



THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 1)

We have a destiny!

MAIN CHALLENGE

Each individual Christian believer, and the Church as a body, is called to be prophetic. This means that we are primarily identified by the presence of God's Spirit in our lives, and we are called to speak God's words into our dark world and to live transparent and transformed lives that demonstrate the truth of our message. This is our destiny, our exciting and glorious destiny; and we will ultimately be judged, like all prophets, on how faithfully we have played out our role. Are you living as God's prophetic witness into the world you live in?

What is the Church? And what is our purpose? Why are we here?

These are important questions, and ones that have been discussed from many and various angles over the centuries. Hanging from these questions are important practical issues such as what actions and attitudes we prioritise, how we will choose to relate to the society around us, and even how we relate to our fellow believers. If we have a true understanding of who we are, the chances are we will begin to understand all these complex relationships correctly, and learn how to be "salt and light" in our world; but if we have an incorrect understanding of our identity, it is more than a bit likely that we will not only get these complex relationships wrong, but that we will also think we are getting them right as we do so.

A lot, therefore, depends upon these simple and profound questions.

In this series of messages, I will make out the case that the primary identity of the Church, the image that best explains our purpose and destiny, is that we are a *prophetic body of men and women*. Once we understand this truth, I believe we will begin to see that we not only have a destiny, but an exciting and glorious one, in this world even as we await the return of Jesus our heavenly bridegroom.

Our prophetic calling

Centuries before Jesus came to earth, the prophet Joel foresaw what would happen when the promised Messiah came and established his kingdom on earth:

"And afterward,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your old men will dream dreams,

your young men will see visions.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)



To understand this promise, we need to understand the context. Under the old covenant, not everybody was a partaker personally in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit – God’s personal presence manifest in the earth – was reserved solely for those privileged individuals who were called to minister for him. These privileged people were called either priests, kings, or prophets. Priests ministered the *presence* of God through the sacrificial system; kings (and their forerunners, the judges) were called to minister the *power* of God through inspired actions; and prophets were called to minister the *word* of God. There was some cross-over between these functions; but essentially, these were the only people who were anointed with the Holy Spirit, God’s personal presence, to minister in the earth.

According to Joel, all this was due to change when the Messiah came. In the Messianic kingdom of God, all God’s people would be anointed with the Spirit, and *all God’s people would become prophets*.

We cannot underestimate how profound and revolutionary this promise was. Indeed, it is so revolutionary that, even today, many of God’s people struggle to understand what it really means.

The Apostle Peter underlined this promise in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, some fifty days after Jesus died. In Ac. 2:16, he explained the birth of the Church by simply saying, *“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel”* – and then proceeded to quote this prophecy to underscore his point. In other words, Peter was saying one very simple thing: the day of the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy was at hand, and all those who put their trust in Jesus, all those who are members of this new body that became known as the Church – *all these people are prophets!*

Thus, from the very beginning, the primary calling of every believer, and of the Church as a whole, is prophetic. You and I individually are called to be prophets. Collectively, we are a prophetic body. That is our calling; that is our destiny.

What does it all mean?

But what does it mean to say that we are a prophetic people? Much of the confusion arises due to the fact that the words “prophet” and “prophecy” are used in a wide variety of different contexts in the Bible. Moreover, there are at least two common meanings of the term “prophet” in common usage, both of which are not Biblical!

It would take a whole series of messages to tidy up this confusion, and it is not my purpose in this message to focus on that aspect. In the Appendix to this introductory message, I present a simple summary of these different meanings; if you need further information on this topic, there are many other sources you can turn to in order to explain the different usages of the word, and their application.

Little wonder there is confusion about what Joel (and Peter) meant by calling the Church a prophetic body, given that there are so many different specific meanings of



the term "prophet" in the Bible! But the confusion begins to clear when we sift through what all these different meanings have in common; we begin to see that the base-line meaning is constant, and it is only the peripheral details that vary in different contexts.

So then, here is what I believe the Bible means by prophecy, in simplest terms: *prophecy occurs when one or more individuals called "prophets", being anointed personally with the Holy Spirit, speak and enact God's word with authority and conviction.*

Prophets speak either by way of revelation ("God has told me X ...") or as a result of a moment of inspiration ("I believe God wants we to say Y ..."). God's word is not only spoken by the prophets, it is also enacted by them – sometimes this means their prophetic words are confirmed by miraculous signs, (e.g. miracles), but always it means that the prophets live lives that are consistent with the message they are proclaiming

This is the base-line meaning of prophecy, and this (I believe) is what the Bible means when it says that the individual believer, and the Church as a body, is meant to be prophetic.

Three key dimensions

The definition I have proposed contains three key dimensions that need to be elaborated upon.

- 1. The primary identifier of the believer individually, and of the Church collectively, is the presence of the Spirit.**

Prophets are anointed by the Holy Spirit for their ministry – that is a universal non-negotiable truth throughout the Bible. With respect to Christian believers, Paul proclaims this unequivocally in Rom. 8:9: *"If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."*

The Spirit of God is the manifest presence of God. In both Old and New Testaments, the presence of the Spirit in, on and with the prophets was not something that had to be accepted without proof, it was always evidenced by manifestation.

This is a vitally important point, and we will have more to say about it in a later message. For the moment, suffice it to say that, if the Church is to be considered a prophetic body, we need to be able to demonstrate to the world around us that "God is with us".

- 2. The primary role of the believer individually, and of the Church collectively, is to be the voice of God to outsiders.**



The sole purpose of the prophet is to speak what God is speaking to outsiders. The prophets were judged by God entirely on the basis of whether or not they were faithful to this calling.

Outsiders do not have access to the Spirit of God; unbelievers do not hear God, see God, or understand God. The role of Christian believers, and the Church as a whole, is *to reveal God to them* – to show them through our words and actions what God needs them to see. Why else would he give us the gift of his presence and then leave us in the world?

In Ez. 3:16-27 (and later in Ez. 33:1-9), God gives the prophet the responsibility of being a watchman. This meant that his responsibility was to warn the people of the consequences of their sin. If the prophet warned them, and they continued in sin, they alone would be responsible for their subsequent judgment; but if the prophet failed in his duty to warn them, *he would be held responsible for their judgment*. This awesome and awful responsibility is surely applicable to the Church today.

3. The primary behaviour requirement of the believer individually, and of the Church corporately, is to act consistently with the way God is acting (and has already acted) towards outsiders.

It is not sufficient to say what God would say; the prophet also has to act consistently with the message. People learn more by our example than by our words, and this applies consistently throughout the Bible with respect to the prophets.

This means, of course, that there is a character requirement for being a New Testament believer, but it is not a counsel of perfection. God does not expect his people to be perfect; if he did, who could stand? However, he does expect us to be consistent with the message we are proclaiming. This means:

- a. We acknowledge the standard that is required of us, and agree that we have a responsibility to live according to it;
- b. We are transparent about how we measure up to that standard, and humbly admit our faults and shortcomings rather than covering them up; and
- c. We demonstrate over time God's power to transform our lives, so that those who know us best can see the change in us.

And what is the standard that is required of us? Nothing less than the character of Jesus, explained by him through his teachings (especially the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 5-7).



The New Testament Church

When we look at the early Church as portrayed in the book of Acts, and in the various New Testament epistles, we see clearly what these three key dimensions look like in practice.

The presence of the Spirit

You do not need to read far into the book of Acts before you realise that the Holy Spirit played the paramount role in guiding and directing the New Testament Church. The Spirit's presence was key to the mandate given by the risen Jesus in Ac. 1:8, and the gift of the Spirit was explicitly poured out when the Church was originally founded on the Day of Pentecost (Ac. 2:1-4), and when the believers were guided into new ventures among the Samaritans (Ac. 8:14-17) and the Gentiles (Ac. 10:1 – 11:18), as well as at various other times.

Not only that, but it is clear that true believers were primarily identified by the presence of the Spirit in their lives, which was understood to be an explicitly observable thing. The first Christian sermon culminated with the promise that those who responded would "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" that had just been poured out (Ac. 2:38), and the following verse confirms this promise applies to all people of all generations. When the gospel came to the Gentiles in Ac. 10, it was their reception of the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit that confirmed to the established Jewish believers that God had accepted them (Ac. 11:15-18). And in Ac. 19:1ff, when Paul was trying to "regularise" the faith of some Ephesian disciples, the first question he asked concerned their reception of the Holy Spirit, indicating that he considered this to be the primary identifying marker of the true believer.

The same message comes through in Paul's Epistles. Mention has already been made of Rom. 8:7 which says, "No Spirit = no believer" (rather than the more common modern interpretation of "Yes believer = yes Spirit; which, although logically equivalent, puts the emphasis in an entirely different place). We can also point to Gal. 3:1-14, where Paul stresses that the gift of the Spirit was fundamental to the ancient promises given to Abraham. And finally, in Eph. 1:13-14, the Holy Spirit is described as both a seal and a deposit, both metaphors pointing to the Spirit as an identification marker for a definite future transaction to be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

The prophetic role of believers

Throughout the New Testament period, it is clear that the followers of Jesus did not see themselves as the founders of a new religion, but rather members of the old religion (Judaism) with a prophetic message to their people. This is apparent from the tone of the early preached messages, by which Peter (Ac. 2:7-39; 3:12-26 and 4:8-20) and Stephen (Ac. 7) identified with their non-believing audiences, rather than seeing themselves as members of a different faith. The anointing of the Spirit in their messages is also explicitly mentioned in each case, clearly portraying them as prophets bringing the word of God to Israel, as per the Old Testament tradition.



Another point worth mentioning is that, even when Paul began to evangelise Gentiles in large numbers, he still primarily identified himself (in terms of religious affiliation) as a Jewish Pharisee (Ac. 23:6, Php. 3:1-6) rather than a Christian. In other words, Paul did not envisage a Gentile Church as part of a new world-wide religion, but rather as an extension of the Jewish Kingdom to include Gentiles. Rom. 11:11-24 and Eph. 2:14 – 3:13 are two other passages that make this perspective clear.

The behaviour requirement

It is self-evident that the New Testament commands a behaviour requirement on Christian believers; however, the important question is *why?*

Clearly, the answer is not the conventional argument found in most religions that such behaviour is a condition of acceptance; the New Testament is just as clear that believers are forgiven in spite of their disobedience, not accepted because of their obedience. Paul himself had to argue that grace was not a licence for disobedience in Rom. 6:1ff.

The clear answer that the New Testament gives is that believers' behaviour is to conform to the pattern of Jesus as evidence that the believers are now "in him". In Php. 2:1-5, Paul emphasises that our obedience is motivated by the comfort we enjoy in being united with Jesus, and consists of having the same mindset as him. In Rom 6:5ff, Eph. 4:17ff and Col. 3:1ff, conformity to the pattern of Christ seen now in heaven is given as the basis for all the moral injunctions that follow.

In addition, the pastoral Epistles (e.g. Tit. 2) provide another nuance of meaning to this emphasis: Christians are to be motivated to godly behaviour by the desire not to bring the gospel message into disrepute. Paul's approach is that the grace of God offers salvation to all people, so how will our message be credible if we do not demonstrate by our behaviour that this has happened to us (Tit. 2:11-14)? In other words, the behaviour requirement for Christians is pragmatic rather than legalistic; as prophets speaking the word of God into a godless world, we need to be able to show that Christlikeness is achievable (as opposed to moral perfection, which is not), if we are to expect people to take our message seriously.

Conclusion

We are a prophetic people: a people endowed with the personal presence of the Spirit of God, called to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God. Our words are to be the words of God, and our behaviour is to be consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus". This is our calling; this is our destiny; and this is an exciting and a glorious destiny indeed.



Unfortunately, the Church has not always seen itself in this light. Over the next couple of messages, we will paint some alternative understandings of the Church that have persisted over the centuries, before returning to the practical aspects of what it must mean today to be a prophetic people. We will then discuss what changes we need to make in order to achieve that goal.

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19/01/2017



APPENDIX: WHAT IS "PROPHECY"?

Firstly, here are two meanings of the word "prophet" that are not Biblical, neither in the Old or the New Testaments:

1. **A prophet is not the founder of a religious movement, i.e. one who speaks with religious authority.**

Islam refers to Mohammed as a "prophet"; similarly, Joseph Smith is a "prophet" to Mormons. By this term, the adherents of these faiths mean that the specified individual speaks on behalf of God as an authority figure in the setting up of religious beliefs and practices.

The Bible does not use this meaning for the word "prophet". The closest figures who meet this job description are Moses (old covenant) and Jesus (new covenant), and neither is described as a "prophet" because of this function. Biblically speaking, a prophet is not a founder (God-appointed or other) of a religious movement.

2. **A prophet is not someone who foretells the future.**

In common usage, a prophet is someone who foretells the future, regardless of the source of their "gift". Thus, people talk about Nostradamus as a "prophet", along with others who allegedly practice divination.

This usage of the word derives from Greek practice rather than the Bible. The Greek religious tradition had oracles that could be consulted by people who wanted to know their future, and the people who replied on behalf of the gods (often in cryptic or ambiguous ways) were called "prophets". In the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), prophets sometimes predicted the future as part of their calling, but this was never their primary purpose – and the future was never seen as being immutably predestined by "fate". Whenever the future was discussed, it was always done so within the framework of God's plan and purpose – and, if people changed their attitude or behaviour, their future could be changed.

When we turn to the Old Testament, we find three different usages of the term "prophet":



At the simplest level, Old Testament prophets simply brought forth inspired utterances.

In Num. 11:24-28, God anointed seventy elders of Israel with the Spirit so that they prophesied as a once-off event. Later in 1 Sam. 10:9-11, a similar thing happened when Saul was anointed by God as the first king of Israel. In the book of Chronicles, we read that King David appointed Levites to prophesy continually as part of Israel's worship (1 Chr. 25:1), and this was probably a further example of this sort of Spirit-inspired ministry.

This is the simplest use of the term "prophet" in the Old Testament.

3. Certain individuals in the Old Testament had prophetic ministries whereby they spoke God's word under the anointing of his Spirit in specific circumstances.

There are many examples of this in the Old Testament: Deborah (Jg. 4-5), Samuel (1 Sam. 3ff), Nathan (2 Sam. 7 and 12), Ahijah (1 Ki. 11-12), Elijah and Elisha (1 Ki. 17ff) amongst others. These men and women both spoke and acted under the authority of God's Spirit, but their words were not (for the most part) written down for posterity.

4. Some individuals in the Old Testament with prophetic ministries were also later assumed to be authoritative when their words were written down in Holy Scripture.

Not all prophets were considered to be authoritative, but the Old Testament includes sixteen men whose words are considered part of Holy Writ (Isaiah to Ezekiel, and Hosea to Malachi), as well as Moses who was sometimes referred to as a prophet.

When we come to the New Testament, we find a similar diversity of meaning, with three meanings (apart from the usage in Ac. 2 that we are discussing) corresponding closely to the three Old Testament levels:

5. At the simplest level, prophecy is a spiritual gift all New Testament Christians can exercise.

See 1 Cor. 12:4-11 and 14:1ff. The purpose of this gift is for the "strengthening, encouraging and comfort" of the hearers (1 Cor. 14:3).

6. In addition, certain (but not all) believers in the New Testament Church have a special ministry gift of prophecy.

This ministry is described in Rom. 12:6. It tends to arise when individuals are faithful in ministering the general gift of prophecy available to all, and their ministry leads to deeper and more frequent usage of prophetic and related gifts.



7. **And finally, as in the Old Testament, some individuals in the New Testament were labelled as "prophets" and their words taken as authoritative.**

Paul discusses the office of the prophet in Eph. 4:11, and we see an example of this office in Ac. 11:27-30 with a man called Agabus. Note that Agabus' prediction of the famine was accepted as authoritative without waiting for external confirmation; his credentials as a prophet had presumably already been accepted by the Apostles. ("Authoritative" in this context does not mean as an alternative source of Scripture, of course; the prophet's authority was purely in relation to specific things consistent with Scripture that they were claiming God was saying).