

Eternity Daily Bible Study

(A ministry of Eternity Christian Fellowship)

Walking In The Spirit - 36

Studies in this series can also be found online at www.globalchristians.org/walkspirit/

Topic: Prophecy In The New Testament

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Last Thursday evening I was invited to a large conference at which various wild doctrines were propagated (including one that God had a physical body with DNA!!) and all of these new doctrines were justified on the basis of being 'prophetic revelations' to the head pastor of this group (which I now believe to have been a cult). Prophecy is being abused left and right by such unscrupulous people and often for considerable financial gain. Just because someone claims to have received something under the anointing does not mean that you should believe it. In this study we will look at what is true and false, and what is right and wrong, regarding prophecy in the Church, particularly in the NT. I do believe that NT prophecy is for today, and has a place, but I want to look very carefully at what that place is.

First we need to understand New Testament prophecy is substantially different from Old Testament prophecy in that:

a) The OT prophets only prophesied up until the time of John the Baptist, who was the last of the line. There is no one like the OT prophets around today:

Matthew 11:11-14 MKJV *Truly I say to you, Among those who have been born of women there has not risen a greater one than John the Baptist.... For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. (14) And if you will receive it, this is Elijah who is to come.*

b) Prophecy in the New Testament does not, at any point, form the basis of Scripture. The New Testament was written by apostles, and not by prophets. For instance there is no 'book of the prophet Agabus' (Acts 11:28-30, 21:10,11). The grand exception is the book of Revelation, which was a prophecy given to the **apostle** (not prophet) John.

c) Prophecy in the New Testament is much more common and widespread : **Acts 2:17 MKJV...** *"And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*

d) OT prophets were rare but there in the NT there may be a number of prophets in the same church congregation (Acts 13:1-4, 1 Corinthians 14:29-31)

e) New Testament prophets are not powerful authority figures (like Moses, Ezekiel etc) but rather are 'judged' by the congregational leadership and their prophecies are weighed up (1 Corinthians 14:29-31).

f) Prophecy in the New Testament is never the basis for the development of doctrine. Doctrine proceeds from the knowledge of Christ, and from deep examination of the Scriptures - in a sensible and reasoned fashion.

This confusion has come about in part because there are two main words for

prophecy in the Bible and they are very different. The word for OT prophecy is the Hebrew word nabi – which means someone who is inspired by the spirit of a god or demon (there were also false prophets). When authentic these nabi wrote Scripture, called own judgments and had enormous cultural influence.

The word for NT prophecy is the Greek word "prophetes" which is a very broad word that includes philosophers and mathematicians (the mathematician Pythagoras and the philosopher Epimenides were considered to be 'prophets' in the Greek world. Epimenides is even called a prophet in Titus 1:12) Such prophecy included scientific inquiry and the development of insight and understanding. There was certainly a spiritual component and the idea of inspiration was still important but it was not the same kind of majestic inspiration as that of the major Hebrew prophets.

Now, unfortunately, we have taken these two very different concepts (nabi and prophetes) and translated them by using the exact same English word. This has resulted in untold spiritual confusion in the area of prophecy. The OT "nabi" prophet is a very narrow specialized sub-set of the much broader Greek word "prophetes".

We cannot import the authoritative nabi concept into every use of the word prophet in the New Testament. Instead we must look at each context to see what is appropriate.

What then are the functions of the normal congregational New Testament prophet?

- a) Edification, exhortation and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3,31) especially of the Church (1 Corinthians 14:4,
- b) Bringing about the conviction and repentance of unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:24,25)
- c) Imparting of spiritual gifts and the calling out of missionaries: (1 Timothy 1:18, 4:14, Acts 13:1-4)
- d) Warning about upcoming events of a rather immediate nature so that Christians can take the correct course of action – e.g the prophecies of Agabus about (i) the famine and (ii) the imprisonment of Paul (Acts 11:28-30, 21:10,11).

The NT congregational prophets 'prophecy in part' (1 Corinthians 13:9), as through a mirror dimly and as such inaccuracies may (and do) occur. Therefore prophecies were to be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29-31) and the good prophecies were to be sorted out, kept and held onto (1 Thessalonians 5:20,21) and they were not to be despised (1 Thessalonians 5:20). In fact all Christians were to seek to have the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1,5 39) so they could build up the Church.

The thing that strikes me about such prophecies is their immediate application. The person walks into the service and is convicted of sin and falls down before God or, in the middle of a prayer meeting, people sense that God is sending out Paul and Barnabas. Even the prophecies of Agabus do not relate to events centuries in the future but for the times that are immediately at hand.

Thus NT prophecies are for the present context. They relate to the immediate edification of the church and the equipping of those who serve in it. NT prophecies are for edification, exhortation, and comfort; for the building up of the saints; for the conversion of sinners; and for the anointing and sending out of workers into God's vineyard and for the warning of the church about things in the immediate future.

NT prophecy operates only within the Church. It is not authoritative 'over nations' as some claim. Nor does it have a grand far future application; nor does it establish new doctrines; and it certainly does not create any body of revelatory work that is to be added to or compared with Scripture. The Bible must be the rule and the standard by which all prophecies are judged. Prophets are to be reverently submitted to the Scriptures, and to Christ, at all times.

If NT prophecy is kept within its proper biblical bounds then it can be a tremendous help in building up the Church – which is why Paul desired for all to prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:5 EMTV (5) *Now I wish you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you should prophesy; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edification.*

1 Corinthians 14:39 EMTV (39) *Therefore, brothers, seek to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.*

Even Moses desired the same thing!

Numbers 11:29 MKJV *And Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would God that all Jehovah's people were prophets, that Jehovah would put His Spirit upon them!*

So we are to seek to prophesy, so that we may build up the Church, with fitting words for each occasion, that come from the Spirit of God. Yet we must do so humbly and within the bounds of Scripture.

NB: I will be traveling tomorrow so there will probably not be Eternity-DBS then. The topic of New Testament prophecy will resume on Wednesday.

Blessings,

John Edmiston (johnd@aibi.ph)

Pastor – Eternity Christian Fellowship

Chairman/ CEO Cybermissions

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