

Starting prophesying

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Christian prophecy is not like fortune telling.

Most people (including many Christians who should know better) wrongly think prophecy is like fortune telling. The prophet tells people what is going to happen in the future, or details about their lives. They think that the more detailed the description, and the more impact it makes on the hearers the better the prophecy is. That isn't Christian prophecy (though a lot of supposedly Christian prophecy is of this sort). Anything like that is to be avoided. In fact, whatever may have been the intention, the effect is manipulative, because being told your thoughts, facts about your past, or what your future holds has a powerful effect on the hearer, and alters the relationship between the person speaking and the hearer, typically bringing the hearer under the speaker's **power of suggestion**, making it impossible for the hearer to rationally evaluate what the speakers says.

Prophesying and Prophets – there is a difference

Any Christian may prophesy as a “manifestation of the spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11) under the direction of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit gives him utterance. It was and is common for people to prophesy when they are baptised in the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 19:6). The Holy Spirit is in full control, and the occasions may be infrequent for a particular individual. The **purpose of prophetic utterances is as a gift to the church from God to build up the church** (see 1 Corinthians 14), and the church has the responsibility to test all such utterances as genuine (or not).

A prophet on the other hand is one of the four ministries in Ephesians 4:11 – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers – that God has given to the church. These ministers have a delegated authority from God to operate within a particular sphere – Paul for example described himself as an “*apostle to the Gentiles*” (Romans 11:13). He could work anywhere within that sphere with God's blessing (but he got into trouble (Acts 21) by trying to go beyond that to reach Jews). Old Testament prophets seem to have been commissioned and worked alone (e.g. Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1; Isaiah, Isaiah 6). However in the New Covenant, because all Christians have received God's Holy Spirit, it is no longer necessary or desirable for Christians to work individualistically: Paul had a call from God to apostleship in Acts 9, but he did not begin that work until he was sent out from Antioch by the church there following prayer and fasting several years later (Acts 13).

In the New Covenant people usually start prophesying as the “*manifestation of the spirit*” (1 Corinthians 12:7-10) – where God is in control – to meetings of the church. What they are and what they say is tested by the church (see paper *Testing today’s prophets and prophecies*). Faithfulness in small things leads to being given more.

Someone who God is giving a **ministry** as a prophet will have already been prophesying and will receive a definite internal call, but that needs to be tested and confirmed as genuine by the church and the scope and purpose of the ministry identified before it can be properly exercised, as was the case with Paul.

In what follows the work and role of “prophets” is in view, but the same considerations largely apply to anyone who seeks to prophesy as a 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 “*manifestation of the spirit*”.

What is a prophet and his job?

The first time someone is called a "prophet" in the Bible concerned Abraham (Genesis 20:7), yet he has no recorded prophecies. This text shows us he was a prophet because he was an **intercessor**. He prayed for Abimelech's wives on that occasion, after God had made them infertile after Abimelech took Sarah into his household. Later Abraham interceded with God, seeking to save Sodom and Gomorrah. In the latter case the cities were not saved, but the only righteous people there (Lot's family) were rescued. The Old Testament prophets whose words appear as Biblical books were also primarily men of prayer – to the extent that sometimes God had to tell them not to pray, as happened to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7:16, 11:14, 14:11).

In order to pray or intercede effectively it is essential to know God's mind (see paper “*introduction to intercessory prayer*”, particularly the sections that discuss knowing God’s mind). Most of the time God shows the prophet things, not so he can talk, but so he can pray for the people. If instead we tell people what God has told us about them, it will not generally help them. Indeed, unless they are Christians actively seeking God, they may well react badly, since God's message to the sinful and unbelieving is that they must repent and turn to God. If they were told that, they would probably attack the prophet, who has told them all these things, rather than turning their lives back towards God in repentance. When prophets did speak thus they were often killed, like John the Baptist, whereas turning the insight into prayer for their salvation is more likely to save them. If the prophet does speak and the hearers accept the message, they are likely to respond by latching onto the "wonderful prophet" (compare Acts 14:3-

18; compare also the impact of the (unhelpful) testimony of the demonised girl in Acts 16:16-19. The impact of a self-promoting false prophet is revealed in Acts 8: 9-11.

So the prophet should avoid this by mainly using what God shows him to pray for the situation, and then speak to the people in words that **make it easy for them to test what is being said** to them (see paper "*Assessing Today's Prophets and prophecies*"). So genuinely prophetic messages are generally likely to sound similar to teaching about the faith, but with the power that comes from that message having come from God, enhanced through the prayer that the prophet has already made for the hearers. When interceding, the prophet will find it helpful to pray in tongues (in private) as Paul did (1 Corinthians 14:18-19 – see Paper *The Gift of Tongues*). Jesus went away to pray when the people became excessively enthusiastic about his ministry.

As the job of the prophet is to build up the church (1 Corinthians 14), almost all prophecy is directed towards those who are within God's Covenant – the Jews in the Old Testament, and the church in the New Testament. Biblically, prophesying to outsiders, as Jonah did, is exceptional, and is always an implicit or explicit call to repentance.

Conveying a message

When conveying any message, it has to be formed to address the condition that the hearers are in. Consider whether someone else would be more successful at conveying the message and cause fewer inter-personal complications. The question is "How will they understand what I am going to say?" That depends on whether they are (genuine) Christians or not. Whatever we seek to communicate – regardless of subject – **hearers hear selectively, and always try to fit what they hear into their existing understanding. This is particularly so concerning God and religion because what people believe about these things forms the basis of their "worldview" which colours and distorts everything they hear.** Hence the expression of God's truth needs to be considered very carefully, seeking to minimise the risk of being misunderstood. Fundamentally the only issue God is interested in dealing with in the non-Christian is that of "Repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Lord", as the only way of salvation. Note how indirectly and yet appropriately and effectively the prophet Nathan rebuked King David in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel 12)

Is there a place for telling people about themselves or what will happen to them?

The main thrust of the prophets who wrote the prophetic books of the Bible was to bring about repentance amongst God's people, as indicated. They did offer hope for the future of God's people (like Isaiah) following the destruction that was about to come upon them on account of sin, but this concerned the **corporate future rather than individuals**. Likewise the call for repentance was accompanied by warnings of being conquered by the surrounding nations. Politically that must have often looked all too likely, but the people had a false view of God which made them think God would not give them up to their enemies no matter what they did – like many Christians cling to their eternal security doctrine of salvation today.

There were cases of – usually prominent individuals such as kings - being given direct prophecy, sometimes in response to those people seeking God (e.g. Isaiah spoke to king Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, which resulted in his prayer for healing, and confirmed by a sign). So such words happened, but as far as the prophets who wrote the Biblical prophecy books are concerned, these occasions seem exceptional, and in response to specific circumstances. They also seem to have differentiated themselves from the “professional prophets” – see Amos 7:14

Kings – from King David onwards - had a special role within the covenant of God with Israel and they looked to “professional” prophets for guidance. There seem to have been many of these – of very variable quality! In the days of king Saul and king David they seem to have been into music and song, their competency seems to have been limited, and apart from some Psalms they seem to have had little long term impact. (see paper “*Assessing Today's prophets and prophecies*” – section Professional Prophets – songsters). Some told Saul what would happen on the way to his becoming the king of Israel (1 Samuel 10), but despite (perhaps because of?) the great detail about what would happen (and it did), and his own participation in the experience, Saul seems to have sought to distance himself from what had happened. It did Saul no good as he wasn't changed by his experience - he called them mad – and he failed as a king, showing that this style of prophecy is best avoided.

Specific prophecy about future events affecting individuals seems limited in the New Testament. God's objective is to develop a covenant people in the Bible generally. So like the Old Testament, the New Testament is more concerned with the development of the church fellowship than of individuals. The early church consequently had a more corporate mindset than we tend to have now. Agabus predicted a famine (Acts 11:28), which helped the church to prepare – the common use of prophecy, But he later opposed Paul as an individual on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 21:11). Agabus's intervention in the life of Paul of an individual is unusual: it happened because of Paul's key role as an apostle of the church. This suggests the main activity of the prophets was what we would now

consider to be teaching to the group with strong application (e.g. Acts 8:18-23).

Prophets must assess the sources of their knowledge

Knowledge about people and situations can have 3 sources: God, natural (human insight), demonic. The prophet must be sure what he receives is genuinely from God, and test this carefully, with the help of others.

Divine. Revelation 19:10 tells us that "*The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*". All genuine prophecy has the objective of bearing witness to the Messiah, Jesus. The Old Testament prophets had in view the preparation of God's people for the coming Messiah. New Testament prophecy has the same purpose. In 1 Corinthians 14:5, 12, 19, Paul writes that the purpose of prophesying within a church meeting context is to edify - that is "build up" - the church. Paul is emphasising the importance of prophecy because it conveys God's mind to his people, which they can use for a basis for action. Paul recognises that outsiders in the meeting (1 Corinthians 14:24-25) may be convicted by what they hear, and recognise the presence of God. Some people have used this verse to justify giving very detailed prophetic information about the person (which is unwise, as previously indicated), but the context implies that the conviction comes from the quality of the wisdom conveyed to the whole group by the person prophesying, which they recognise as coming from God.

Natural At a purely natural level, people know some things about other people because they are emotionally connected to them – as a student once I knew something was wrong at home but did not know what until later (my grandfather had died). Even with people you aren't emotionally involved with, if you know the background of the people you are talking to, it is very easy to say things that engage with what they are thinking about, and what they are feeling, and give them the illusion that you know their lives in great detail, when actually you don't, and so potentially manipulate them. That power of suggestion is how horoscopes work, and why people get addicted to horoscopes. Natural knowledge can be useful, but it does not change lives like insight from God.

Demonic. Some so called prophets have more knowledge than that, but rather than it coming from God, it has been told to them by a demonic spirit. The information may be true, at least in part, but the ultimate effect is to bring the hearer into bondage - into dependency on the prophet and through him to the demon. A characteristic of false prophecy is that in general it is very "positive" and "affirming", telling people what they want to hear. Deceiving spirits also encourage the speaker to be overconfident that he knows what is the right thing to do. Deception by lying spirits will be considered further below.

Making sure the prophecy is good

The need to test prophecy. Before the church (or anyone else) acts on anything that is said the prophet and the prophecy have to be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29), to check that the prophet really is someone who speaks for God, and that what is being said is correct. Testing prophesy is needed because it is very easy for someone who prophesies to be deceived, or worse still may be deliberately attempting to manipulate the activities of the hearers by claiming to be speaking from God. Many false prophets are recorded in the Old Testament, and the New Testament warns that this will continue to be the case with false teachers (2 Peter 2:1. This parallel of prophesy with teaching shows that the content of New Testament prophesy can be typically be expected to be teaching.). Some years ago I wrote a lengthy text on how to test today's prophets and their prophecies (see paper "*Assessing todays prophets and prophecies*"). I wrote it because many modern Christians think if someone speaks as from God it must be true. Unfortunately that isn't the case. The person prophesying might be deceived by a demonic spirit posing as God's spirit, or they may be speaking from their own mind, possibly without knowing that they are. These two occurrences are more likely if they are not obeying God wholeheartedly, but **anyone** can be deceived, and part of the reason for the testing is so the church can help someone who has got it wrong to turn back to the right path. So anyone who is going to work as a prophet needs to be watched over by people who can protect them by testing them and their prophecies. Women are more easily deceived than men (2 Corinthians 11:3; 2 Timothy 2:12-14) – probably because they tend to be more spiritually open to hear – and a wife should look in the first instance to her husband to protect her by his checking what she is getting (Ephesians 5:22-27). This means he needs to know everything that she is doing, and their joint prayer and bible study fellowship should be extensive and meaningful – since all genuine modern prophecy will be consistent with the spirit and teaching of Scripture, and needs continually to be tested against it. The couple needs similar covering by their fellowship, for “The Devil is like a roaring lion, seeking whoever he may devour. Resist him...” (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Why well-intentioned prophets can make mistakes

Desire and deception. When deception happens, the person who is deceived is (necessarily) unaware that they are being deceived. (If he is aware, then it is no longer a case of deception.). Deception arises from our desires (James 1:14-16, see paper on James 1:2-18 – "*Overcoming under trial*"): we can be deceived through our good desires as well as bad ones – and Jesus was so tempted in the wilderness. The prophet therefore needs to be aware of his desires, and what potential they have for leading him into deception. Examples include emotional or other involvement with the lives of those being prophesied to, other states of

emotion like being angry fearful, or otherwise emotionally disturbed by events or situations, all of which are either indicators to avoid saying anything at all, or to do so only after checking carefully for motive and source.

It is possible for a prophet to give a false prophecy because of his association with someone whom God has judged on account of their idolatry. Unclean spirits associated with someone or actually controlling them (as a result of e.g. occult practice, or adherence to false religion (which is in reality demonic (1 Corinthians 10:20)) may lie to the prophet, yet present themselves as “angels of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

The classic example of this happening is in 1 Kings 22. The (bad) king of Israel’s 400 prophets, and especially Zedekiah (v11) claimed that the king would succeed in battle (v6,12). The (good) king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, wasn’t convinced. There was another prophet Micaiah – the king of Israel did not like him because he does not prophesy good concerning him (v8) – he was asked to come forward with the same message(v13). Micaiah’s answer is that he will say what God tells him (v14) – and then he gives (under God’s direction) the same message as the false prophets (v15)! Interestingly the king of Israel realises this isn’t true! (v16). Micaiah then gives the truth.(v17) and goes on to explain why the king of Israel’s prophets were deceived (v19-23). But despite now hearing the truth the king of Israel still believes the false prophets and goes into battle and is killed! (see the sequel). Zedekiah, now said by Micaiah to be a false prophet, is angry (v24), and it seems he had had some previous genuine experience of the Spirit of the Lord. Micaiah is imprisoned pending the king’s return(v27). So what had happened? Zedekiah was deceived by the lying spirit (v22) because of his close association with the evil king of Israel. So the prophet should beware of whom he associates with. A detailed explanation is in Ezekiel 14:1-11 – the king had idols in his heart, and practised abominations, and the prophet was consequently deceived. (I have seen this sort of thing happening in supposedly Christian groups which went off the rails.) Deuteronomy 18:15-22 provides the primary test of a prophet – that what he says comes to pass (v22). However this has to be qualified by examples like Jonah, where his message produced God’s desired result of repentance – this example shows that the primary purpose of prophecy directed towards outsiders or the unfaithful is to bring them to God.

Conclusions

The role of a prophet is to intercede for people that they may come to repentance, and provide God inspired teaching applied to the situation that will build up God’s people (the “children of Israel” in the OT and the church in the NT). In the New Testament the “testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”,

and the purpose of a prophet's words is to aid people to come to repentance, and build them up in faith to be effective Christians. It is a responsible activity, and the prophet needs to be sure his inspiration is the Holy Spirit, and that what he says is consistent with Scripture. Prophesying should now be normally undertaken within a church fellowship context, with care to avoid deception, since a prophet is likely to be especially subject to such attack. Any message needs to be conveyed in a way that is not likely to be misinterpreted, so the prophet needs to understand and take account of the worldview of the people he addresses.

“Test all things and hold fast to that which is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

This paper should be read along with the following further reading:

Assessing Today's Prophets and Prophecies

Introduction to intercessory prayer

Overcoming under trial

These may also be helpful:

The Gift of Tongues

The Baptism in the Spirit

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk) (v2 29.12.2013; 7.9.2018)

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