

Pneumatology
The Doctrine of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit

TWO EXTREMES:
STOPPING THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
and
FAILING TO REGULATE PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH

1 THESSALONIANS 5:19-21

1 CORINTHIANS 14

INTRODUCTION

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. 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.

The specific spiritual gift we will be discussing today is that of prophecy. I give this with fear and trembling because I know how controversial this subject is among Christians and certainly no gift is more damaging to the church of Christ when used incorrectly. Furthermore, through the years I have changed my mind on this particular gift. Originally I held it was a first century gift that went out of existence after the first century because the gift of prophecy was used to give direct revelation to a young church that had no complete Bible. Yet, as I read the Bible, it seemed as though prophecy was equivalent to preaching the Word of God with particular insight. But, I was still not satisfied with this explanation. Yet I was very uneasy with many of my Charismatic brethren who said that New Testament prophecy was equivalent to Old Testament prophecy which was given in the spirit of “thus says the Lord.” The Charismatics seemed to put prophecy on an equivalent level with the inspired Bible or in some cases above it so as to state that God is somehow giving continued revelation today. I was convinced that God closed the canon of the Bible and there is therefore no more inspired, infallible revelation today. As I continued to read the Bible, there just seemed to be more to the gift of prophecy than I was understanding. A few years ago I was introduced to the book *The Gift of Prophecy In the New Testament and Today* by Wayne Grudem. I was given new insight into the gift. Grudem’s view is essentially where I am today on this subject, and I confess to you I’m still learning and have not closed my mind to any position.

PUTTING OUT THE SPIRIT’S FIRE vs. 19

This verse and all of 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 must be put in the context of the congregation of the Thessalonian church. The King James Bible says: “Quench not the Spirit” and the Living Bible says: “Do not smother the Holy Spirit.” To put out the fire is to stop the manifestations of the Spirit in the local church. This actually says, “Stop quenching the

Spirit,” indicating this is what the Thessalonians were doing and what any church can do! It is possible for an individual Christian or a congregation to stifle the work of the Holy Spirit by extinguishing His flaming power.

To “put out the Spirit’s fire” has been interpreted two ways. Most commentators say the Thessalonians were stifling the unusual manifestations of the Spirit in their church and the context is specifically about prophecy. The Thessalonians were just the opposite of the Corinthians who were abusing their spiritual gifts. Perhaps some in the Thessalonian church were frowning on any spectacular manifestations of the Spirit. Therefore, Paul is warning the Thessalonians of a mechanical order in their church which would discourage the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in His free operation. Other commentators say this is reading too much into the text. They say Paul was referring to the extinguishing of the power of the Spirit by sin in general – loafing, sexual immorality, and insubordination to elders. When it is true that sin grieves the Holy Spirit and diminishes His power, this context is about extinguishing the Spirit’s power by forbidding prophecy. I personally believe the context demands putting out the Spirit’s flame in relation to prophecy.

God wants His people to open up to the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit and not to fear His moving in their lives. How does a church put out the Spirit’s fire? Christians ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s promptings come in two areas: stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right. Every Christian has experienced inner guidance, Holy Spirit prompted feelings, indicating God wants him to do something or God wants him to stop something. As long as those feelings have a biblical basis, we are to give in, yield, submit to those feelings. Without fear, the Christian is to ask the Holy Spirit to do a sovereign, supernatural work in his life.

When Christians open up to the Holy Spirit, He will do wonderful works in the life of the church. He will use people we thought would never amount to anything. He will do the unexpected and move in strange, wonderful and mysterious ways upon the Christians who make up the church. However, the Spirit of God will never contradict the Word of God. Yet, the Spirit will think of things and do things that never occur to us, but He will always operate in conjunction with the truth of the Bible.

What we learn from this verse is that we Christians must not resist, grieve or quench the Spirit in our individual lives or the life of the church. The fire burns hot as we yield, submit and open up to the supernatural workings of a sovereign Spirit.

BY FORBIDDING PROPHECY – vs. 20

There were those in the Thessalonian church who were despising any prophetic utterances and therefore were forbidding the use of the gift of prophecy in their midst. The obvious conclusion is that to forbid this spiritual gift was wrong.

This raises the question: What is the gift of prophecy? And is the gift for today? There are no easy answers to these questions and obviously the Christian church is divided over the issue. There are at least four views on prophecy held by Christians today.

1. **The Gift of Prophecy is no longer active today.** These proponents state the prophet was one who received direct revelation from God and gave it to the church. The New Testament church had no completed canon of Scripture and received direct, inspired revelation from God, some of which has been

recorded as Scripture. All direct revelation from God through the prophets was not recorded, but that which was recorded and put down in the Bible is inspired. The church today has a completed canon of Scripture, therefore, there is no longer any need for the gift of prophecy.

2. **The Gift of Prophecy is equivalent to preaching.** This view states the prophetic gift today is not receiving direct revelation from God but preaching the revelation God has already given in the Bible. Prophesying is expository preaching whereby one opens the mind of God from the Word of God. This is perhaps the most commonly held position among evangelicals today.
3. **The Gift of Prophecy is receiving direct revelation from God and is for today.** This view says God is still giving continuing revelation today in the church. This revelation has the authority of God and is perfect. Prophecy is placed on the level of inspired Scripture and is as equally authoritative as the Bible as long as it does not contradict the Bible. This view is held by many in the charismatic part of the church. This view has sometimes produced serious abuses and errors.
4. **The Gift of Prophecy is receiving a type of revelation (enlightenment, impressions) from God and is for today.** This view holds that the canon of Scripture is closed, so no more direct, inspired, infallible revelation is happening today. Prophecy, therefore, is merely telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind. God still providentially works in the lives of Christians and can prompt inner thoughts in the mind of His people that can be a blessing to the church. In a primary sense of apostles and prophets who receive inspired revelation, there are no more of them. In the secondary sense, there is a gift of prophecy for the church. These prophecies are not inspired and they are always to be subjected to its agreeing with the inspired Bible. Assuming this position is the correct one, then let's try to examine it more closely.

In the Old Testament, prophets spoke with divine authority and when what they said was written down, it was inspired Scripture. They declared, "Thus says the Lord!" When we come to the New Testament, it was the Apostles who wrote inspired Scripture. The New Testament, however, does speak of prophets and the gift of prophecy. By New Testament times, the concept of prophet probably had the idea of one who speaks on the basis of some external influence. "Even one of their own has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons'" (Titus 1:12). "They blindfolded him and demanded, 'Prophecy!'" (Luke 22:64). The thought in both of these verses refers not to speaking absolute, divine authority, but telling something that has been revealed to the person. By the first century, the term prophet meant one who had "superhuman knowledge" or just "one who spoke a message." Therefore, the New Testament idea behind the concept of prophet and prophecies is not of one who speaks with absolute divine authority, but simply one who reports something God has laid on the heart or brought to the mind.

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 into the hands of the Gentiles." This prophecy

was not totally correct because in Acts 21:33 it says the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul. This prophecy seemed to contain some inaccuracy (error) and a lot of truth.

In the assembly of believers, when prophecies were given 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” (1 Cor. 14:29). The prophets were to examine to see if it was right or wrong. This would not happen if this was absolute, divine, inspired truth. Obviously, there was truth mixed with error. Also the prophets often interrupted one another. “And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop” (1 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 from God. 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 words, and not equal to God’s words in authority.

When a person senses God wants him to prophecy, 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.”

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” (1 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 which 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!’” (1 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 and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3). A very practical purpose of prophecy is that it speaks to people’s hearts in a very spontaneous, direct way.

Prophecy seems to be a gift that many in a congregation may exercise. “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy...” (1 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 prophecy 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.

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" (1 Cor. 14:1). The gift of prophecy could help balance individual Christians and churches that are highly cerebral and intellectual.

BY FAILING TO TEST ALL PROPHECY (21a): Test everything

All prophecies given in a local church are to be tested by the church and by the elders in particular. Human error can and does get mixed up with God's impression and each prophecy must be tested as to its accuracy and whether it build up the church. Prophecy may involve encouragement and exhortation. However, whoever gives a prophecy must be willing to submit it to the scrutiny of the leaders.

The Bible does not advocate a blanket acceptance of everything in the church that claims to be of the Holy Spirit. Everything, especially prophecy, must be tested. Perhaps people who sense God is giving them a prophecy should submit it to the leaders of the church in writing so that they can test its validity. This probably would not be necessary in all cases, but in some serious prophecies it would be an absolute necessity.

BY NOT HOLDING TO GOOD PROPHECY (21b): Hold on to the good

All prophecies must be deciphered and sifted so any error can be separated from the truth. Christians are commanded to hold on to that which is good.

BY AVIODING EVIL SPIRITS WHEN PROPHECYING (22)

Avoid every kind of evil. -- Prophecy is based on intuition and is therefore subjective. Whenever there is subjectivity there is the possibility that evil spirits can get involved. False prophesying can lead to great evil. Again, it is the task of the church and its leaders to discern the spirits and to test all prophecy.

CONCLUSION

Saved

Prophecy deals in the realm of the subjective. Prophecies which try to control people or manipulate situations are to be avoided and stopped. Prophecy which tries to dogmatically predict the future is to come under great suspicion.

There is a way to place limits and boundaries on prophecy. They are as follows:

1. All prophecy is subject to the inspired bible and never contradicts it.
2. All prophecy is to be tested by the church, and its leaders in particular.
3. Any prophecy which is not primarily for building up, encouraging and consoling the Christian is to be viewed with suspicion.
4. People giving prophecies must be willing to be publicly questioned by the leaders.
5. Prophecy used for power or to draw attention to self should be rejected.
6. All prophecies should 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.

It is my opinion that prophecies are given quite regularly in any evangelical church but we are not trained to recognize them or willing to accept them as such.

In a prayer meeting a Christian might stand up and say, "I'm burdened that we are not praying for our missionaries. God seems to be prompting me to say this to us." This is a form of prophecy.

Unsaved

For those who are not Christians, prophecy can play a part in their coming to Christ in a personal way. In a local church or in a small group where they are present, a prophecy may be made to them as God impresses a Christian with a particular aspect of their life which needs forgiveness. "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!'"

Perhaps a Christian will be prompted to say, "It seems to me God is impressing me to say this to you." A message is then given, the non-Christian hears it and is led to deal with it.

When Paul lists the gifts he always lists the gift of prophecy second, just behind the gift of apostle. The list is not just there for us to enjoy, it is there because it is critical for the church to understand that it is a gift that needs to be present in every church. Let us also remember it is a GIFT that God has give to us. May God help us to not only use this gift, but to use it wisely!