

## ***Five-Fold Ministry Gifts***

### ***Part 3: Prophet***

#### **Introduction**

The importance of the prophet in the economy of God is best expressed by Amos 3:7: *Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.* This is still true. Though historically, there have been seasons when the word of the Lord was scarce (i.e., 1 Samuel 3:1), there have always been, and will continue to be, those chosen and anointed by the Lord to announce and proclaim what he purposes to do. The Lord does nothing without first revealing it to his servants the prophets.

People want to know, “Is there any word from the Lord.” We do not find our sustenance on *bread alone* but on *every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4). Under the New Covenant the word of the Lord has exploded and is not at all rare. This is because God has spoken definitively in these last days through his Son (see Hebrews 1:1) and his word is in us. In addition, he has poured out the gift of prophecy which is available to all who have been born again by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. Does this mean that the mantle, designation and office of the prophet are no longer needed? It could, but it doesn't. The New Testament witness is that God continues to place men and women in the New Covenant church whom he designates prophets.

#### **Prophets and Prophecy**

As noted in the introduction to the five-fold ministry, there is a difference between the gift of prophecy and the office of the prophet. We can and should all prophesy, but we are not all prophets. Paul's longing for the church was that we would all eagerly desire and learn to prophesy so that the body of Christ would be edified (see 1 Corinthians 14). We should all seek to grow and become proficient and sensitive in the exercise of the gift of prophecy. The promise of Joel 2, fulfilled in Acts 2 and beyond is, *I will pour out my Spirit on all people...and they will prophesy* (Acts 2:17-18). The promise is for us and for our children: we are meant to prophesy the word of the Lord. The Lord wants us all to speak his word to others *for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort* (1 Corinthians 14:3)—whether that be the gospel message or some other word from his heart.

The Holy Spirit could come upon anyone under the Old Covenant and they could prophesy, but that did not mean that they were necessarily prophets. Two examples come to mind:

*So Moses...brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and He took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied...two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. —Numbers 11:24-26*

*As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him; the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he joined in their prophesying. When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, "What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" -1 Samuel 10:9-11*

In actuality, Saul was not also among the prophets. The Spirit of God can come upon anyone (i.e., Balaam's donkey/Caiaphas) at anytime, and they can prophesy the word of the Lord. That being said, not many can, or should, claim to be a prophet. Though every local congregation should seek to have the prophet(s) in place, not many should presume to be a prophet because they will certainly be judged more strictly. I have heard it taught that the office of prophet under the Old Covenant is of a different nature than the office of prophet under the New Covenant. Not really.<sup>1</sup> The difference is not in the office of a prophet but in the availability and operation of the gift of prophecy. Under the Old and New Covenants the function of the prophet is very similar. This paper will not attempt to deal with the proper operation of the gift of prophecy in the church—a very important subject—but only with the nature of the office of a prophet.

Was the test of the Old Testament prophet stricter according to Deuteronomy 18:20-22?:

*A prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death." You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.*

Some who oppose the modern New Testament prophet say that anyone who claims to be a prophet should have one-hundred percent accuracy in what they proclaim or predict—otherwise they have not met the biblical criteria for a prophet and consequently, they must be put to death. There are two things wrong with this argument. First is the punitive application of the Law which is no longer valid under the New Covenant—as if we are going to stone someone in the age of grace. The test of a prophet, however, is still the same. They must not presume to speak on their own but only in the name of the Lord, and their prophecies must be tested for accuracy. Second is the underlying assumption that someone could not be consistently accurate in prophetic ministry today. But what would handicap a New Testament prophet in comparison to an Old Covenant one? If an Old Testament prophet could be consistently accurate, why not a New Testament prophet? Would not a prophet who knows Jesus have a keener sensitivity to the word of the Lord considering the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit and that *the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy* (Revelation 19:10)? Again, this is where the function of the prophet is different from the function of the general gift of prophecy. No one expects the Christian who is developing his or her prophetic gift to be fully mature in their ministry. We should encourage the exercise of the prophetic gift in the church. It is the consistent employment of this gift, along with the development of the character of the man or woman of God, which give cause to the church to receive him or her as a prophet of God.

## **The Nature and Work of a Prophet**

What is a prophet? There are three Hebrew nouns for those who were called to the prophetic office. One is “nabi” which means, “a spokesperson,” and the other two are “hozeh” and “ro’eh” which mean “seer.” The New Testament Greek noun, “prophetes” does not lend new insight into the meaning—but there is no deviation from the Hebrew understanding of the meaning of “prophet.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a prophet is a designated spokesperson for Yahweh—with the ability to hear and see heavenly revelation concerning past, present and future events.

The function of a prophet can be understood in part from these Scriptures concerning the established prophets of Israel:

- **Moses:** *Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.* -Exodus 4:12. *The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend* - Exodus 33:11
- **Samuel:** *In those days, the word of the Lord was rare... “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.”* -1 Samuel 3:1, 10. *The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the*

ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel. -1 Samuel 3:19-4:1

- **David:** *"The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue."* -2 Samuel 23:2. *The patriarch David ...was a prophet* -Acts 2:29
- **Elijah:** *Now Elijah said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."* -1 Kings 17:1
- **Isaiah:** *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people..."* -Isaiah 6:8-9
- **Jeremiah:** *The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."* -Jeremiah 4:1-10

Here is what we glean from the above examples concerning the calling and function of the prophet:

- The call of the prophet must be initiated by God
- The call to be a prophet often comes in a profound encounter with the Lord.
- It is the Lord who instructs the prophet what to say. The word of the Lord comes to the prophet and they speak what they are given.
- The word of the Lord and prophetic revelation usually comes out of intimacy of relationship.
- The word of the prophet is authoritative and effectual.
- The ministry of the prophet will in most cases be recognized by the people of God as authentic.
- The word and work of the prophet goes beyond the exercise of the simple gift of prophecy which is to *strengthen, encourage and comfort*. The prophet is called to tear down as well as to build up.

## New Testament Prophets

When we think of prophets, Old Testament personalities are the ones who usually come to mind. Even John the Baptist, the most famous New Testament prophet, is considered the last of the Old Covenant prophets. Though the terms "New Testament" and "prophet" typically do not go together in our thinking and teaching, the Scripture says that *God's household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone* (Ephesians 2:19-20). The office of the prophet is pre-eminent in the New Testament Church along with the office of apostle. Jesus said, *"I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute"* (Luke 11:49). Paul said that *in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets...* (1 Corinthians 12:28). So we see that prophets are mentioned in the same breath as apostles and are to play a prominent role in the establishment and operation of God's church.

The following are the examples of New Testament prophets who are specifically noted in the book of Acts:

- **The Jerusalem Prophets:** *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch* (Acts 11:27). One of these prophets was,
- **Agabus:** *Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea* (Acts 11:28-29). *After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he*

took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done" (Acts 21:10-14).

- **Philip's Daughters:** *We...stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied* (Acts 21:8-9). Though not specifically identified as prophets, chances that Philip's daughters were prophets because of their prophetic reputation.
- **Judas and Silas:** *Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers* (Acts 15:32).
- **The Antioch Prophets:** *In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul* (Acts 13:1).

Admittedly, we do not have a lot of biographical detail regarding the lives of the prophets of the early church. That they were in the church is without question and that their role in the church was important has already been established. You can see by the two accounts regarding Agabus that he played a very important role in the life of the early church. The word he spoke was authoritative and appropriate action and attitude came as a result.

### **Why Prophets are Needed in the Church**

We would do well in the church today to embrace not only the gift of prophecy but the office of the prophet. When Agabus spoke the church listened and benefited from the word of the Lord. The word of the prophet is generally weightier than a prophecy that may come from a general gathering of the congregation as the gifts of the Spirit are flowing. A number of years ago a prophet by the name of Nita Johnson was ministering in our church. Of course, we gave her freedom to minister the word of the Lord as she was led. She predicted publically that my wife, Sherry, and I would enter a season of favour with our denomination but then we would be "catapulted" out of the church by denominational officials. I questioned her the next day whether that word would have been better given privately because a few people in the church were naturally upset by it. She said she had considered that but was deeply constrained to offer it before the entire church—an explanation which I accepted. Two months later Sherry and I were in La Plata, Argentina in a church pastored by Sergio Scattaglioni. A man from their "company of prophets" told us that in two years there would be a major change in our ministry. When we returned home we noticed a rise in favour in the denomination (Sherry was voted the "Alumnus of the Year" by the denominational college) but two years (to the week) after our word in Argentina we received a letter from our denomination saying that if we did not cease from certain charismatic activities our ministerial credentials would be revoked. The news did not shake the church for they said, "Well, isn't that what Nita said would happen?" We and the church had been prepared by the ministry of the prophet.

In addition to the benefits associated with operation of the gift of prophecy, we need prophets:

- To build our faith
- To counsel leaders
- To confront wrongdoing
- To give individual and corporate direction
- To confirm the word of the Lord
- To prepare us for major life and ministry change
- To identify and warn against false prophets

## **The Character and Covering of the Prophet**

Because the voice of the prophet carries so much authority, there is potential for great damage in the lives of people if prophets or their word becomes corrupted. Most cults are started by persons with mutant apostolic or prophetic callings. To speak the word of the Lord with divine revelation and startling accuracy is heady stuff. Pride can quickly defile the prophet of the Lord if he or she does not have the character and accountability to handle the power of the word of God. One of the most phenomenally gifted prophets that I have known caused much damage to the body of Christ in our city, shattering the faith of dozens of vulnerable believers and nearly wrecking the ministry of one of our most vital and vibrant fellowships. He had become haughty in his giftedness and eventually sought to control people through harshness and fleshly indulgence. Those in apostolic authority eventually rose up to discipline him and curtail his public ministry, but not until the damage had already been done.

The development of the character of the prophet is paramount in the development of the prophet. Character is many times more important than gifting in the establishment of the prophet. It takes much time for a prophet to come into his own. John Paul Jackson says that it takes at least ten years to make a prophet.<sup>2</sup> Prophets, like apostles, have always been refined through persecution and suffering. To some extent this is true for all Christians, but to a greater degree for prophets. The Lord is jealous over his word and needs those he can trust to handle it with humility and the fear of the Lord.

Character is not developed in a vacuum. The prophet needs to be submitted to apostolic and local church authority. He or she has to have a spiritual covering. The prophet who was mentioned earlier who did much damage in our city had his most effective ministry when he was submitted to apostolic covering. For a season in his life he traveled and ministered with a recognized apostle. They travelled as a team and he was submitted to the authority of the apostle. He thrived and was a blessing to many.

The importance of the teacher in the five-fold ministry team is also key in the development and protection of the prophet. Many of the greatest prophets of the last century have fallen into serious doctrinal error which could have been prevented if they had the counsel of recognized teachers in the body of Christ. Prophets are prone to doctrinal error more than any other five-fold office because their ministry is the most subjective of the five. They are constantly proclaiming by faith what they hear in their spirits (see Romans 12:6), but what they hear can get corrupted if not kept pure by sound doctrine. The use of the prophetic anointing can go sideways, and a prophet who once prophesied by the Spirit of God can lose discernment and even become influenced by a familiar spirit.

## **False Prophets**

The fact that Jesus warned against false prophets indicates that there would be true prophets. Wherever there is the precious there will be the counterfeit. That there will be false prophets should be no surprise considering the importance of the true prophet. Here are the warnings that Jesus gave us:

*"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.* –Matthew 7:15-16

*At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved...For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible –Matthew 24:10-13, 24*

False prophets are not that hard to recognize. The key, according to Jesus, is to see past the outward anointing and look for godly fruit. Both true prophets and false prophets will operate in the supernatural. Some Christians are so fearful of false prophets that any one who operates supernaturally is suspected to be a

false prophet because of Jesus' warnings in Matthew 24. The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub. For some people, like Jehovah's Witnesses, any kind of supernatural ministry is an indication that you are in league with the Devil. But remember that Jesus said that it is blasphemy to attribute the work of the Spirit to Satan. This is why we need discernment.

This discernment comes from examining fruit: Fruit of character, fruit of ministry and fruit of doctrine.

- **Character:** Is the fruit of the Spirit evidenced in the prophet's life? Are love, patience and self-control exhibited? What about family life? Are they faithful to their spouse and are their children respectful and obedient? Is there integrity in financial dealings? Is there humility? Are they submitted to godly authority? Have they been refined by suffering for the sake of the name of Christ? Or is there pride and are they attempting, like Balaam, to profit from their gift and office?
- **Ministry:** Is the church built up and the kingdom of God advanced through their prophetic ministry? Do they speak to *itching ears* appealing to the idols in peoples' hearts (see Ezekiel 14), or do they proclaim the unmitigated word of the Lord?
- **Doctrine:** Does the prophet's doctrine line up with the truth of the gospel (I am talking here about the basic tenets of the faith and not disputable matters that many religious witch-hunters will try to split hairs about)? Do they acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (see 1 John 4:2-3)? Do they preach the crucified, risen Lord? Do they believe in the virgin birth and the immanent return of the Lord? Do they acknowledge and warn people about the judgement to come?

Most false prophets in the world—like psychics, witches, cult leaders and new age guides do not prophesy in the name of the Lord and are easily recognized. In Jeremiah 14:14 the Lord identifies four categories of false prophecy that will further help us to identify the false from the true when someone is claiming to speak for God: *"The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds."*

- **False Visions:** These are actual visions, but they are not from the Lord. They are spiritual in nature and come from the one who *masquerades as an angel of light* (2 Corinthians 11:14). Joseph Smith and Mohammed had false visions.
- **Divinations:** Prophets who attempt to speak for God through divination (forbidden/occultic means) are necessarily false and an abomination. Modern divination includes tarot cards, palm reading and psychic energy.
- **Idolatries:** Prophesying "idolatries" could mean speaking "worthless things," but more specifically I see this as the prophet prophesying according to the idolatries he or she sees within the hearts of their audience (see Ezekiel 14:1-4).
- **Delusions of their Own Minds:** This would be the most common. People often mistake their own understanding for the voice of God, but to speak it as such puts it into the category of false prophecy.

## Conclusion

The need for the prophet today is no less than it has ever been. The vacuum the church has left in the area of the prophetic has been illegitimately filled by psychics and new age gurus. Both the church and the world need to hear from those who are truly called to speak for God. The direction and counsel meant to come from the prophet of God is irreplaceable. We must have the ministry of the prophet if individuals and churches are to fulfill their destinies. May the church continue to bless and receive the office of the prophet.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion on this subject see John Bevere's book, *Thus Saith the Lord?*, 1999, Charisma House.

<sup>2</sup> See John Paul Jackson, *Developing Your Prophetic Gift*, Streams Ministries, 4 CD set.