

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

I think, having thought about this in preparation for this series, I have experienced the gift of prophecy. It is a gift that has been given to me – in the sense that someone else has used the gift and I have been given prophecy. One example would be as I was thinking about going into the Ministry. Some of you may even remember this, because some of you were there when this prophecy was given to me. I applied to train for Baptist Ministry, this church said “yes – that’s what we want Ian to do,” but the Ministerial Recognition Committee, who had interviewed me, said “No!” In truth I was surprised and disappointed because in my heart I was convinced this was God’s call on my life. I was struggling with what to do – particularly with the thought that I might have got it completely wrong. I was also confused – the people who knew me – the church – had said “yes”, while the people who didn’t know me – the Ministerial Recognition Committee – said “no”. At an evening service soon after I was turned down (may even have been the week after), we had a visiting preacher; I can’t remember his name or anything about him. I had never met him before and he had never even spoken to me. He got up to preach. During the service he had picked up the fact that I had been turned down for training – because people had prayed for me. Before he began his sermon he said these words: “Ian, I think God is saying, this is a comma not a full stop.” Imagine the impact those words had on me – this is a comma, not a full stop. He didn’t elaborate or try to explain it – he then got on with his sermon. I have no idea what he spoke about! But I remember the prophecy! Those words were a revelation given to that man whose name I don’t remember and whose sermon I have forgotten. But God spoke to me!

God spoke a word of encouragement, or of building me up, of reminding me that I was on the right path and simply had to wait God’s timing. That man didn’t know me, or my journey, or any of the circumstances that brought me to that place at that time. But he must have sensed that God had something to say to me. Then he had the courage to say it – probably not understanding it fully. Turned out – he was right! It was a comma not a full stop. Eighteen months later the church asked me to apply again – and this time I was accepted and here I am!

Today is July 6th. Why is this a significant date in this church? Because on July 6th 2002 we laid the foundation stone of this new building. To get to that point was a long journey, and God spoke to us in many ways and on many occasions – sometimes in prophecy – to encourage us to keep going. We have a room out the back here called the 29:11 room. It is so called because Jeremiah 29:11 became a significant verse for us : “I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, “ plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” I believe that was God’s revelation to us as his community to encourage us in what he had laid on our hearts. I believe the gift of prophecy is alive and well.

Interestingly this is one of two gifts Paul encourages us all to desire. 1 Corinthians 14 v 1 says: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." What is the purpose of prophecy? 1 Corinthians 14 v 3 says: "But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." And to edify the church: "He who speaks in tongues edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church." (1 Corinthians 14 v 4)

When was the last time you came to church and asked for the gift of prophecy? Do you believe God speaks today? One of the ways he does it, in the gathered community, is through the gift of prophecy. Some important things to note about the nature of prophecy: First – a common misunderstanding of the nature of prophecy is that it is only about foretelling. By foretelling I mean – predicting the future. Sometimes prophecy is much more about God's word for this moment, than it is about the future.

Second – prophecy is not "teaching" or "preaching." Teaching and preaching are much more about new insights into the Word of God which are prepared and presented. Prophecy is much more spontaneous than that. I think teaching and preaching can and hopefully does have a prophetic element to it, but prophecy is an inspired utterance of a word which God gives directly to a believer. Sometimes God will give a prophecy to someone sometime before they actually say it. You see this is in some of the Old Testament Prophets. There was a delay between when God spoke to the prophet and the prophet spoke to the people. Sometimes it is more immediate. A person has a sense of what God wants to say so they begin to speak. As they begin to speak they get a sense of what the complete message is. Sometimes someone will get a sense that they are to prophesy – without any particular words in mind and it is as they speak that the words come.

So what form does prophesy take – what does it look like when it happens? Paul does not specify exactly how but he gives some clues that are important. We know it is something that is spoken, and Paul is clear that it will be intelligible and it will be intelligible for believers and unbelievers alike. A prophecy is spoken in words that you can understand. Paul does suggest that when prophecy is given to unbelievers it will take a particular form.

1 Corinthians 14 v 24 – 25 reads; "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!""

This kind of prophecy is "the secrets of a person's heart". Think back to John 4 and the woman at the well: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (v29). "Sir, I can see you are a prophet." (v19) When this happens to an unbeliever – the secrets of their heart are laid bare – it leads to conviction! At least one form of prophecy then is an inspired declaration of the secrets of a person's heart.

Prophecy then can have a powerful effect on those who do not yet believe or who are enquiring. Here is an example for the life of Charles Spurgeon:

“While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, “There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took ninepence, and there was fourpence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for fourpence.”

Later the shoemaker told his side of the story:

“I went to the music hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place; Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he could know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me: but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me and saved my soul.”¹

In 1 Corinthians 14 v 3 Paul talks about the effect prophecy has for those who believe: “But those who prophesy speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” And that might happen in a number of ways. Think back to the day of Pentecost where Peter quotes from Joel. Acts 2 v 17 + 18 reads: “In the last day, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

So it seems prophecy can take on varied forms. We know that the gifts are given primarily for the building of the church - 1 Corinthians 12 v 7 reads: “Now to each one the manifestation of the spirit is given for the common good.” Paul makes this clear with prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14 v 22: “Tongues then are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy however, is for believers not for unbelievers.” Prophecy is primarily for edification and encouragement. So in this way any inspired speech that builds up the church is prophecy! Whether it is in the form of a picture, vision, poem or story is less important – they are all valid. What is more important is that God has inspired someone to speak to his people to build them up. We do, however, have to be careful with prophecy. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that we prophesy only in part. The gift of prophecy is fallible. When a prophecy is given we should perhaps look at the general sense of what is being said rather than every detail.

Paul tells us that all prophecy needs to be weighed: “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.” Prophecy today is not scripture and does not have the authority of scripture. Truth is we sometimes get it wrong! We speak our thoughts rather than God’s.

A comment on how prophecy should be handled in church. The whole context of what Paul writes about the gifts of the spirit is that of love. Any prophecy therefore should be given in love. Prophets are accountable to leaders. 1 Corinthians 14 v 37 reads: “If anybody thinks they are prophets or are

spiritually gifted, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." Paul has responsibility for the church in Corinth and he expects those who exercise this gift to recognize his God given authority. Most of the time that would mean here in CBC you share what is on your heart with a leader before you say it or share it with the church. Certainly it is the responsibility of leaders to weigh prophecy and prophecy will be given in an orderly, controlled way so that everyone understands what is being said.

Now, friends, Paul says we should eagerly desire this gift, so if you believe that God speaks to his people today, how will that change the way you come to worship? You could be the one through whom God want to speak to build up his church. Eagerly desiring the gift of prophecy may not be safe, but it will be good and do good!

1. Spurgeon – (Stibbe pg 116/117)

Preached by Rev. Ian Phillips at Crawley Baptist Church on 6th July 2008.