

What the Bible Says Is the Real Role of Prophecy in the Local Church

Regarding the corporate (body) nature of prophecy, Paul continues his teaching on the nature and administration of the manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (ESV): “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

The passage above teaches that all the gifts of the Spirit—including prophecy—are given for the common good. Hence, we should conclude that there is really no such thing as “personal prophecy” since all true prophecy should lead to the common good and edification for the whole body! (Even prophetic words given to an individual should be connected to calling to advance and edify the body of Christ for the sake of His kingdom.)

Based on the clear teaching of this passage, as well as the rest of the New Testament, we have to conclude that nobody can fulfill their calling in Christ apart from being a functional member of the body of Christ as expressed in the local church. Paul makes this as clear as “tar on snow” in 1 Corinthians 12:12-18:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not

a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose."

Furthermore, to make sure there is no manipulation and/or abuse in regard to the use of the gifts, Paul shows in the context of his description of the gifts (in chapters 12 and 14) that the vessel that carries said gifts has to do it in love. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-6 Paul says:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing". If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

The Corporate Function of the Gift of Prophecy

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives practical instructions related to the church's proper use of prophecy in the corporate setting. In verses 1-5 he says, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." Here, Paul singles out prophesy as the highest gift to pursue because of its power to edify the church.

First Corinthians 14:2-5 says: "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one

who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

In verse 2, Paul is describing the private gift of speaking in tongues, which is to aid you as your personal prayer language—this is not referring to utilizing the gift of languages to minister prophetically to others, in which case you would need to interpret your languages in order for the church to be edified (see 1 Cor. 14:5).

Verse 3 describes the function of the simple gift of prophecy: upbuilding, encouragement and consolation. The NKJV says: “edification, exhortation and comfort.” Notice nothing is said here about the gift of prophecy being used for general guidance; it is dangerous to be led solely by the prophetic words of others!

Every word has to confirm what God is already saying to you since prophecy should not take the place of the sons of God being led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14). (Of course, prophetic words also have to line up with the teaching of Scripture—which includes getting pastoral council from your spiritual leaders; see Heb. 13:7.) Also, as we will see later on, all prophecies should be done in the context of the local gathering so that other spiritual leaders can judge the word.

The Corporate Protocol for the Gift of Prophecy

In 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 (ESV), Paul says: “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to

account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.” This shows that the power of prophecy is effective even for unbelievers—not just believers.

Verses 26-28 say, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.”

In light of these guidelines, so we don’t scare new people and/or interrupt the flow of the church meeting, speak in tongues quietly to yourself unless you believe it is an anointed tongue meant for someone to interpret; in that case, it functions in the same manner as a prophecy.

Paul continues in verse 29, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” Paul seems to limit the amount of people giving prophetic words in a church service to two or three people (he did not say two or three prophecies, but two or three *people*). This important section also shows the importance of giving and receiving prophetic words in the presence of other spiritual leaders and mature saints so that the words can be properly judged (this is contrary to parking lot prophecies and social media prophecies). This is to protect both the one giving the prophecy (so their words are not twisted by selective hearing) as well as the one receiving the prophetic word (so mature leaders can help them discern and apply it).

Verses 30-33 say: “If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”

This important passage demystifies the flow of the prophetic, showing that the Holy Spirit doesn't force anyone to give a prophetic word. It shows that even when one is prophesying, they are in control over their own emotions, will and actions. Consequently, there is never an excuse for a person giving a prophetic word to interrupt the flow of the service—to be rude, out of order or acting weird. He ends this great discourse by stating that God is not the God of confusion but of peace.

In conclusion, we have to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Do you earnestly desire to move in the prophetic gifts? If not, then why not? (Don't you desire to build up the body of Christ as well as expose the secrets of the hearts of the non-believer?)
2. Is your motivation to prophesy to glorify Jesus or gain attention for yourself and manipulate others?
3. Will you allow God to activate your prophetic gifts today?
4. Are there solid prophetic people in your church who can walk with you to develop this gift inside of you?

May the Lord raise up a powerful, prophetic company of believers that will glorify Jesus and manifest His kingdom.