritually immature people who cannot handle the truth and thus exhibit weird behavior. And there will always be charlatans, false ministers and others who are wrongly motivated, looking for an opportunity to promote themselves and to profit from the movement.

Abuses to Avoid

As with every move of God, the prophetic movement will produce its share of abuses when people carry it too far or totally misapply the truths God is restoring. God's Spirit is pure and restores unadulterated truth and ministry, but such truth and ministry are poured into earthen vessels that can be faulty (2 Cor. 4:7). So I want to raise a warning against perverting the truths being restored or using them for personal gain or for other ungodly purposes.

I believe that several specific cautions are necessary at this point as Christians seek to maintain integrity and balance in the prophetic movement:

Overemphasis on personal prophecy. Some Christians will think they need a "word from the Lord" to make every major and minor decision. They will no longer depend on their personal convictions, the Holy Spirit's leadings, or pastoral counsel and wisdom to walk daily before the Lord. In some lives, personal prophecy will replace personal prayer and hearing from God for oneself.

This is not of the Lord. Personal prophecy has a valid place

in the church and in the lives of individual Christians, but it was never intended to be a “quick fix” or a replacement for seeking God.

Elevating prophecy to the level of Scripture. Another form that abuse will take is an elevation of contemporary prophecy to the same level of authority and inspiration as the written Word of God, causing cultic groups who esteem prophetic utterance as Scripture. All orthodox Christians, however, believe that the Scriptures are complete and sufficient, and will reject all extrabiblical revelation claiming authority equal to the Bible,

Ministering out from under authority. Some Christians will begin to prophesy in places other than those their church leadership has sanctioned as appropriate. I call these “parking lot prophecies,” in which people draw others outside of meetings to prophesy strange things to them.

I believe it’s critical that all prophecies be given only under spiritual oversight, and also that they be tape-recorded. This allows the local eldership to adjust or correct any words that are false, wrongly applied or untimely, thus saving, the person who is receiving the prophecy from confusion or misunderstanding. Sadly enough, some who are new to this movement will prophesy helter-skelter without allowing their words to be weighed and evaluated (1 Cor. 14:31; 1 Thess. 5:21). Because the prophetic ministry has the power either to bless or curse, all words must be witnessed to and judged by those who are spiritually mature and are in oversight in the local assembly.

Using prophecy to justify rebellion and sin. The charismatic movement caused many prayer groups and unstructured meetings to break themselves off from the church. Some were of God, as the Holy Spirit poured out new wine that old wineskins couldn’t contain, causing inevitable splits. But many others were just rebellious groups who wanted to do their own thing

without any oversight.

The prophetic movement will see a continuation of this trend, with personal prophecy used as a tool to justify rebellious factions and groups. When confronted by spiritual authority, some will say “God told me,” and will produce as evidence several prophecies they gave themselves or which were given by others who endorse their group or ministry. God never intended prophecy to judge doctrinal or disciplinary matters, and He certainly has not appointed certain saints in the church to straighten out everybody else through their spiritual ministry.

Control and manipulation through prophecy. Some ministers or leaders who already have a problem with being controlling will use the gift of prophecy to dictate “orders from God” to those under them. The abuses of the discipleship movement may pale in comparison to this abuse of personal prophecy. Ministers will prophesy to people about whom to marry, which job to get, and when and where to move, all in the name of “spiritual revelation.”

Scores of ignorant and immature believers will follow such leaders because they seem to prophesy the word of the Lord and have signs following their ministry. Moses told the Israelites the reason God allows such things to take place: “The Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 13:3; NKJV). So Christians must understand the difference between obeying the word of the Lord and getting confirmation of major moves and life’s decisions.

Using the prophetic gift for personal gain. This abuse of deceit will take two forms as people flock to prophetic ministry because God’s anointing is upon it. First, many will hold “prophetic conferences” that are prophetic in name only. They will be more interested in drawing people in to pay large seminar fees to bolster their churches’ finances than in

ministering prophetically to the people. We will hear the word “prophetic” hung like a tag on nearly everything in the church as some try to manipulate people into becoming a part of ministries that are not at all prophetic.

The second form of this abuse is as ancient as Balaam, who tried to prophesy for his own personal gain. Even now certain ones prophesy, “Thus saith the Lord, God is saying if you will support His servant with a one-time gift of \$1,000, He will surely bless you.” Thousands of gullible Christians will send their money, thinking the man is speaking for God. In the end, however, these false prophets will be exposed as charlatans and judged for making merchandise of the gift of God.

Trying to fulfill personal prophecy out of proper timing. Many Christians who receive true personal prophecies about some great ministry or life situation will misunderstand God’s dealing over a period of time and run out to try to fulfill their prophecy in their own strength. If God tells them prophetically that they will be raised up as a great pastor, prophet or apostle, they will run out and print up business cards with titles and proclaim themselves as God’s wonder-workers.

Others who are called to be financial stewards for the kingdom of God will rush into business situations based on a personal prophecy because they think one prophecy will cause them to prosper in all their endeavors. The results will be broken contracts, bankruptcy and ruined lives.

When a true prophecy is spoken to an individual, God intends to accomplish that prophecy at some point in that person’s life, not necessarily in the following week or month. Christians must learn to wait on the timing of the Lord.

Presumptuous, critical and judgmental prophesying. One of the greatest dangers and abuses of the prophetic movement will be people prophesying presumptuously or critically. For some

reason, folks with a critical or negative spirit seem to flock to prophetic ministry, feeling that congregational or personal prophecy is their platform to blast everyone else for living in sin, directly implying that they themselves are the true standard for righteousness. I have seen and heard many who felt they were God's lone prophet in the wilderness, proclaiming righteousness while the rest of the church was wicked and sinful (see Deut. 18:20-22).

I have found, however, that the result of such prophesying is bitter, fruitless and condemning. God has not anointed any sheriffs in the kingdom of God to judge and condemn others, and I believe He rarely, if ever, uses immature believers to give a true word of rebuke and correction. This will be left instead to the mature person whom God can trust with hard words that need to be delivered in the spirit of humility and healing.

Abuses Have Already Begun

My spirit is grieved when I see and hear how some are already abusing the truths and ministries being restored by the prophetic movement. Even now, there are those with television programs who are using the ministry of prophesying to manipulate people to give them financial support. They close their eyes and point their finger and say, "The Lord says" or "The Lord shows me" that someone is to send them a certain amount of money. If the Lord ever did anoint them to prophesy in the first place, then that anointing left when they started using the gift for personal promotion.

I was shocked and disgusted when I heard another television personality say, "Write to me, and I will send you your personal prophecy tape for personal prosperity." I sent for it just so I could hear for myself what was being said. It was a soulless sham of using prophetic ministry to manipulate and motivate people to support his ministry.

I sometimes wish I had the power to close the mouths of such ministers. But then the Lord reminds me of what Paul told the Corinthian church: "There must be also heresies among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Cor. 11:19, KJV). In relation to this movement, that means there must be false prophets, the ignorant, the immature and the wrongly motivated prophetic ministers who are improperly using the office of the prophet and the ministry of prophesying, so that those who are true and proper may be made manifest as the true prophetic ministers within Christ's church. Jesus said we must let the tares grow along with the wheat until the time of the harvest (Matt. 13:24-30).

Let All Things Be Done

Paul declared, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). But there is no need for decency and order unless something is being done. The emphasis should be placed on the first five words in this statement as much as it is on the last four. *Let all things be done!*

The preacher of old declared that the only way to have a totally clean stall was not to have an ox in it—thus losing the benefit of the ox's labor (Prov. 14:4). So it is with the prophetic movement. If we want the benefit of prophetic ministry in the church, we must expect a few messes in the "stall" as some believers demonstrate a lack of balance, integrity or maturity.

The ones who do not manifest the truth as God intended will not make it back to the middle from the extreme swings of the pendulum of restored truth. But those who have the heart of God and the mind of Christ for this movement will proceed with proper prophetic procedures and practices—bringing the church closer to full restoration, maturity and triumph.