

David Pytches: Prophecy in the local church

A Practical Handbook and Historical Overview.

Notes Alison Morgan March 2004

Hodder & Stoughton 1993

INTRODUCTION

While there are dangers of false revelations, there are the more serious dangers of no revelation at all. This is the more tragic once it is understood that God really does want to communicate with us. 2

Change in the Church begins at the local church level. Prophets are the major agents for change. We must train them, release them and listen to them. 3

PART ONE : PROPHECY TODAY

1. Is there a biblical case for prophecy today?

Jesus:

- ◆ Mt 10.41 (receiving prophets)
- ◆ Mt 23.34 (promise to send prophets)
- ◆ Mt 7.15 and 24.24 (false prophets)

NT:

- ◆ Eph 4.11-12 he gave some...
- ◆ 1 Cor 12.28 God has appointed...
- ◆ Acts 2.17 prophecy released for the last days
- ◆ 1 Cor 12.10 a spiritual gift
- ◆ 1 Cor 14.1, 39 to be sought
- ◆ 1 Thess 5.20-21 not to be despised

Prophets in NT:

- ◆ Acts 13
- ◆ Acts 11.28 Agabus
- ◆ Acts 15.32 Judas & Silas
- ◆ Acts 20.23 'in every city the HS warns me'
- ◆ Acts 21.10-11 Agabus warns Paul
- ◆ Acts 21.9 Philip's 4 daughters
- ◆ Acts 13.6-11 false prophet Bar-Jesus
- ◆ Acts 9.17 Ananias, Acts 13.1-2 various, Acts 21.10-11 Agabus prophesy over Paul
- ◆ Acts 27 Paul
- ◆ 1 Tim 4.14 Timothy not to neglect his gift
- ◆ Rev 18 prophets and Babylon

2. What do we mean by prophecy and prophets?

Prophecy is a message from God through an individual; God's direct response to the human situation, 10. Its purpose is to reveal his word and will, his truth and his purposes to his people.

Main categories:

1. Preaching gospel – teaching God's revealed truth with application : John Baptist
2. Interpreting the word by a gift of the Spirit : George Whitefield
3. Being a critic of the times : Os Guinness
4. Speaking into social conditions
5. Study of end times; comparing contemp world happenings with scripture
6. Praise
7. Supernatural revelation of God's will/purposes for the 'strengthening, encouragement and comfort' of his people, 1 Cor 14.
8. An oracle inspired by the HS and spoken in a specific situation.

Prophets – people who are God's servant and his mouthpiece. Moses and Aaron. He does not invent the words, he just speaks them.

There seems to be a difference between gifts of prophecy and the office of prophet – see 1 Cor 12 and 14; Acts 21.9-10. But the demarcation is indistinct.

Not all who prophesy in the NT are called prophets.

Turner suggests Paul is aware of authority of content, but not divine authority of actual words.

High level prophecy – Moses and successors. Purpose; to challenge the people; to help the rulers; to prepare for the Messiah; to address God's concerns of the covenant; to ensure a record for the future.

Low level prophecy – one off occurrences eg Numbers 11.24-30; Joel's explanation 2.28-29.

Paul also seems to support 2 tier prophecy, encouraging people to be eager to prophesy but at the same time insisting on the absolute authority of his own prophetic teaching.

No prophets today are comparable to biblical prophets (who spoke for all time); they speak into a particular place, time, situation, not giving new teaching of the faith but giving direction to human activities.

Purpose of prophecy

1. To strengthen, encourage, comfort – 1 Cor 14.3
2. to convince, instruct – 1 Cor 14.24,31
3. to direct – Acts 13.2 – and predict – Acts 27.10, 23-4

Always to be carefully evaluated – 1 Thess 5.19-21; 1 Cor 14.29

3. What kind of person is a prophet?

Spirituality – time spent in his presence; obedience; character. But no guarantee!

Personality – little fear of mankind (Amos 7), independent, eccentric, not easy to receive (Mt 10.41). where those with prophetic gifting are not received they may become withdrawn, individualistic, nomadic.

Psychology – mad (Hosea 9), naked (Isaiah 20), unhygienic (Ez 4), unpredictable (1Kgs21), preposterous (1Kgs 20), lonely (Jer 15.17), depressed (1 Sam 8.7), rejected (1Kgs 19.10). Many modern prophets seem to have suffered from early relational problems and have strong sense of rejection.

4. How can we learn to be prophets?

1. By prayer. Prophets are not manipulators; they fight in secret against the real stringpullers – devil, hidden forces of society, of their own flesh. Intercession. Prayer for revelation.
2. By seeking Lord in scripture
3. By being alone – trained in the silence of the wilderness (John B, Paul, Jesus, many since). Donald Whitney (*Spiritual disciplines for the Christian* life) writes of the discipline of silence. Outward silence means not talking audibly but engaging in internal dialogue with self/God. Inward silence means listening for God's voice.
4. By relationship with others – training, praying with others and learning to listen to God together.
5. By experience of life
6. By listening – but there is no methodology for listening. We can only hear God because and when he chooses to speak to us.
7. By obedient response to revelation already received
8. By becoming aware
9. By correction (from God)
10. By teaching and training – get people to try it, in groups
11. By taking the risk
12. By asking questions – how do others think you are doing? *Prophets in training make fools of themselves more times than they make sense.* 43. *The Church is waiting for mature, broken, prophetic people whose heart is for the well-being of the Body of Christ rather than on the well-being of their gift.* 44.

5. How is prophetic gifting initiated?

1. Imparted

Laying on of hands – Romans 1.11; Deut 34.9; 2 Tim 1.6.

By association with other prophets – schools, OT.

2. Manifested

Worship with music seems to enhance the atmosphere for a manifestation of the prophetic gift.

In the congregation

In isolation

3. Inherited

Jeremiah, John B born with it

4. Received by faith

Can be asked for – Mt 7.7

6. How is prophecy received from God?

Job 33.14-16 *now one way, now another; in a dream, in a vision of the night... he may speak in their ears.*

Heb 1.1 *at many times and in various ways*

'Nabi' – group prophets. 'Seers' – lone prophets.

Seeing prophets : Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos

Hearing prophets : Jeremiah, Hosea

Modes of prophecy in the Bible

1. Face to face – Moses, Christ
2. Dreams – Joel 2.28, Deut 13.1
3. Visions/pictures – Dan 7.15, Acts 7.55-6
4. Voices – 1 Samuel 3.4
5. Trances – Gen 15.12, Dan 8.18; Acts 10.10, 22.17
6. Supernatural visitations – Luke 1.1
7. Raptures – Ez 8.2-3, 2 Cor 12.2
8. Nature
9. Situations / circs, 1 Sam 15.28; Amos 8.1
10. Subjective impressions – Jer 23.9 (inc ecstasy, bubbling up inside – nabi is from root nb, to bubble forth)
11. Riddles – Num 2.6-7
12. Allegories/parables – Ez 17.2
13. Puns – Jer 1.12

7. How is prophecy analysed?

Stages:

- ◆ Revelation
- ◆ Interpretation
- ◆ Application

Mistakes can occur at any of these 3 levels.

Interpretation can come out of gifting (Joseph, Daniel) or out of office (leaders of church, working out of appointing not anointing).

Application – may come from the one with the prophecy, may not. Who, what, how, when, where? Fulfilment may take ages.

The predicted results are not inevitable – cp Ninevah.

Biblical example – eg Paul and Agabus, Acts 21. Agabus saw Paul bound, got interpretation (who) wrong. Also got application wrong – that Paul was not to go to Jerusalem.

8. How is prophecy relayed?

Jesus only said and did what he heard and saw the Father doing (Jn 5.19). He only said it how the Father wanted him to say it (Jn 12.49). He only did things when the Father told him, and not before (Jn 16.12). Sometimes he hung onto things.

Practicalities

1. Prose, poetry, drama, singing – all possible delivery modes
2. In church, prophesy standing (1 Cor 14.30).
3. Beware of nervous movts
4. Don't claim divine authority, just speak
5. Give it in normal voice
6. It may be in biblical language;
7. or not
8. It may be accompanied by dramatic act (1Kgs 11.30), mime (Ez 4.4), personal commitment (Hos 1.2), or come through a tongue
9. It may lose effect if insensitively given

10. Timing is important
11. Best not to call self a prophet even if you become one.
12. Not all who have the gift of prophecy are prophets (Agabus vs Philip's daughters)
13. Never boast of yr gifting or insist you have any gift
14. Never try to manipulate things to show you are right, or circulate your words about individuals
15. Never insist you are right; Is 55.11, Eccl 11.1 – God's word does not return empty; cast your bread on the waters
16. You can be wrong
17. Try to avoid speaking emotionally even if you are
18. Keep it brief
19. Edit it to make it clearer (Dan 7.1)
20. Don't be surprised if it is very brief
21. Once you start you may find more comes
22. Expect opposition (2 Cor 12.7)
23. May give a word outside the gathering to an individual, with leader's permission (unless it is a confirmation)
24. Once you have given the prophecy to the leadership, you have discharged your responsibility
25. Don't give dates for Second Coming, DofJ, end of world!
26. Don't give prophecies for correction/direction to individuals without consulting leadership
27. Don't give blanket prophecies, eg calling the church to repentance
28. Don't resort to prophecy for solving church disputes
29. Or to the sick/dying
30. Don't add to the prophetic word
31. Never prophesy concerning romance/marriage if you are emotionally involved
32. Or over any other situation where you are emotionally involved or have natural knowledge or strong opinions
33. Never claim to prophesy when you are speaking from convictions/scripture

Receiving prophecy

Prophecy does not control.

We should never act on it until it has been confirmed from a completely different source.

Beware of prophecy which promises personal benefit.

9. How is prophecy evaluated?

Prophecy is a mix of the human and the divine; which is why we are to weigh it, using gifts of discernment and of wisdom. It may be 80-20 divine-human, or the other way round!

Tests

1. Scripture – Acts 17.11, Deut 13.1ff, 2 Tim 3.16 (but bear in mind Peter in Acts 10.4)
2. Jesus – does it honour Christ in its words and in its feel?
3. Gospel
4. Character of prophet (known by fruits – but bear in mind Abraham lying, David committing adultery/murder)
5. Fulfilment
6. Edification – does it build up the Church (1Cor 14), is it exercised under authority, does it show love?
7. Resonance – the inner witness of those who receive it
8. Love (1 Cor 13)

10. How is prophecy evaluated in the local church?

The leader has the proper responsibility and full authority to deal with any matters concerning prophecy (1 Cor 14). They may not have the anointing of a prophet, but they do have the experience of leadership, an overview of the local church, a relationship with the wider church, which enables them to handle prophecy sensibly and sensitively. They are aware of the pack mentality and the dangers of the cult personality. They may have a lesser sense of unction but a greater sense of obligation.

Prophecies for individuals should be given with the leader present/after consultation/ with others present.

Once the prophecy has been given, the bearer has discharged their responsibility.

Leaders may be confident, keep things low key. They must not allow themselves to be spiritually manipulated, or to abdicate responsibility under false humility.

A leader may also be a prophet – Moses, David, Ezekiel, Jeremiah.

Leaders must be aware that all prophets are fallible. They may invite people with proven track record to visit the church.

Beware of shaming the prophet – you will quench the gift.

Beware of theopaths – the superspiritual.

11. Practicalities for public worship

Make space for prophecy – using liturgy in a way which excludes the exercise of the spiritual gifts is unbiblical. Freedom and order are equally important. Order isn't so much rules as relationship. Only allow church members (not visitors) to prophesy. Allow 2 or 3. Be careful about giving them the mike. Testing is immediate, in the body posture of the congregation. Don't worry about the dress – you have to wash away a lot of dirt to get the gold. Don't worry about silence – listening to God is good. Don't worry if it's commonplace, it may be for someone in particular.

Responses – some are for individuals; some for the congregation, and may be followed by short time of silence; some may be best handled by waiting on them; often it seems that new initiatives follow on from a trickle of similar prophecies.

12. What about church order?

Needs:

1. Accept the place of prophecy in speaking to individuals, churches, communities, nations
2. Define the relationship between leadership and prophecy (apostle comes before prophet in NT lists)
3. Pray individually and corporately for the gift
4. Teach about prophecy
5. Provide the environment to encourage those with potential gifting to share their words
6. Teach the balance between order and freedom

13. Towards a better theology

The influence of Greek thought, esp Aristotle. Rationalism. Reformation. Enlightenment. Existentialism. All rejected revelation through any prophetic ministry.

Revival movements have occurred throughout history. Fox C17, Wesley C18.

These two types of scenario tend to alternate – order vs charismata.

World view of Aristotle is becoming gradually deconstructed today.

Pentecostal movement.

PART TWO : PROPHECY YESTERDAY

14. Prophecy in the early church

Mani, C3, classic example of prophet heading off into heresy → Manichaeism

Montanus C2 → Montanism, C2-3 (inc Tertullian) : ascetic strictness, apocalyptic fervour, insistence on its own infallibility.

It is a natural assumption but a mistaken one, to believe that because the Lord has revealed something he must have revealed everything. 155 Prophets do not know everything...

Led to the fixing of the Canon, C4.

Prophecy also quenched by the gradual identification of the anointing of the HS and the sacrament of baptism.

Didache, C1-3, declared that bishops and deacons were to perform prophecy and teaching – priest and prophet merging into one ecclesiastical office.

15. Prophecy during the Dark Ages

Persecutions led to radical responses. Hermits, pilgrims, sects.

Prophetic groups – Novatianists C3, Paulicians C7, Cathars C12. Albigensians, Beguines, Beghards, Apostolici, Petrobrusians, Henricians, Familists.

Prophetic trends within the Church – Francis, Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Henry Suso, Jansenists, Russian hermits.

16. The French prophets

Huguenots, C16. Extreme manifestations, baptism of HS. Serious mistakes (false prophecies).

Galenus Abrahams, Holland, C17

Jansenists, C17-18, Catholic. Rigorism and elitism.

17. The German prophets

Zwischau prophets - Storch et al. Gathered followers to extend Luther's Reformation into social reform.

Munzer. Hus. Overclaimed divine authority, ended in prison.

Luther scornful. Munzer stirred up peasants' revolt; massacres resulted.

18. The Ranters

A 'plague of prophets', mid C17 England, invading towns and villages.

Freelance prophets everywhere. Hard to know what they believed.

19. The Quakers

George Fox, C17, founded Society of Friends, called Quakers because they trembled at the word of God.

Influenced by Waldenses, Francis, Beguines, Eckart et al. Had visions.

20. The classic case of Edward Irving

Gifts of Spirit poured out in his church in London mid C19th. He didn't know how to handle it, and ended up dismissed.

21. Revelation and mysticism

Anyone who aspires to prophesy needs to have a spiritual discipline for his life. Mystical tradition contains many helpful rules for the development of this.

Mysticism seems to have originated with Plotinus C3 – ie not Christian. But Christian mysticism really has come to mean just an experience of God. It assumes the soul as well as the body can see; it seeks knowledge of God and bases itself on love. Mystic teaching is based on Ps Dionysius, C6th. Threefold ladder of the contemplative life – purgative, illuminative, union.

Visions of white ladies (Virgin Mary?) common among pubescent girls, not just Christian, esp after bereavement.

22. Prophecy and ecstasy

Socrates believed the Gk words for prophecy and madness were related, and divided the notion of divine madness into 4 kinds:

- ◆ Prophecy
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Artistic inspiration
- ◆ Love

Philo of Alexandria, C1, was the first to use the word ecstasy of a Jewish prophet receiving revelation. He said it could take these forms:

1. madness, mental delusion
2. amazement at sudden/unexpected events
3. passivity of mind
4. divine possession/frenzy

Modern definitions (OED):

- ◆ exalted state of feeling, rapture – esp delight
- ◆ morbid state of nerves in which the mind is occupied by one idea
- ◆ trance
- ◆ poetic frenzy

Generally understood in Christian terms to mean a state of disassociation, being out of oneself, with alienation of the senses. Lindblom reduces it to 2 categories – absorption ecstasy (prophet's personality fuses with God) and concentration ecstasy (soul meditates so deeply on a single object that normal consciousness is obscured).

Not helpful in public gathering, but there is a place for it when alone with God. And we must remember that it is a Greek word adopted to describe biblical forms of spiritual experience. Some of the prophets showed it (Jer 4, 23; Ez 1, 2, 3,8; Hos 9). But divine communication never limited to this mode alone.

23. Religious experience validated

Need for care and discernment in the area of feelings and religious experience. Some discern God's voice and see his hand in the context of strong emotion. But not all revelation is accompanied by emotion. It may be possible to recognise truth intellectually while being unable to appreciate it emotionally; Jonathan Edwards doubted if this would bring about much beneficial change of mind or lifestyle: *I am bold to assert, that there never was ny considerable change wrought in the mind or conversation of any one person, by anything of a religious nature that ever he read, heard, or saw, who had not his affections moved.* 253. He believed teachers should not discard emotion. Feelings affect our perception of truth and they also affect our wills. So we must welcome both experience and scripture, and keep them in balance, interpreting each in the light of the other.

24. What about second sight?

Like anything else – natural, must be offered to God

25. Do non-Christians receive revelation from God?

Nebuchadnezzar. Cyrus. People being called by God

26. Forbidden fruit for prophets

Occult things.

Appendix: Revelation and the human brain

Offers this as a conjecture – a possible location in the physical human brain for the operations of the gifts of the Spirit – the right hemisphere.

Left hemisphere

Speech
Reading
Writing
Abstract categorising
Musical ability
Verbal memory
Detail in drawing
Left-right discrimination

Right hemisphere

Tone, facial exprn, body lang
Facial recognition
Metaphor
Spatial/holistic perception
Musical sense
Form memory
Form in drawing
Ability to find way
Dreams/vision

Each hemisphere can inhibit the other if it feels more strongly that it can solve the presenting problem.

We have 2 memory banks – the facts in the left, the associated emotions in the right

Verbal thinking is left brained, visual thinking is right brained.

Modern education is dominated by the left brain, the talking side. In the discovery of knowledge through reasoning, the right brain has been unengaged; the non-verbal side of knowledge has tended to be ignored in W culture. Right brain atrophy leaves a person inept in sport, art, dance, and in the creative side of intellectual or spiritual pursuits.

Right brain – seat of : dreams? Gifts of Spirit? Tongues?