

8,28,25 1 Cor. 14, Prophetic Ministry

As we saw last time, Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor. 14 was on correcting a misunderstanding and misuse of two primary spiritual gifts – tongues and prophecy. Our last study focused on the gift of tongues: What they were, why they were given, when and why they were cut off.

This week we'll look at the second gift – which is the gift of prophecy.

(1 Cor. 14:1) Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

There are two kinds of “prophetic” gifts; two kinds of “prophets”. One identifies a specific gifted *person*, the other describes the function of the *gift* of prophecy *in the assembly*. That second gift is the one Paul is telling the Corinthians they should want to see in action over all the other gifts; “. . . desire the use of spiritual gifts, but *especially* prophecy.”

We saw last time what Paul's *definition* of this gift is, and I included that definition in a brief overview of this gift from a lexicon on the Greek word used throughout 1 Cor. 14;

“Propheteia” has the literal meaning of speaking forth, with no connotation of prediction or other mystical significance. The gift of prophecy is simply the gift of proclaiming the Word of God in the assembly. Paul gives the best definition of the prophetic gift in (1Cor 14:3); “He who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.”

As we've seen numerous times in the past, the ultimate goal of all Christians is to be conformed to Christ by moving from infancy to maturity. The Biblical term used for this process or advancement is “edification”, which means,

. . . to build up and to spiritually strengthen; the act of one who promotes another's growth in Christian wisdom, piety, and holiness . . .

William Barclay makes a very good point about the affect of true prophesying as it's defined in 1 Cor. 14:3; especially in it's relationship to edifying or building up the Body of Christ: He said,

You may humble a man through showing him his sin, but it is a failure unless it ends by pointing him to the grace of God that can enable him to conquer it.

It's always been frustrating to me to be told by teachers and authors what I must do or be without telling me how to get there. If the one who "prophesies" is doing his part in the Church successfully, people will be gaining insight into God's Word, but they will *also* become increasingly clear on how they can bring what they are learning into their own walk with the Lord.

Right after "He who prophesies speaks edification . . ." Paul adds what he calls "exhortation" and "comfort".

The word for exhortation is "paraklesis" which means;

To urge or incite by argument or advice; a strong urging or appeal, an earnest persuasion, giving strong advisement to encourage the continuance of a good deed or laudable conduct or course of action.

"Comfort" ("Paramuthia", sometimes translated "consolation") adds this nuance;

This describes coming along side someone to speak to them in a friendly way. The meaning can develop along two main lines-- with reference to rousing up someone's will about what ought to be done, or with reference to what has happened rousing up hope for a good outcome (to console someone about something). It was used in secular Greek in connection with death or other tragic events. The idea is speaking soothingly so as to comfort. This word denotes the encouraging side of exhortation, inspiring people to continue the desired course of action. This is critical in assisting spiritual growth because of the many obstacles and failures Christians can experience.

Each of us has an extremely important part to play in the growth of the saints, and what we've just looked at is the part the prophet is meant to play.

We see this in Paul's outline of the purpose of assembling together in (Eph. 4:16-17);

(We are to) grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ; from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies,

according to the effective working by which every part (every gift) does its share, causing the growth of the body for the *edifying* (the building up) of itself in love.

Our purpose in coming together may include prayer, worship, and encouragement, but the ultimate goal is “the edifying of (the Church) in love”; and in our passage in 1 Cor. 14 we’re told that this is accomplished by “He who prophesies (proclaims the Word of God) resulting in *edification* and exhortation and comfort to men.”

That’s why this gift, and its function in the Church, is so important. There’s no other way to reach our final goal of full conformity to Christ than to consistently receive the Truth of God’s Word into our souls and spirits. We are shaped into the image of Christ from the inside out; our minds have to be renewed so that we can see all of life as Christ sees life – the written word has to become, in us, the living word.

So, what I want to do now is break down the qualities or characteristics of what prophetic ministry is, and we’ll start with the fact that first and foremost, it is meant to be a clear message to the Church related *directly* to that Church’s specific need. When we read the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Rev. 2 & 3, we can see that each letter contained some similarities, some general truths that apply to all churches, but each letter also had some unique truths and exhortations that applied just to the Church receiving the letter.

This was true of all the New Testament epistles – they contained general information and revelation from the Lord that all Christians need to know, but as we’ve seen, each epistle also addressed specific concerns or praises that targeted the members of *that* congregation. For example, the letter to the Corinthians was obviously very different than the letter to the Philippians – there were things they had in common, but there were distinct exhortations that specifically targeted the readers in that locality.

Here's how Sparks explains that in his comments on Rev. 3:22 which says; “ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

A striking feature of our time is that so few of the voices have a distinctive message. There is a painful lack of a clear word of authority for the times we’re living in. Why is it so? May it not be that so many who might have this

ministry have become so much a part of a religious system? A system which puts preachers upon a *professional* basis, the effect of which is to make preaching and teaching a matter of demand and supply; of providing for the established religious order and program? Not only in the matter of teaching, but in the whole organization and activity of "Christianity" as we have it in the systematized form today. There is not the freedom and detachment for speaking *only* that which "the burden of the word of the Lord" has put upon the prophet; when he could say, "The hand of the Lord was upon me." The present order requires a man to speak every so often; hence he must come up with something, and this necessity means either that God must be offered our program and asked to meet it (which He will not do) or the preacher must make something for the constantly recurring occasion. This is a pernicious system and it opens the door to any number of dangerous intrusions of what is of man and not of God. The most serious aspect of this way of things is that it results in a confusion of voices, but not the *specific* voice with the *specific* utterance of God for those people at that time.

This has been a major concern to me for a long time. There is as vast difference between teaching in a way that is "general", almost "generic", in that what is being taught is both basic and applies to all Christians in every location and every generation, versus the prophetic ministry which would *include* a general education of the Bible, but would also bring a very specific message to a specific Church designed to meet the present-tense spiritual needs of that Church.

As Spark's implied, it not just a matter of 'coming up with something Biblical' because it's Sunday morning; it's the ability of the prophetic minister to know, by God's grace, what Sparks called " . . . a distinctive message; a clear word of authority for the times we're living in" and the unique spiritual condition of those who are to hear that message.

I'm not saying this never happens; I'm only saying that it's extremely rare because most pulpit ministries emphasize either academics or entertainment. They are either technically impressive or emotionally rewarding. Depending on the type of personalities represented in the majority of that congregation, in order to keep people coming each week, the pastor will fashion the sermons to appeal either to

the intellect or to the emotions. People tend to draw to themselves teachers who will tell them what they want to hear, not necessarily what they need to hear.

But prophetic ministry doesn't worry about what the people want; it only takes into consideration what *the Lord* wants them to hear, knowing that that, and that alone, is what will meet the real spiritual needs that the people have.

And we could go a step further than this in relation to prophetic ministry based on Acts 13:27 which says; "They knew Him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath."

The Bible makes a very clear distinction between the *words* of the prophet and the *voices* of the prophet. You can have one without having the other, and the voice is the most important part. If all you have is the words of the prophet, even if they're read every week, you could still end up so deceived that you crucify your Messiah, or in our generation, you could embrace a completely false Christianity in spite of the fact that you're hearing the truth, academically, every week.

In the synagogues, the Jews heard God's Word read to them every Sabbath; *they heard truth every week*. But since they never heard the "voices" *behind* that truth, they eventually became so bored with what they heard and deceived by their limitation and pride that they couldn't recognize the Living Truth among them. In something Sparks added to what I just read above, he wrote;

These messages constitute a principle which governs so much of the Bible. It is that deeper than the words of Scripture, there is a voice; that it was – and is – possible to hear the words and miss the voice. The words are the statements; the voice is the spiritual meaning. We have proved this to be the case by such a statement as that in Isaiah 6:9: "You hear indeed, but you understand not, and you see indeed (lit. 'continually') but do not perceive." It is sometimes positively amazing and staggering what even Christians – and Christian leaders – can do and say because of their ear being deaf to the Spirit. It is one thing to include belief in the Holy Spirit as a tenet of Christian doctrine, and quite another thing to know when "the Spirit of truth" witnesses within the heart to the truth or the falsehood of what is being taught. It is significant that both the Remnant of the Old Testament and the Overcomer of the New Testament are marked by this "hearing the voice."

Jesus placed the ultimate issue of spiritual Life or death upon this one thing-
"hearing the voice (not just the words) of the Son of Man."

So, again, that is how important this is. Not only must the people be able to hear what the Spirit is saying, but the person involved in prophetic ministry has to be communicating the voice and not just the words; "Every Sabbath they heard the words, but not the voice."

In *this* use of the prophetic gift, the emphasis is not predicting the future, but is focused on the reality in the present. We've seen this passage several times over the last year, but I want to consider it in the context of the type of prophecy we see in 1 Cor. 14;

(1 Chron. 12:32) from Issachar, (there were) men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.

There are two very important issues that flow from prophetic ministry; first, they knew their time in history; they knew exactly what God's purpose was in their generation, not just what His overall purpose was for all generations. And second, because of that, they knew what God's people should do beyond what we are always to do. Each generation of Christians has a very specific calling the Lord upon them that is distinct from His calling on other generations.

We are living in at the time of the end; the *terminal* generation. Knowing that should motivate us to pray and explore the scriptures to determine what the Lord would have us do to prepare for His coming.

Those with the gift of prophecy are able to communicate the specifics of what that preparation would involve. In Dan. 12:4, 9-10, God revealed to him what that preparation would include;

Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. . . For now, go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand.

What God says to His Church at any given period depends on its moral and spiritual condition, and on the spiritual need of that time. Religious leaders who continue

mechanically to expound the Scriptures without regard to the current spiritual condition of God's people are no better than the scribes and lawyers of Jesus' day who faithfully taught the Law without a clue of what was going on around them spiritually. They fed the same diet, week after week to everyone, and were completely unaware that there was such a thing as what the scriptures call "meat in due season". The prophets never made that mistake or wasted their energy like that. They spoke to the condition of the people of their times.

We desperately need the gift of discernment again in our pulpits. It is not the ability to *predict* that we need nearly as much as the ability to give a spiritual interpretation to all that's happening around us; to be able to see the true condition of the Church as viewed from God's position, so we will know what is going on and what we should do about it.

I'm sure all of you have seen the immense changes that are taking place in this world; not just geo-political or technological, but also the one thing prophesied by our Lord and Paul in his letters which is to reach a point of global saturation in this final generation – and that is deception.

(Matt. 24:4) Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you."

(1 Tim. 4:1) Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits . . .

Both the world and the Church are more deceived than at any time in history. One of the most important elements of the prophetic gift is that of spiritual discernment – the supernatural ability to see through to the core of a thing; whether it's teaching or a movement or a person. Spiritual discernment lays it bare and exposes the reality of what is really there.

The importance of that gift being in operation in the Church in this generation can't be overstated. For the majority, deception is increasing, and the remnant is decreasing.

Tozer believed the majority of this spiritual stagnation was due to an unwillingness on the part of God's people to submit to the Headship of the Lord. Everyone wants to do what is right in their own eyes. They want Biblical information as long as it's

acceptable to them; and they want to participate in Christianity as long as they get to decide how that's defined.

Here's how Tozer put it;

Let me state the cause of my burden. It is this; Jesus Christ has today almost no authority at all among the groups that call themselves by His Name. I refer to Protestant churches generally, and I include those that protest the loudest that they are in spiritual descent from our Lord and His apostles, namely the Evangelicals. Board meetings are habitually opened with a formal prayer; after that the Head of the church is respectfully silent while the real rulers take over. Let anyone who denies this bring forth evidence to refute it. I for one will be glad to hear it.

What is needed desperately today is prophetic insight. Scholars can interpret the past; it takes prophets to interpret the present. Learning will enable a man to pass judgment on our yesterdays, but it requires a gift of clear seeing to pass sentence on our own day. In the future people will know what was taking place religiously in *this* year of our Lord; but that will be too late for us. We should know right now.

If Christianity is to receive a rejuvenation it must be by other means than *any* now being used. If the church is to recover, there must appear a new type of preacher. The proper, ruler-of-the-synagogue type will never do. Neither will the priestly type of man who carries out his duties, takes his pay and asks no questions, nor the smooth-talking pastor who knows how to make the Christian religion acceptable to everyone. All these have been tried and found wanting.

Prophets were driven by a profound sense of moral responsibility and a deep concern for the spiritual state of their people. True prophets are those who have learned to discern and obey God's voice. Prophets are absolutely *not* driven by the pressure of public opinion. They are men who are not afraid to speak truth and stand in opposition to the status quo.

A prophet is a man who has heard a voice from the Throne, and is willing to stand in contradiction to the world, and if need be, the Church, even if it means facing opposition and suffering.

This is from Isaac Newton, who wrote in the late 1600's;

At the time of the End, a body of men will be raised up with will turn their attention to the prophecies, and insist upon their literal interpretation in the midst of much clamor and opposition.

Another author I came across described the prophet's ministry in a way that was very similar to Tozer's;

The function of the prophet has almost invariably been that of recovery. That implies that his business is related to something lost; he sees that something absolutely essential to God's full satisfaction is missing. The dominant burden of the prophet was one of dissatisfaction. And, there being the additional factor that, for obvious reasons, the people were not disposed to go the costly way of God's full purpose, the Prophet was usually a very unpopular person. To bring into view the full purpose of God was the essence of the prophet's ministry, and will always be so.

There is something else related to our spiritual survival in an age of extreme deception that we need consider for a few minutes.

What the prophets of the Old Testament did was to move into action during times of apostasy and try to bring God's people back to God's original intention for them- which had been lost. They interpreted the spiritual condition of God's people and challenged them to repent and return from where they had fallen.

This type of prophesying, which we've been looking at in 1 Cor. 14, could also be called "spiritual interpretation". It's the interpretation of everything from a spiritual standpoint. It's bringing in the spiritual implication of things to the people and helping them understand what they have been blinded to. If you read through the major and minor prophets of Israel, you'll see that this was the primary work they were doing.

But the same has been true for the last 2000 years in the Church Age, we just don't think of those who did this work as "prophets", but they were.

Again, as Spark's describes it;

I am quite sure that those who have any knowledge whatever of the times, spiritually, will agree with me when I say that the crying need of our time is a

ministry of spiritual explanation. One does not want to make extravagant statements or to be extreme in one's utterances, but I do not think it would be either extravagant or extreme to say that the world today is bankrupt of real ministry in this sense- a voice that interprets the mind of God to His people.

One thing that I've always found encouraging when I studied the Old Testament prophets (which is true of New Testament prophets also) was that they were far from perfect, we all are, but because of God's call on them and because of where their hearts were in relation to Him, He sovereignly overruled their mistakes and used them to teach something more about Him and His ways. God didn't allow their mistakes to derail them.

The Lord desires that each one of us get to the place where we can honestly say, "I have seen what the Lord wants; I know what's He's after." That allows us to not only to pursue that personally, it also enables us to avoid deception, because then we can see the things that are *not* what He's after. That becomes clear too.

By now, I'm sure you're seeing why Paul put such an emphasis on this gift being used as often as possible when God's people gathered together. There is a multitude of advantages to the Church of what prophetic ministry really is.

All of the gifts are important, obviously, or the Holy Spirit wouldn't be placing them in the body of Christ to bring us to maturity. And as we saw in chapter 12 vs. 23; "Those members of the body which we may think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor . . ."

No matter what gift you and I have, we will all be evaluated in the end by our faithfulness to *that* calling, regardless of how others see it in this life. A person with what may be considered by some to be a very small responsibility could ultimately be sitting on a much higher throne than an apostle who's *commitment* to his calling was minimal at best.

Never let the comparisons and judgments of others determine how valuable you believe you are to God. Whatever He has called you to do is of great value to Him.

The reason I'm stressing the gift of prophecy (and prophet) is simply because that's what Paul was emphasizing. Again in 14:1; "Earnestly pursue love and eagerly desire (the use of) spiritual gifts, *especially* the gift of prophecy." By the time we

close this study, you'll see clearly why *that* gift was to be preferred over *all* others in a corporate setting where the children of God are being instructed in God's Word.

Now, another thing we need to touch on is something I found in a commentary on the ministry of John the Baptist, who Jesus said was "the greatest prophet who ever lived";

(Matt. 11:8-11) What did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.

Listen to this author's application of the life of John to us;

We must come to the place where we say: 'Lord, I am set upon all that you mean in Christ and I am not going to allow other people's prejudices or suspicions or criticisms get in the way; I am not going to allow any man-made system to hinder me; I am going right on with You for all Your purpose. I will reject everything that would get in the way.'

How easily we can get side-tracked, simply because we are not desperate enough! We get caught in things which may be good, that may have something of God in them, but which are limiting things, and do not represent a wide-open way to *all* God's purpose. The only way for us to come into all that the Lord means is to be people who say, 'By God's grace, nothing and no one, however good, is going to stand in my way; I am going on with the Lord.'

I want to close with something I came across about Tozer because it does such a great job of balancing all we've looked at tonight with the realities that all of us face in this life. It's a prayer that Tozer himself lifted to God as an appeal to Him for His help. And all of us need all the help we can get.

Tozer is probably the best example we could find of a genuine, 20th century prophet, so to me, looking at the heart of this man is the best thing we could do if we want to really understand what the gift of prophet is all about.

Tozer's prayer is not a short prayer, so bear with me on this;

Lord, I have heard Your voice and was afraid. You have called me to an awesome task in a perilous hour. You are about to shake all nations and the earth and also heaven, that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. O Lord, You have stooped to honor me to be Your servant. No man takes this honor upon himself save he that is called of God. You have ordained me, Your messenger, to them that are stubborn of heart and hard of hearing. They have rejected You, the Master, and it is not to be expected that they will receive me, the servant.

I shall not waste time deploring my weakness nor my unfittedness for the work. The responsibility is not mine, but Yours. You have said, 'I knew You – I ordained You – I set you apart'. And You have also said, 'You shall go to all that I shall send You, and whatsoever I command You, You shall speak.' Who am I to argue with You or to call into question Your sovereign choice? The decision is not mine but Yours. So be it, Lord. Your will, not mine, be done.

Well do I know, God of the prophets and the apostles, that as long as I honor You, You will honor me. Help me therefore to take this solemn vow to honor You in all my future life and labors, whether by gain or by loss, by life or by death, and then to keep that vow unbroken while I live.

It is time, O God, for You to work, for the enemy has entered into Your pastures and the sheep are torn and scattered. And false shepherds abound who deny the danger and laugh at the perils which surround Your flock. The sheep are deceived by these hirelings and follow them with touching loyalty while the wolf closes in to kill and destroy. I beseech You, give me sharp eyes to detect the presence of the enemy; give me understanding to see and courage to report what I see faithfully. Make my voice so like Your own that even the sick sheep will recognize it and follow You.

Lord Jesus, I come to You for spiritual preparation. Lay Your hand upon me. Anoint me with the oil of the New Testament prophet. Forbid that I should become a religious scribe and thus lose my prophetic calling. Save me from the curse that lies dark across the modern clergy, the curse of compromise, of imitation, of professionalism. Save me from the error of judging a church by its size, its popularity or the amount of its yearly offering. Help me to

remember that I am a prophet – not a promoter, not a religious manager, but a prophet. Let me never become a slave to crowds. Heal my soul of carnal ambitions and deliver me from the itch for publicity. Save me from bondage to things. Let me not waste my days puttering around. Lay Your terror upon me, O God, and drive me to the place of prayer where I may wrestle with principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world. Deliver me from overeating and late sleeping. Teach me self-discipline that I may be a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

I accept hard work and small rewards in this life. I ask for no easy place. If others seek the smoother path, I shall try to take the hard way without judging them too harshly. I shall expect opposition and try to take it quietly when it comes. Teach me to use whatever I receive in such manner that will not injure my soul nor diminish my spiritual power. And if, in Your permissive providence, honor and support should come to me from Your church, let me not forget in that hour that I am unworthy of the least of Your mercies, and that if men knew me as intimately as I know myself, they would withhold their support and honors, or bestow them upon others more worthy to receive them.

And now, O Lord of heaven and earth, I consecrate my remaining days to You; let them be many or few, as You will. Let me stand before the great or minister to the poor and lowly; that choice is not mine, and I would not influence it if I could. I am Your servant to do Your will, and that will is sweeter to me than position or riches or fame, and I choose it above all things on earth or in heaven.

Even though I am chosen of You for this, let me never forget that I am but a man of dust and ashes, a man with all the natural faults and passions that plague the race of men. I pray You, therefore, my Lord and Redeemer, save me from myself and from all the injuries I may do to myself while trying to be a blessing to others. Fill me with Your power by the Holy Spirit, and I will go in Your strength and tell of Your righteousness, not mine. I will spread abroad the message of redeeming love while strength endures.