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THE HOLY SPIRIT

IS THE GIFT OF PROPHECY FOR TODAY?

Lesson 9

There are today among Christians two extremes on the Holy Spirit. Those who are deathly afraid of the Holy Spirit and those who have opened up to the Spirit but are guilty of all kinds of abuses. It seems to me that the truth is somewhere in the middle. God has given the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts to the church and these gifts are to be governed by the inspired Bible and placed under the sovereign control of God.

COMMAND TO DESIRE PROPHECY 1 Cor. 14:1

“Follow the way of love . . .” First Corinthians 14 follows the great love chapter. While spiritual gifts are important, the Corinthians were to make love their number one aim and their chief priority. Love is a more excellent and higher way than that of spiritual gifts

“And eagerly desire spiritual gifts,” All gifts may be sought by the Christian. The Corinthians, however, were to seek the better spiritual gifts and tongues was the least of all the gifts. The Apostle Paul does not say a Christian is never to seek the gift of tongues, but if it is the least of all the spiritual gifts, then it should be sought last and not first. Paul never says tongues are wrong or of the devil. While Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues, he strongly encourages believers to seek after the gift of prophecy.

“Especially the gift of prophecy.” -- The gift of prophecy is more valuable to the church than the gift of tongues because prophecy is a greater gift than tongues. Since prophecy is of great value to the church, Christians should seek after this gift for themselves as well as for the congregation.

DEFINING PROPHECY

What is prophecy and is it for today? The official office of prophet in the Old and New Testaments involved receiving divine, inspired and infallible revelation from God and giving it to the people in the common language, for in those ancient days there was not a closed canon of Scripture consisting of 66 books of the Bible. In a technical sense, there is no more inspired infallible prophecy because the canon is closed and God is giving no more infallible revelation.

However, a distinction must be made between the office of prophet and prophecy as a gift. There are no more Prophets who formed the foundation of the church and gave infallible communications. ***“Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with***

Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Those with the office of Prophet spoke infallibly and what they said always came to pass. ***“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” (Deut. 18:22).*** However, in a non-technical sense, there may be a type of prophecy today. *This gift would be the ability to speak the mind of God whether that is by preaching the Bible or telling something which God spontaneously brings to mind.* This lesser form of prophecy is not inspired or infallible and is subject to error. This lower form of prophecy is always mixed with error; therefore, it is not intrinsically revelatory.

When we compare prophecy to the gift of preaching, we see how something could be of God and yet mixed with error. When a preacher is preaching God’s Word in so much that he quotes God’s Word directly or is consistent with God’s Word in principle, then what he preaches is truth, but his sermons may also contain error because the preacher is human.

“The speeches that these people give are not inspired--that is; the speeches are not identically the speech of God in such a way that they carry unqualified divine authority and perfection. Such speeches may nevertheless be inspiring in the popular sense of the word. We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is present. We thank God for the gifts that are exercised, and we know that when properly exercised they come from the power of the Spirit. But the results are always fallible and must be checked by the standard of the Bible” (Vern S. Poythress, *“Modern Spiritual Gifts As Analogous To Apostolic Gifts”*).

So it is when people claim to prophesy - there is always a mixture of truth and error and the truth is determined by how closely the one prophesying sticks with the exact Word or the principles of the Word.

It is important to understand that “prophecy” and “revelation” are sometimes used in the New Testament in a non-revelatory sense. **Prophecy:** Rev. 19:10 – the message attested by Jesus and about Jesus is the essence of prophetic proclamation. Surely, this continues until the end of the age. Acts 15:32, I Chron. 25:1,5; Acts 17:10-13 show that prophecy is sometimes declarative. These verses show that the word “prophecy” can mean something less than inspired and infallible words. **Revelation:** Eph. 1:17 – “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.” This seems to be insight and connected with “enlightenment” in Eph. 1:18. Philip. 3:15 – God reveals, gives insight, or makes clear when off the mark doctrinally. These verses show there are other meanings to *apokalupsis* than just special revelation. These verses help one to understand that the word “revelation” in I Corinthians 14:2 may have a lesser meaning that inspired infallible revelation.

EXPLAINING PROPHECY

In Acts 21:4 it says of the disciples of Tyre, ***“Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.”*** This appears to be a prophecy towards Paul. Surely, Paul would not have gone if he felt this was God’s very words. In Acts 21:10-11, Agabus prophesied that the Jews of Jerusalem would ***“bind Paul and deliver him in to the hands of the Gentiles.”*** This prophecy

was not totally correct because in Acts 21:33 it says that the Romans not the Jews bound Paul: ***"The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains."***

When prophecies were given in a congregation no more than three could speak and the others were to weigh what was said. ***"Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said" (I Cor. 14:29).*** The prophets were to weigh or sift out the good from the bad. This would not happen if this were absolute, divine, inspired truth. Obviously, there was truth mixed with error. Also, prophets often interrupted one another. ***"And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop" (I Cor. 14:30).*** If prophets were speaking infallible truth, it is hard to imagine they would be interrupted and not allowed to finish the message. It appears that congregational prophecies were flawed and definitely less authoritative than scripture. Therefore, New Testament prophecy is merely human words prompted by the Holy Spirit, not God's infallible words, and not equal to God's words in authority.

When a person senses God wants him to prophesy, he should preface his words with, "It appears" or "I believe" or "I think the Lord is putting this on my heart and in my mind." To say, "The Lord told me" is too presumptuous and arrogant.

The Holy Spirit spontaneously bringing things to mind is referred to as "a revelation." ***And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop" (I Cor. 14:30).*** The word "revelation" here is used in the sense of impressions being put into the mind. These impressions or spontaneous thoughts are passed through the human personality that is sinful and therefore liable to error. Man's thoughts often get mixed up with God's impressions. Often these impressions are accompanied with a sense of urgency. Most Christians at times have experienced these impressions and a sense of urgency to make them known. Intuitions prompted by the Holy Spirit would be revelation and the giving of that impression to the congregation would be a prophecy (not perfect).

Putting thoughts into the mind by God will not come by hearing the external voice of God but these will be internal impressions and sometimes they will be quite strong. Prophecy may occasionally involve thoughts about the future as in the case of Agabus' prophecy about Paul (Acts 21:11). Sometimes prophecy will be used by God to convict of sin. ***"But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you" (I Cor. 14:24-25).*** But the major use of prophecy is to build up, encourage and console God's people. ***"But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (I Cor. 14:3).*** A very practical purpose of prophecy is that it speaks to people's hearts in a very spontaneous, direct way.

Some have put "revelation" and "prophecy" under the heading of illumination. Guidance would include intuitions, impressions, feelings, urgings, impulses, etc. Some have also put this into the area of common grace and general revelation.

PRACTICAL USE OF PROPHECY

Prophecy seems to be a gift that many in a congregation may exercise. ***“Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy. . .” (I Cor. 14:31).*** Prophecy is not just a gift for skilled teachers. Some obviously will be more gifted in this area than others, but Christians should be encouraged to prophesy when God is prompting the mind and heart to do so. This would certainly help the people in our churches from becoming mere spectators. It would also necessitate Christians having a designated time for prophecy to take place in a worship service. Churches often contribute to spectator Christianity by quenching the Holy Spirit in the area of prophecy. ***“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt” (I Thess. 5:19-20).***

The gift of prophecy is to be highly valued by the individual Christian and by the church as a whole. ***“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (I Cor. 14:31).*** The gift of prophecy could help balance individual Christians and churches that are highly cerebral and intellectual.

If on a practical level someone gives a prophecy, how should we receive it? Merely receive it as information. It may or may not be true. If there is truth in the prophecy, you will be convicted, or, if you are not convicted, the Holy Spirit may confirm the truth with several other prophecies or circumstances. We neither totally reject nor credulously accept these prophecies. We wait and see.

SAFEGUARDS FOR PREVENTING THE ABUSE OF PROPHECY

Prophecy deals in the realm of the subjective. Prophecies which try to control people or manipulate situations are to be avoided. Prophecy, which dogmatically predicts the future, is to come under great suspicion. Prophecy is based on intuition and is therefore subjective. Whenever there is subjectivity, there is the possibility that evil spirits can get involved. And there is a greater possibility of the flesh (sin nature) being involved. False prophesying can lead to great evil. It is the task of the church and the elders to discern the spirits and to test all prophecy.

“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” (I Thess. 5:19-21).

There are limits, boundaries and safeguards to put on prophecy. They are as follows: 1) all prophecy is subject to the inspired, infallible Bible and never contradicts it; 2) all prophecy is to be tested by the church and the elders in particular; 3) any prophecy which is not primarily for building up, encouraging and consoling the Christian is suspect; 4) people giving prophecies must be willing to be publicly questioned by the elders; 5) prophecy used for power play or to draw attention to self should be rejected; and 6) all prophecies must be prefaced with “I think” or “It appears to me” or “It seems as though the Lord is saying this to me” because no prophecy is inspired and no prophet is infallible today.