



THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 2)

Prophetic body or religion?

MAIN CHALLENGE

A prophetic Church identifies believers primarily by God's witness, the seal of the Holy Spirit; a religious Church identifies believers by what they believe. Although these two definitions are closely related, the latter is based on outward appearances because only God knows the true state of our hearts. There are many ways of discerning the Spirit's work in people's lives, and we need to focus on those things if we are truly to be a prophetic people operating as a pure Church. Do you have the testimony of God, a supernaturally changed life, to confirm your profession of faith?

We are examining the nature and purpose of the Church from the standpoint of the key Scripture found in Joel 2:28-29 and Ac. 2:16ff, namely that we are called to be a prophetic people. This means we are fundamentally 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 and called to live lives consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus".

In the previous message, we identified three key dimensions of that calling: our primary identifier, our primary role in society, and our primary behaviour requirement. Although these do not cover all that the Christian life entails, they go a long way to explaining what our priorities need to be.

In this message, we will examine what happens when the Church forgets the first of these priorities, that our primary identifier is that of a people in whom the Spirit of God resides.

"Religion vs relationship"

A common meme these days on electronic media is that Christianity is "a relationship (with God), not a religion". This is profoundly true. However, the real problem is that it is the Church itself, even those of us who like to quote this meme, who contribute most to the perception that we are a religion. We do this by defining ourselves primarily in terms of what we believe.

A religion can be defined as a group of people who share the same set of beliefs, and this is how Christians tend to identify what a Christian is. There are certain statements about God and Jesus that you have to believe in order to be considered a Christian; and certain groups (such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons) are identified as non-Christian on the basis of their doctrinal unorthodoxy. This situation has been going on since at least the 4th century, when the Church (through a series of Councils) defined the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Now, we may sometimes disagree about where the boundaries are, but so long as the boundaries of who are "in" and who are "out" are defined in terms of what we believe, we are clearly behaving as a religion.



But is there anything wrong with this? Surely it is true that you have to believe certain truths in order to be a believer? Surely the Gospel itself teaches us that faith is necessary for salvation? Absolutely! The problem is not one of doctrinal substance, but of priority; although believing certain things is an important part of being a Christian believer, it is not the most important thing. Our *primary* identifier is the presence of God's Spirit with us, not what we believe. It is this distinction that marks out the prophetic Church from the religious one.

Perhaps you feel at this point that I am playing games with words. "Yes, we are identified by the presence of the Spirit of God; but God promises to give us his Spirit when we believe, so the two definitions are in practice the same thing." However, this objection glosses over a subtle but significant distinction: "faith" in the Bible is far more than merely believing certain doctrines; it involves a personal trust in Jesus, and this means that *not all those who profess to believe are in fact believers*. Indeed, whether we have truly entrusted our lives to Jesus depends upon the state of our hearts, and only God knows our hearts; and this is a distinction that turns out to be vital.

When our primary identifier is what we believe rather than the presence of God's Spirit in our lives, we are substituting a human, "outward appearance" definition for God's definition, which is based upon the true state of our hearts. God sees our heart, sees a life that is truly surrendered to the cross, and responds by giving us the promised Holy Spirit. *It is this act by God that identifies us as his people*. We can fool others, we can even fool ourselves, that we have given our lives to Jesus, but only God knows the truth, and he confirms that truth by giving us the gift of his personal presence. This, more than anything else, is the primary identifier of those who are his; once we believe this and focus on this, we are on the pathway to fulfilling our destiny as a prophetic people.

Discerning the Spirit's presence

So how do we tell whether God has confirmed a person as a believer by giving the gift of the Spirit? This is a complex question, and it turns out that we get slightly different answers when we turn to the book of Acts than when we look in the Epistles.

(I can only touch on this subject briefly in this message. For a more detailed treatment, see the message series "A Matter of Life and Death" ([Library/Message series/A matter of life and death](#)), especially messages 4, 8-10, and 13-15).

The gift of the Spirit in Acts

In the book of Acts, the gift of the Spirit is primarily seen in terms of its initial manifestation, that is, what happens (or is supposed to happen) when a person becomes a believer. The basic rule can be summed up from Peter's sermon in Ac. 2:17-39: if you are called to be prophetic, then you should prophesy! Two promises are quoted from Joel 2 in vv17-18: firstly, that God would pour out his Spirit on all people, and secondly, that they would all prophesy¹. This is balanced by the testimony of Luke that two things

¹ This point is emphasised by the fact that Luke repeats the words "and they will prophesy" at the end of v18 when the original Joel quote omits this.



happened to the believers that prompted this sermon: firstly, all the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, and secondly, they all began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (v4). Clearly, Peter is interpreting the tongues-speaking of the first believers as the fulfilment of the prophesy that "they will (all) prophesy".

There has been much debate about this topic over the last hundred years or so, mostly focusing on what the exact nature of these "tongues" was, whether the gift is still for today, and whether other signs are possible as well as speaking in tongues. Might I suggest that most of this debate is actually beside the point? The crucial issue is not the exact words that were spoken and what language they were in, but the fact that they were speaking under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The essential nature of prophecy is that *it is God who is manifesting his presence through the words spoken*; or, to use the words of Luke, it is the fact that, whatever they were saying, they were speaking *as the Spirit enabled them* (v4b).

Even in Pentecostal circles, this emphasis is often missed. It is possible to manufacture the gift of tongues by human effort, and this is no more the fulfilment of the Joel prophecy than any other result of human striving. When we create a doctrine that says, "you must speak in tongues to be filled with the Spirit", we are actually in danger of substituting one law-based religion with another. It is the freedom to realise our identity as prophets *and therefore to start prophesying* that liberates us into the true life of the Spirit.

This emphasis is confirmed when we look at the only other two examples in Acts of what actually happened when believers received the gift of the Spirit. In Ac. 10:46, we are told that the new Gentile believers were speaking in tongues and praising God when they received the gift of the Spirit, and in Ac. 19:6, we are told that the Ephesian believers spoke in tongues and prophesied. Thus, gifts of tongues, prophecy, and (spontaneous) praise were all considered signs of the prophetic Spirit (although, arguably, speaking in tongues seems to have been at least the most common experience), for each of these are manifestations of the new believers being released so as to speak prophetically in words given directly to them by the Holy Spirit².

The gift of the Spirit in the Epistles

The Epistles were, of course, written to men and women who were already believers established in a New Testament (prophetic) church, so it is reasonable to assume that they had already experienced the initiation into the life of the Spirit described in Acts. What the Epistles emphasise is that, having received the gift of the Spirit, our duty is to go on living in the Spirit's power. The best summaries of this teaching are found in Rom. 8:14 ("those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God") and Gal. 5:16-25 ("walking by the Spirit"), though many other texts could be quoted. Here are the main signs in the Epistles that we are indeed walking by the Spirit:

² The coming of the Spirit in Acts closely parallels the very first mention of prophetic experience described in Num. 11:24-25. In this instance, God took the power of the Spirit from Moses and placed it on seventy elders, and they spontaneously prophesied. Interestingly, Moses then expressed the wish that all God's people should be prophetically endowed (v29). He had his wish come true some 1,500 years later, in the book of Acts.



1. **Fellowship of the Holy Spirit** (2 Cor. 13:14).

Fellowship with another believer does not mean talking after church about what you did during the week! Fellowship refers to a deep intimacy at the level of the human spirit whereby I share with you what God has laid on my heart, and you do the same with me. When two people are Spirit-endowed believers, a mutual and deep encounter with God results when we do this, and this is what it means to share in the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit". This is perhaps the easiest sign to identify that a person has received God's Spirit: the simple testimony that, "when they open their heart to me, I encounter God."

2. **Revelation to know God** (Eph. 1:17; 1 Cor. 2:10-15).

A revelation is simply something that God has revealed. The only way we can know God personally is when we receive personal revelation from him in our innermost being. We can know *about* God from books; but we cannot know God personally without revelation. Revelation commonly comes through the Scriptures, but may come from other sources; the key, though, is that it is personally received and applied. Every true believer has received some degree of personal revelation from the Spirit, and we are meant to grow in this grace as we walk with the Lord.

3. **Gifts of the Spirit** (1 Cor. 12-14).

Spiritual gifts are supernatural manifestations given as the need arises for the building up of the Church or for the conviction of the unsaved. Paul lists nine of them in 1 Cor. 12:7-10, and they can be understood in three clusters of three each: gifts of supernatural revelation (words of knowledge, words of wisdom, and discerning of spirits), gifts of supernatural power (miracles, healings, and mountain-moving faith), and gifts of supernatural inspiration (prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues). Together, these gifts replicate the gifts manifested in Jesus' earthly ministry, and are designed to fulfil the amazing promise that we (collectively) are better off now that Jesus has returned to the Father than when he was on earth (Jn 16:7).

4. **Fruit of the Spirit** (Gal. 5:22-23).

Fruit are the long-term character transformations that take place in believers lives as they walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. You do not grow godly fruit by trying to be more loving, kind, joyful, peaceful, etc; the fruit of the Spirit happen spontaneously as you turn your eyes on Jesus and follow the leadings of his Spirit (see Jn 15:1-8).

The true test with the fruit of the Spirit is not whether we bear any evidence of them, but whether we are growing in them, i.e. the change we can observe over time. Some people are naturally more kind, or loving, or peaceful than others, but this does not mark them out as believers; rather it is the testimony that they have been transformed over the long term that is evidence of the Spirit's working in their lives.



Putting the two pictures together

When we put together the pictures found in Acts and in the Epistles, and then try to reconcile them to that found in modern church experience, we have some difficulties. In short, our modern experience does not seem to match the New Testament norm very closely! There are no hard-and-fast ways to resolve this dilemma, but here are some of the observations that I would make based on my experience over 30 years, and my reading of the Scriptures:

1. **Our modern experience of the gift of the Spirit does not match very closely with the book of Acts, even in Pentecostal circles, but that does not mean we are not true believers.**

Non-Pentecostals tend to deny the evidence of the book of Acts that prophetic words are meant to occur when a person receives the gift of the Spirit; Pentecostals and Charismatics affirm the need for the prophetic gift (arguably with an over-emphasis on the specific gift of tongues) but talk about it as a second, post-conversion experience. I accept both groups as true believers, but, as I see it, the real issue is that we do not emphasise the prophetic nature of Christian conversion, and therefore do not experience the simplicity of what God wants to do in our lives. The New Testament Apostles did not reject converts who did not prophesy; rather, they took the time to “educate” them in the nature of the gift that God had already given them and pray for them (see Ac. 8:14-17; 18:24-19:7, etc). When I meet a professing believer who has never prophesied, I try to do the same thing, while looking for the other evidence of the Spirit’s presence from the Epistles. There are definitely not two separate classes of believers!

2. **In the western church, we miss out on much because of our reserved natures, and because we tend not to understand the difference between being “full” and being “filled”.**

The prophetic initiation of the Spirit found in Acts is described as being “filled” with (or by) the Holy Spirit. This means being filled to overflowing, and the overflow is meant to come out of our mouths! But we are often so reserved, that we like to be filled, but only to the top of the glass, because the overflow is messy and, quite frankly, outside our comfort zone. But God wants the overflow to flow out from us to reach others (see Jn 7:38-39), so we need to get beyond our inhibitions and start giving up the control of our tongues to the Spirit of God.

There is also a difference between being filled (a process) and being full (a state). When we first come to Christ, our life is like a glass that is full of rocks (where the rocks represent our sin and other character flaws). God’s will is to fill us to overflowing, even though we are still full of rocks – this is pure grace. When this happens, we have experienced God’s *filling* (a process) but not his *fulness* (a state). Over time, God will disciple us and remove those rocks from the glass; and, as he does so, we will become more and more *full* of God. But being filled and becoming full are two different (but complementary) processes.

I know many non-Pentecostal believers who show evidence of being full of the Spirit, even though they may never have been filled. Similarly, I know many



Pentecostals who have been filled, but never seem to move towards fulness. My prayer is that we may all come to appreciate both.

3. **Supernatural gifts are important, but should never be relied upon. The only long-term evidence of the Spirit is our fruit.**

In Mt. 7:21-23, Jesus warns that there will be “many” on the Day of Judgment with prophetic gifts and gifts of supernatural power who will not prove to be saved. I struggle to understand how this may be, but it is a warning that we all need to heed. The only long-term evidence that we are truly among the people of God is the fruit of the Spirit that comes from abiding in Jesus; unless we are walking in the Spirit *today*, the gifts we manifested in the past are of no benefit.

4. **Revelation and fellowship in the Spirit are vital witnesses that we should not underestimate.**

People who are truly believers in Jesus should have a living, exciting witness about what God is currently doing in their lives. When you meet them, they should have an excitement about them that is infectious, an excitement spawned of the fact that they are living in the power of the Spirit, learning new things from him, and being transformed from one degree of glory into another (see 2 Cor. 3:17-18). To me, this is the most reliable witness of the Spirit’s presence in a person’s life. Not everyone, of course, will be at their best every day; but when a person professes to be a believer but shows no evidence *ever* of knowing personal revelation from their fellowship with God, I tend to be sceptical if they have ever truly had the encounter with God that truly marks salvation.

Conclusion

In summary, when we have an understanding of Christianity that is religious, we tend to understand salvation in terms of whether a person believes the right things. So long as they profess the right doctrines, we look no further and tend to accept them at their own estimation. But when we move into the understanding that we are a prophetic people rather than a religion, we instead look for evidence of the Spirit’s work in their lives, which is God’s testimony that he has accepted them. Have they been filled with the Spirit according to the New Testament prophetic model? Are they manifesting gifts of supernatural power, inspiration and revelation? Are they growing in the knowledge of Jesus through personal revelation of him? Are they growing in the fruit of the Spirit? These are the signs we look for, and must insist on, in assessing the true state of someone who wants to join our community of faith.

Suppose a person comes to our fellowship and professes to be a fellow believer, but shows none of these signs that God has sealed them with his Holy Spirit. Are we doing them any favours by ignoring this fact? What will happen on the Day of Judgment if God says to them, “I never knew you”? And what will happen to us if we have failed in our duty to teach them about what it really means to be a believer?

I am not saying that we should reject or exclude anyone who does not meet these high standards; that is certainly not what the New Testament disciples did. Rather, they used



the witness of the Spirit as a diagnostic tool to identify where seekers were on the process of coming to the full understanding of the grace of God. And we need to do the same. Nobody benefits from an attitude of blind acceptance of outward their appearances. For the individual, there is the risk of missing the mark; and for the body as a whole, the result is inevitably an impure Church that fails to live up to the mandate given us by Jesus. Instead, we need to humbly share the full revelation of the gospel with them, and lead them through prayer and example into the full understanding of what God has freely given us in Christ.

In the next message, we turn to what happens when we in the Church forget our primary purpose (that of speaking prophetically into our dark world) and focus on other, more readily achievable, goals.

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30/01/2019