

equip the saints
work of ministry
building up the body

Let ALL things be done for
BUILDING UP

unity of the faith
mature manhood
fullness of Christ

When I am preparing a message, it's sometimes difficult to know where to bring a message to a conclusion. This is especially true when I am continuing to cover the same passage week after week like I have been with Ephesians chapter four. I talked quite a bit about prophecy last Sunday but it felt a little unfinished. Sure enough, after the service last Sunday, two people asked me this question. "What does prophecy look like in our church?" It's one thing to define prophecy but that does not tell you what it looks like. Now if we were to use the common understanding that prophecy is basically the same thing as preaching, there would be no need to spend time defining it or describing its use in our church. But I don't think the typical understanding of prophecy is correct. If you didn't hear my message last week, you may want to read it over. Either way, based especially on 1 Corinthians 14, here is my definition of the gift of prophecy.

Prophecy is a revelation from the Lord spoken directly to a believer which is then discerned by others in order to be used within the church body for building up one another.

It's different than preaching or teaching. Those tend to be prepared lessons and messages that are presented to a congregation or group of people. The Holy Spirit is very much involved in preaching and teaching. Hopefully, the person is relying on the Spirit's work to help them understand His word and put together a lesson or a sermon. And then the Holy Spirit can be involved in the working of his word in the hearts of the listeners. So the Holy Spirit can be working all throughout that process but it's definitely different with prophecy. Prophecy involves a revelation from the Lord, a message that is impressed upon the person. Corinthians implies that this tends to happen when the church is gathered together for corporate worship.

So let's picture this happening. Someone in our church body is sitting in the worship service this morning and they suddenly get a revelation from the Lord. What does that look like? How do you know it's a prophetic word and not indigestion? We have not used prophecy in our church body like we have the other gifts, so what in the world will this look like?

In many ways I can tell you that I have no idea what this will look like. I can tell you this much. I introduced a time of sharing a long time ago to allow for the possibility of someone receiving a word of prophecy that they could share with the church body. I explained this 13-14 years ago when I preached through 1 Corinthians. The vast majority of you were not even here then and those who were probably won't remember it anyway. But that was the intent. 1 Corinthians instructs us to pursue prophecy—not as the highest or most important gift, but not to neglect it either. 1 Thes. 5:19 says, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” So whatever prophecy might look like, we want to have it be a part of our church.

But working out what this looks like at Grace is not all that simple. But let me give you a personal example to help paint a possible picture. About fourteen years ago, I was sitting in a meeting with Ray Olson and another church planter. In the early days of this pastor's church plant, there was one man who was a primary financial supporter of the church. I talked with this pastor this past week and he told me that this man was THE supporter. He was clearly giving the lion's share of the funds necessary for ministry. While this pastor was talking about this man, all of a sudden I got this overwhelming sense of concern about this man who was the primary supporter. This was not just a small feeling in my gut or a passing thought. As I sat there I felt wave after wave of emotion, of concern about this man. It affected my breathing and my heart rate. It was like little shots of adrenaline coursing through my body. It was like a loud siren was going off in my head and my heart warning me about this man, whom I had never met. It was an absolutely overwhelming feeling.

Meanwhile, Ray Olson and the other pastor kept talking. They had no idea what was going with me and I was sitting there wondering myself what was going on. I really felt that it was from the Lord so here's what I did. I explained to both men exactly what I was thinking and feeling. I told them that I felt the Lord was prompting me to share this warning about this man.

Now how you share such a thing is really important. Here's what I did not do. I did not say, “Guys, listen to me. Thus saith the Lord. The Lord is telling you to remove this man from your midst immediately before he destroys the church.” That would have been crazy and prideful. But I did share my feelings and thoughts and that I felt it was from the Lord but I communicated in such a way as to say, “Test it out. I could be dead wrong. I don't know the guy or the church. I think it's from the Holy Spirit but take it for what it's worth.”

After I shared with them the pastor did not seem to be alarmed by it and we just went back to talking about whatever it was we were discussing. I don't think the pastor agreed with me that it was a Holy Spirit impression. After all, the man I was warning them about was their number one supporter and the church was meeting in this man's home at the time. A little while after that, he this pastor's son would marry the man's daughter, so there were no signs of any trouble when I shared my warning.

Occasionally, I have wondered about that situation because it was so unusual. It was so out of the ordinary for me. For all of these years I assumed that I had been wrong—that it wasn't the Holy Spirit at all. Since I knew I would be talking some more about prophecy I decided to call and ask this pastor about it. I was almost embarrassed to call him because I was quite sure I had been

wrong about the whole thing. I didn't even think he would remember the conversation. It turns out that he did remember the conversation and here's what he said to me. He said, "Rich, what you said then was spot on. You were exactly right."

He then told a story of immense betrayal led by this man about seven years ago. The man had a sharp disagreement with a ministry emphasis they were moving toward so he instigated an attempt to have this pastor removed. When that did not work, he led seven other families to leave the church—all of whom were on the church's leadership team. It devastated the church financially and gutted their leadership. As they were leaving the church they told the pastor that they were looking forward to watching the church die and they could not wait to see his family move out of town in a U-haul. This was a very painful chapter in the life of the church and the pastor and his family. Only by God's amazing grace did they recover and now are doing way better than they were at that time.

Based on my fulfilled prophecy, this morning I am announcing the formation of the Rich Maurer International Prophetic Ministry. 😊 No, I'm certainly not doing that but I am certain it was from the Holy Spirit and I was shocked that it turned out the way it did. All of these years I had assumed I was wrong and it turned out I was right. Now what do I call this? What do I do with this? To be honest, I am still processing it so even telling you about it feels weird to me, because I haven't figured it out. If you are new or newer to our church, this is the very first time I have ever shared such an experience in nearly seventeen years. This is not normal for me.

If I were to give it a name, I think it fits better in the category of a word of knowledge as opposed to prophecy. As far as I can tell, prophecy is used within the gathered church, like as in a worship service. But then again, I might just be splitting hairs. The point is that it was a revelation. Something was revealed to me by the Lord about which there is no way I could have known it.

I won't go into details, but there was another time when I had a very similar experience but the details never panned out. Then there was the time when my dad was diagnosed with leukemia. He was in his early seventies and without treatment, he had 4-6 weeks to live. I distinctly remember walking into the elevator just after I left my dad's hospital room and I said to Karen, "I really believe that he will either go into remission or get saved—or both." He did go into remission—twice—and lived another five years. He never told me he was saved but after more than twenty years of not attending church and having no faith in his life whatsoever, after his second remission he began to attend church every single week. Something happened in my dad's life.

Most of us have had these kinds of impressions or gut feelings in our lives. Not all of them are probably from the Holy Spirit, but some of them may have been. And often we don't know what to do with them. We're fine with the so-called 'regular' spiritual gifts such as teaching, leadership, faith and giving but we tend to get a little nervous when it comes to what is usually called the 'miraculous gifts.' Many are adamant that such are no longer in use today, like they all ceased with the early church. I explained last week that I am a firm cessationist when it comes to the gift of apostleship. I see no evidence that apostles have continued beyond the initial 15-20

apostles in the early church but on the other hand, I see no Biblical reason why any of the other gifts have ceased.

Interestingly, if you take just the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians, most of them fit into more of the category of miraculous gifts.

utterance of wisdom
utterance of knowledge

Note: this is not merely wisdom and knowledge which can be acquired by every believer over time. These are utterances or words of wisdom and words of knowledge. These are something that God gives to you to share with others.

faith
gifts of healing
working of miracles
prophecy
distinguish between spirits
various kinds of tongues
interpretation of tongues

I would say that seven out of nine of these gifts are miraculous gifts. Of course all spiritual gifts are miraculous in the sense that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit but many of them are also a bit more ordinary, if you will. We tend to be far more comfortable with gifts like leadership, teaching and mercy than we do miracles, healing and prophecy. Unless you run in charismatic circles, evangelicals tend to get a little nervous around the miraculous gifts. And for good reason. There have been so many abuses of these gifts and people tend to blindly follow after people who promote them. The New Apostolic Reformation is filled with examples of false miracles and charlatans. We should be nervous and cautious. I can get pretty angry when I see tens of millions of people being led astray by false teaching and false gifts of healing or whatever. It's even worse when you personally know someone who has been led astray. Abuses abound and we need to be very discerning and cautious. If you know me at all, you know that I tend to be very skeptical of all kinds of claims. We tend to forget that fake news has been circulating long before the 2016 presidential election. In fact, fake news started in the garden with Adam and Eve, didn't it?

So I am about as skeptical as they come. But on the other hand, we don't want to get in the way of what the Holy Spirit might want to do. I go back again to 1 Thes. 5:19. "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good." The last thing we want to do is to quench the Spirit. The Pharisees took Jesus' miracles and credited them all to Satan. We can grieve the Holy Spirit through intentional sin and we can quench the Spirit by despising genuine works of God like prophecy.

We're still attempting to answer the question—What does prophecy look like at Grace Church? Let's take a look at a prophet from the New Testament to see if we can get more clarity to our question. This is from Acts 21.

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:10-14)

Let me point out some things in this story. First, Agabus is called a prophet because he prophesied. It was not an office or a role. It was his spiritual gift. He was known as a man who gave reliable prophecies. He showed up in chapter eleven also.

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27-30).

In this case, Agabus predicted a famine, which we are told, did indeed come to pass. Which brings up the second point. The prophet's words must be reliable and true. Agabus predicted a famine and he predicted that Paul would be bound and delivered to the Gentiles. Both events happened as predicted. Reliability is part of the testing and discerning process that must accompany the gift of prophecy. Unless there is discernment, prophets must keep quiet.

Third, the word of the prophet did not have to be heeded in direct obedience as with Old Testament prophets. Under the old covenant, when a prophet said "thus says the Lord," you'd better step in line with exactly what the prophet was saying or else suffer the consequences. Which is interesting, because they heeded Agabus' prophecy regarding the famine in Judea but Paul did not follow Agabus when he warned Paul about being arrested. What was Paul doing? Paul was practicing discernment of the prophecy. When Luke and the others who were with Paul heard what Agabus said, they more or less freaked out. *When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.*

They assumed that Agabus' warning was sufficient reason to stay away from Jerusalem. That was not the only warning. A few verses earlier, others were ringing out the same warning. *And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4).* "Don't go Paul. Don't go!" That was their repeated warning. But like a warrior bent on doing his master's will, Paul's resolve would not be shaken.

Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

This was a great moment in church history. Multiple sermons could be preached on its significance but for now I want to point out that Agabus' prophecy, true as it was, was not God's will. It was a warning to be heeded but it was not a command to be obeyed. Do you see the difference? In a very small way, maybe this is what I did for that pastor many years ago. He didn't kick the man out of the church because I suddenly gave a vague warning about him but perhaps he was a bit more prepared for it and less shocked when it did happen.

But lest you think prophecy is still only predicting the future or giving warnings, listen to how it is supposed to work within the church.

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Corinthians 14:23-25)

This is a fascinating description. An unbeliever is in the worship service and has the secrets of his heart laid bare. Whatever that looks like, God's display of power causes him to immediately begin worshipping God. I don't know about you, but I'd like to see something like that happen at Grace Church.

What does prophecy look like in our church? I still don't know but let me give you some final thoughts.

1. Understand what prophecy is and what it is not.

This may seem obvious, but if we do not collectively understand the Bible's teaching on prophecy, it is not likely to be manifested in our church body. If we think it is merely preaching, it won't happen. If we are afraid of it, it may not happen. If it is not discerned diligently, there will be chaos and error.

Prophecy is a revelation from the Lord spoken directly to a believer which is then discerned by others in order to be used within the church body for building up one another. It might be a warning. It might mean disclosing the secrets of our hearts. It might be a word of great encouragement spoken at a vital time. God can do whatever he wants in our midst but understanding must come first. If we ignore or pass over certain truths in Scripture, they are not likely to be a part of our church body. If you are still not clear about this teaching, search the Scriptures on your own or ask me about it.

2. Do not quench the Spirit.

What does that mean? I think it means that we should be open to the gift of prophecy—either that you would have the gift yourself or that others in the body would express it at times. Don't be afraid of it. We are commanded to seek after all of the gifts, including this one. If we call something God is doing evil, we will be quenching the Spirit and inviting discipline on ourselves.

3. Discern the prophecy.

We don't want to call something that God is doing evil, but neither do we want to call something that God is not doing good. As I understand it, the elders are tasked with discerning truth from error in the local church. They are not the only ones who can do this but the main responsibility rests with them.

4. Remember that character trumps giftedness.

God wants us to use every gift all of the time. Each believer exists for the building up of the body. I would love to see God do something with the gift of prophecy in our church but by its nature, it is a gift that could be more prone to pride than some others. And that would be a disaster. And if you ever manifest this gift, be humble about it. It's not a "thus saith the Lord" kind of a thing.

5. Invite more of the Holy Spirit into your life in all things.

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