

Prophecy And Discernment

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INTRODUCTION

The topic I have chosen might appear at first to be rather narrow in scope. Why only discernment of prophecy? Surely more things could be said about this important subject than just discernment? Indeed, more things could be said, but I have specifically chosen to focus on discerning prophecy for good reason.

Of all the gifts in the NT there is reason to believe that prophecy occupies a special place. The NT scholar James Dunn goes so far as to suggest that prophecy may be considered the central charisma in Paul.¹ It occurs in all the three lists of gifts mentioned by Paul (1 Cor 12:7-11; 12:27-31; Rom 12:3-8). It could also be seen as the basic means by which other gifts are expressed. Prophecy is first and foremost speech, and speech is the means by which a good many other gifts are exercised, e.g., word of wisdom, knowledge, encouragement, even preaching under special circumstances. There is evidence to suggest that in a special sense prophecy is not just one of the gifts of the Spirit, but the gift of the Spirit for the entire church. The Spirit, who is the gift of God for the “last days”, is seen, especially in Luke, as the “Spirit of prophecy”. To the extent that the church is viewed in Scripture as the community of the last days, the community oriented towards the future fulfillment of God’s purpose, the community in which the word is given, received and proclaimed in the power of the Spirit—to that extent, the church as a whole could be described as a prophetic community.²

But of all the gifts of God, prophecy also appears to be an enigmatic gift. As we shall see, there is a strange ambivalence in the way prophecy is presented in both the OT and NT. It is in view of this ambivalence that we are urged to critically evaluate prophets and prophecy. Jesus warns his disciples to beware of false prophets:

¹ *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), pp. 227, 232-33.

² See Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

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. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (Matt 7:15, 16).

Paul in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Thess 5 calls on the church to judge prophecies.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said (1 Cor 14:29).

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil (1 Thess 5:19-22).

In summary, we may say that because prophecy is one of the basic markers of the church, but at the same time because it is susceptible to misuse, it is imperative for the church to distinguish between true and false prophecy. Its ability to discern will determine whether it will maintain its identity as the true prophetic community.

We shall approach the question of discerning prophecy by trying to answer a number of related questions:

1. Is there a distinction between prophet/prophecy in the NT and in the OT? This question is important because it sets the context for understanding the nature of NT prophecy.
2. What can we learn from the early church fathers about the place of prophecy in the church? This question is also important because it is sometimes assumed that with the close of the canon, prophecy no longer played any significant role in the life of the church. We shall see that the early church fathers did not think so, and how they understand prophecy reveals an intimate connection between prophecy and the church.
3. But while prophecy is very important for the church, it also confronts the church with an issue of far-reaching consequence: there is an ambivalent dimension in NT prophecy. In the light of this ambivalence, how are we to distinguish between true and false prophets/prophecies?

'CHARISMATIC' PROPHETS AND THE 'VOCATIONAL' PROPHETS

If we look at the OT we can broadly distinguish two types of prophets: 'writing' prophets and the charismatic prophets. I say "broadly distinguish" because the distinction is not always clear-cut and there is some overlap between the two.

Vocational or Writing Prophets

By vocational prophets I am referring to prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and others who were called (Latin, *voco* = vocation) and sent by God to speak his word to the people (Jer 1; Ezek. 1-3; Isa 6; Amos 7:14-15). Many of these prophets also had dramatic experiences bordering on the ecstatic. Their prophecies were accompanied by visions, strange actions and an inner compulsion (e.g., Ezek 1; Dan 9; Isa 20:2-4). Jeremiah may be cited as a case in point.

Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot (20:8,9).

But the dominant characteristic of these prophets is not their ecstatic experiences but their being called and sent to proclaim a message from the Lord.

The Charismatic Prophets

There is also another group of prophets that seem to function differently. We don't really hear much of what they said. Most of the time the focus is on the *phenomenon* of prophecy rather than on the content of what they said.

E.g., in the episode of the 70 prophets (Num. 11:16-30):

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

"Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him [Moses], and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elder; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more" (v. 25).

In this instance prophecy appears to be a sign of the presence of the Spirit.

Sometimes in 'charismatic' prophets, their character appears ambiguous, e.g., 1 Sam 19:18ff.

When David had fled and made his escape, he went to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. Then he and Samuel went to Naioth and stayed there. Word came to Saul: "David is in Naioth at Ramah"; so he sent men to capture him. But when they saw a group of prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing there as their leader, the Spirit of God came upon Saul's men and they also prophesied. Saul was told about it, and he sent more men, and they prophesied too. Saul sent men a third time, and they also prophesied. Finally, he himself left for Ramah and went to the great cistern at Secu. And he asked, "Where are Samuel and David?"

"Over in Naioth at Ramah," they said.

So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came even upon him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. He stripped off his robes and also prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay that way all that day and night. This is why people say, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

The prophesying of Saul appears to be the means for David to make good his escape. In 1 Kings 13 we read of the strange behaviour of a "man

of God from Judah” and an “old prophet from Bethel” whose prophecy is a mixture of truths and lies (see especially vv.11-32).

The ‘charismatic’ prophecy in the OT confronts us with a deep problem that we must face when we try to evaluate NT prophecy. What are we to make of this moral ambiguity? Not all charismatic prophecies are morally ambivalent but not all charismatic prophecies are beyond question either.

NT Prophets

With this OT background in mind, we now turn to the NT. In the NT, “prophet” and “prophecy” appear to refer more frequently to the ‘charismatic’ type. Some scholars believe that the NT equivalent to the OT ‘writing’ prophets are the apostles and that NT prophets do not have any apostolic functions, i.e., they are not tasked with providing normative teachings for the church. Others, however, think that this distinction is too neat and does not always hold true.³

The NT mentions a number of prophets in the Christian community: Agabus (Acts 11:29; 21:10); five “prophets and teachers” at Antioch among whom are Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1-2); Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32); Anna (Lk. 2:36); Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9). What we find is that while a number of prophets are distinctly identified in the NT, little is said about their functions *as* prophets, except for Agabus. Another instance is found in Acts 13:1. Here Paul and Barnabas are identified as prophets and commissioned by the Spirit to go on their first missionary journey. At their first stop in Cyprus, Luke appears to be giving us an instance of Paul functioning as a prophet (vv. 9-11):

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

³ See the discussion in Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp. 213ff.

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

Luke's use of the phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit" in connection with some oracular speech appears to be his way of highlighting the charismatic dimension of prophecy (cf. Acts 4:8 where a similar description was applied to Peter).⁴

Both Luke and Paul stress prophecy as essentially to *encourage*. Acts 15:32: "And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, *exhorted* the brethren with many words and strengthened them." 1 Cor 14:3: "He who prophecies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." 14:31: "You can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged".

Nature of prophetic speech

It seems that the common element that runs through prophetic speech is the sense that the "word" is given by God for his people. Although not all the prophets appear to display "ecstasy" the content of their message is usually understood to be God's communication, "the word of the Lord", rather than "explanations" or "expositions" of God's word by a preacher. Thus, Turner defines prophecy as essentially "oracular speech". But it represents a broad spectrum from apostolic proclamation (which is authoritative because it accords with the gospel) to those of mixed quality.

Prophecy must not be equated with preaching even though it may have a kerygmatic element. Preaching is the attempt to explicate the word in the way the preacher knows best. The OT equivalent of preaching may be found in the wisdom literature. The book of Ecclesiastes in Hebrew is *Qoheleth* or "Preacher." In the NT, the truth of preaching is to be found in its conformity to gospel norms. Prophecy may share this characteristic with preaching, i.e., its content could be the gospel, but it also addresses the particular situation of the hearers. Prophecy has the character of "inspired speech", something "from the Lord" which He wants the community to hear. A true prophecy brings to pass what it proclaims. This is not necessarily a prediction. In fact, most times it would be of the nature of encouragement.

⁴ See Stronstad, *Prophethood*, pp. 109-111.

But what makes it true is that it actually encourages and strengthens the believers. A prophecy that uses many encouraging words (“Don’t worry, the Lord will take care of your problem” etc.) but does not actually encourage anyone, but rather creates questioning in people’s minds, is of doubtful quality.

Prophetic speech implies that God’s working includes addressing us in our particular circumstances. The Christian church’s continuing acceptance of prophecy stems from the belief that God is a personal being who is free to speak. Christian life is not just a matter of following general principles and guidelines. Christianity has to do with personal relationship, not just a matter of observing a set of ethical principles. If Christianity were the latter, one can get along in life more or less on our own, without much direct intervention from God. Some Christians seem to prefer their life that way: everything could be controlled and measured, and follows a predictable pattern. There are no surprises. But God, being a personal God, is also the God of the particular. But precisely because of this, we cannot simply rely on past precedents. But then, the particular events need to be evaluated more stringently.

The ambivalence of NT prophecy

There is one more significant characteristic in NT prophecy which seems to represent a carryover from OT ‘charismatic’ prophecies, namely, the moral ambivalence associated with some charismatic prophets. The strange stories of 1 Kings 13 and of Saul among the prophets have somewhat similar parallels in the NT: the story of Caiaphas, the high priest (John 11:51-52); Jesus’ warning that even an “evildoer” could prophesy (Matt 7:22); and Paul’s guidelines on the need to judge prophecy (1 Cor 14:29).

There are a number of related questions raised by this phenomenon: It seems so out of character with our expectation of words that are supposed to have their source in divine revelation. How could God use unholy people to communicate his holy word? Space does not allow us go into such questions. I would only say that many discerning Christians in church history recognized that being able to operate spiritual gifts was not considered to be a sign of spiritual maturity, nor is it a proof of personal integrity (cf. the story of Balaam).

In brief, we could say that NT prophecy appears to be generally closer to the OT 'charismatic' type of prophecy. This close affinity between NT prophecy and the OT 'charismatic' prophets/prophecies, however, creates a real problem: it also seems to share the same ambivalence as in the OT. But before we address this problem, we want to look at how some early church fathers understand prophecy and how this understanding actually heightens the problem of discernment rather than solve it.

THE PLACE OF PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH FATHERS

Many early Christian writings argue that the truth that the church proclaims is proven by the presence of the gifts of the Spirit in the church especially prophecy. Prophecy and other charismata are seen as part and parcel of healthy church life. Both the *Didache* (early 2nd C) and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (late 1st C) show that the prophetic ministry had a very important place in the congregation and worship. The *Didache* refers to a class of people called "prophets" with a recognizable position in the congregation. *Hermas*, however, speaks more of "the one who has the divine Spirit" rather than "prophet". It seems to suggest something like "congregational prophecy" rather than an official position. It has closer affinity with the spirit of 1 Cor. 14.

In the 2nd C, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus spoke of the presence of the prophetic gift in the church as proof that the church was in continuity with the truth and with the apostles. Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* says, "From the fact that even to this day the gifts of prophecy exist among us Christians, you should realize that the gifts which had resided among your people have now been transferred to us." Similarly, Irenaeus declares:

Wherefore also, those who are in truth his disciples, receiving grace from him do works in his name, so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gifts which each one has received from him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe and join themselves to the church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions and utter prophetic expressions. Others still heal the sick by laying their hands upon them and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for

many years, And what more shall I say? It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the church, throughout the whole world, has received from God, in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and which she exerts day by day for the benefit of the Gentiles, neither practising deception upon any, nor taking any reward from them. For as she has received freely from God, freely also does she minister to others.⁵

Irenaeus further argued that it was the heretics who denied the gifts of prophecy in the church. The spirit of prophecy remained in the true church. In other words, prophecy was a sign of the true church's continuity with the apostles. In fact, one unknown Christian writer refuted the Montanists precisely on this score: Montanists could no longer claim any prophetic gift after the death of Montanus and his first followers, including Maximilla, a prophetess, whereas the true church continued to exercise the prophetic gifts.⁶

What these patristic sources show is that prophecies and "prophets" continued to play an important role after the apostolic age. While we today may not give as much weight to the presence of prophecy as a sign of being the true church, we can at least appreciate the point the early church fathers made that its presence is compatible with what we know the true church to be. In other words, while prophecy alone does not prove that the church is true, it does show at least that if the church is true, it should manifest some form of prophetic gift. Prophetic gift is a normal part of church life. In a way, what the church fathers are saying is that prophetic gifts are the sign of true spiritual life. It is not enough to propound right ideas and preach sound, expository sermons. There is such a thing as *dead* orthodoxy. The true church is the community in which truth is alive and this living truth is evidenced by the presence of prophecies.

⁵ Cited by Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal* (Ann Arbor, Mi.: Servant Books, 1982), pp. 111-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

DISCERNING CONGREGATIONAL PROPHECY

So far I have shown that NT prophecy is more like the ‘charismatic’ prophecies in the OT. Prophecies are a very important part of church life and identity, according to the church fathers, yet NT prophecies have the same ambivalence as those found among the ‘charismatic’ prophets. This problem raises the obvious question that we must now address: how are we to tell between true and false prophecy and what is the real function of prophecy? In the light of the ambivalent nature of the prophetic gift (1 Kings 13; Matt 7:22; John 11:51 etc.) prophecies must be evaluated (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19-22).

The function of congregational prophecy

It may be because of the ambivalent nature of NT prophecy that the NT does not associate prophecy with personal guidance. Paul does not speak of predictive prophecy but of encouragement, much less do we find anything like “prophetic guidance.” The two things that many modern charismatics make much of when they think about prophecy—prediction and guidance—are not even given any prominence in the NT! This fact is poignantly illustrated in the story of Paul. Paul knew by the Spirit that he must go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24). But on the way, people tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem “by the Spirit” (Acts 21:4, 10-14). Paul, however, did not follow their suggestions.

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).

The lack of evidence in the NT of instances of “prophetic guidance” does not mean that it has to be completely dismissed. We cannot pre-empt God’s freedom to act as he sees fit in a given situation. But we must at the same time ensure that any sort of guidance must be closely scrutinized and not accepted unquestioningly. For the most part prophecies are “inspired speeches” which seek to encourage the church and assure the church that God is still with us. Even in these instances, we need to subject them to careful evaluation to see if it is truly from God. As a rule of thumb, we may accept a prophetic word as from the Lord if it truly encourages and ministers to us. If it does not, we should not feel obliged to accept it.

There are basic guidelines regarding the person and the message which should help us evaluate a prophecy. If a person is mentally unbalanced or disturbed or if he or she is an attention-seeker, we would do well to be cautious about such a person’s prophecy. On the other hand, if one is prayerful, responsible and is in the habit of acting only after careful deliberation, such a person is more likely to be prophesying genuinely. As Jesus himself warns us concerning false prophets, “By their fruits you shall know them.”

In terms of the content of prophecies, negatively, a true prophecy must not be at variance with Scripture and the basic teachings of the church. It must not be contrary to charity, unity and peace. Beware of prophecies that claim to be giving “new revelations”. Positively, a true prophecy should be more than something edifying. After all, a good sermon can be edifying too. It has the character of “a word from the Lord”; it is “a word that not only *says* but *does*.”⁷

CONCLUSION

In the light of the foregoing discussion I think we can safely draw a few conclusions regarding the nature of the prophetic gift in the church today.

1. The presence of prophecy in the church today is a sign that the church is in fact the church of the Spirit. Therefore prophecy should not just be passively tolerated but actively encouraged. To actively encourage does not mean that we should go about to teach people how to

⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

prophecy (as some modern charismatics are trying to do); rather, we should be open to what the Spirit of God is saying to the church. We must recognize that God's working in the church includes his word coming to us in the form of a "revelation".

2. However, we must also recognize the limits of prophecy. Its use for personal guidance must be carefully regulated. We do have an instance of prophecy in the NT providing a basis for a certain action.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you (1 Tim 4:14).

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands (2 Tim. 1:6).

What we notice in these two passages is that the collective leadership of the church or an apostle plays a vital role in determining the direction of the church or the individual. The prophetic word occurs in the context of an open and affirming collective church leadership that recognizes God's gift to the individual. In other words, if there is prophetic guidance, it comes from the church as a whole represented by the leadership's giving a confirming voice to God's will for the individual. Timothy had responded to God's call and the church confirmed that call by the laying on of hands.

3. Prophetic words of all kinds must be subject to evaluation at all times. Precisely because of the moral ambivalence of prophetic ministries, the church cannot be too careful. Prophets (especially the self-appointed ones) who become a law to themselves and refuse to subject themselves to any church authority must be treated with the gravest suspicion. We must not hamper prophetic gifts, but at the same time leaders must always exercise oversight, correction and guidance if the church is to be truly a "community of prophecy".

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