

THE STRANGE THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Part eight

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND TODAY'S LOCAL CHURCH

We have studied the gift of prophecy in the very general terms of MacArthur's misunderstanding of it. But that's hardly enough. Today we'll study of the gift of prophecy and its role in the local church today.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 - "For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues."

People have all sorts of questions about the gift of prophecy. Is this gift meant to be exercised in the church today? Is it needed now that we have the full revelation of Scripture? Is it equal to the revelation we have in the Bible? What should the content of a prophetic utterance be? How can I know if the Holy Spirit is prompting me to prophesy? Can any Christian prophesy? Can those with the gift prophesy at any time?

Let's look at some of these issues:

1) **WHEN YOU REMOVE ALL THE PREJUDICE AND BIAS YOU CAN SEE THAT IT WAS CLEARLY PAUL'S WISH THAT THE CHURCH INVOLVE ITSELF IN THE USE OF THE GIFT OF PROPHECY**

1 Corinthians 14:26-29,39-40 - "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. [27] If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. [28] But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. [29] Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said....[39].... So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. [40] But all things should be done decently and in order."

Any unbiased reading of those verses leads to only one conclusion. And it really shakes up much of the more traditional understanding of the church service. Paul's desire in writing those words was clearly not to *eliminate* prophecy with condemnation but *liberate* prophecy with instruction.

People were to come into the sanctuary clearly anticipating and expecting to do more than listen to a service or enjoy the choir. They came in sorting out their role - their responsibility and capacity to bless and minister in a proper and orderly way. As churches grow that involvement will spread itself out beyond the large corporate worship setting. The *logistics* certainly may change. But the Holy Spirit's desire for manifestation and involvement don't. The idea, then and now, is not, "*What is God going to do for me today?*", but "*What is God going to do through me today? And how is it going to get done if I'm at home barbecuing or watching TV?*"

Listen, how would your body function at work without your eyes, or your hands or your heart? The Body of Christ has to be *linked together* if the work is going to get done. And the gifts of the Spirit play a key role in this. *They are for people as they are on the road to ministry in the congregational life of the body of Christ.* Remember, the Holy Spirit was *first* poured out when the church was "*together and in one accord.*"

Look at those words in **verse 39** - "*earnestly desire to prophesy!*" Seek God about it in the prayer room before church. Fill your mind with the things of God on Saturday night, long before the church service begins. Enter into His presence in forthright praise and worship. Search and understand the Scriptures. Be sensitive to those with special needs. Expect God to work through you.

2) **WE NEED TO HAVE A FIRM UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE AND HISTORY OF PROPHETS AND PROPHECY AND APOSTLES IN THE SCRIPTURES**

I've already looked at this teaching point in this series but it's importance bears review. People get horribly mixed up and twisted in their thinking simply because they have never come to terms with these key roles in the Old and New Testaments.

- a) **The Old Testament Scriptures** - The Old Testament prophet was clearly the mouthpiece of God to the people. That's why prophets were constantly called "*sent ones*" or "*messengers*". These prophets had no hesitation to utter words like "*Thus says the Lord your God....!*" or, "*Surely, the Lord would say to you...!*"

This direct pattern of revelation is seen over and over again in the Old Testament:

Exodus 4:12 - "Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

Deuteronomy 18:18 - "Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

Numbers 22:38 - "Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything?"

The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.”

Ezekiel 2:7 - “And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.”

All of these verses make the same point. *Prophets in the Old Testament knew that they were not speaking their own words.* Often, they spoke the Lord's words in the first person singular - “*I, the Lord, say unto you...*”.

On the contrary, false prophets were said to “*speak words from their own hearts.*” They made up their own stuff. But the true prophet conveyed the *very words* of God. To obey the prophet was to obey God. To disobey the prophet was to disobey God Himself.

The Old Testament prophet had to be 100% accurate in everything he said. **Deuteronomy 18:20-22** says that if even one thing the prophet said didn't come to pass he was a false prophet. He was to be executed - “**But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.**” [21] And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’— [22] when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”

- b) **What the prophets were in the Old Testament, the Apostles were in the New Testament** - The apostles were the authors of the New Testament Scriptures. Like the prophets in the Old Testament the Apostles spoke for God to the people. The Apostles did not hesitate to declare their words to be of divine origin. They were not to be questioned or replaced:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 - “ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

1 Thessalonians 4:8 - “Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

Paul would even write to those who are giving prophecies in the church of Corinth and *place them under his own authority.* They were not to do things just any way they would like. They were not free to argue with him. *They were to regulate their prophecies by his teaching and instruction.*

That was because he was an apostle and they were not. *There was a difference between the way he spoke the words of God and the way they spoke on behalf of God when they prophesied.*

Now, here's the point to all of this. *It's an enormous mistake to think of those who give prophecies in the church today as being replacements for Old Testament prophets or New Testament apostles.* They are not. Those offices, *in that sense,* are gone and will never be replaced in the church today in any sense. *Nobody speaks for God in that direct sense anymore.*

Having said that, it is certainly true that prophets and apostles *are* included in the ministry gifts of the risen Christ to His church. Here we're reviewing material from an earlier teaching in this series. But it's crucially important to get this straight:

Ephesians 4:11-12 - “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ....”

What I'm saying does not contradict Paul's teaching in any way. But Paul also makes clear just what *kind* of gift the apostles and prophets are to the church today:

Ephesians 2:19-20 - “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone....”

Remember this important principle. Apostles and prophets are gifts to the church - along with pastor/teachers and evangelists. But they are not gifts of the same *kind*. Pastors aren't the *foundation* of the people of God. Nor are evangelists. Prophets and apostles are given as the *foundation* - the *base of revelation* - on which the rest of the gifts and ministry function in today's church.

- 3) **THEN WHAT IS THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?**

A gift of prophecy is a revelation from God in the speaker's own words. The gift of prophecy isn't the very words of God in the same sense as the Old Testament prophet or the New Testament apostle.

This point can be very easily shown from the Scriptures: **1 Corinthians 14:29** - “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.”

Those words "*weigh what is said*" literally mean "*to sift or separate*". Now here's the important question - *What is there to sift through or separate? What are we to separate from what?* Clearly, if all the words given in a prophecy are 100% God's words, then there's nothing to judge or sift.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 - "Do not quench the Spirit. [20] *Do not despise prophecies*, [21] but *test everything; hold fast what is good.*"

Again, what are we to examine? Why not just hold on to everything that is said when people prophesy? After all, Isaiah never came on the scene asking people to sift or separate his prophetic words. They were to obey everything God said through him. If they didn't obey him they were guilty before God - period. *Why* are prophecies in today's church to be weighed and sifted?

The Scriptures clearly answer that question - **1 Corinthians 13:9** - "**For we know in part and we prophesy in part....**" Those words are placed right in the context of the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. *All the gifts are to be exercised in humility, teachability and love.*

Why? Because, as precious and valuable as they all are for the church today, *they are all exercised "in part"*. There is always a mixture of *human and divine*.

Now, that doesn't mean the gifts shouldn't be exercised or valued or desired. Rather, it means their use will be Scriptural and proper when they are used according to the will of the Spirit and regulated by the Scriptures.

4) **UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE NATURE OF THE GIFT OF PROPHECY SHOULD BRING FREEDOM TO THOSE WHO EXERCISE IT**

This single truth should bring a tremendous liberating freshness into the congregational life of any church. Of all the gifts of prophecy distributed in this church here's something we are all supposed to know - *not one of them will be exercised perfectly!* Not by anybody. Not ever. And that's OK. In fact, it's more than OK, it's liberating:

a) ***Understanding this truth should liberate people to step out in faith and use their gift when the Spirit directs them.***

"But, Pastor Don, I might not do it perfectly right!" Listen, I have freeing words for you. We all know in advance you won't do it perfectly right. None of us will. God isn't looking for perfection. He's looking for *obedience* and He's looking for *humility*. He's looking for *teachability* and He's looking for *faithfulness*.

b) The fact that we prophecy in part *should also not prevent me from receiving what you have to say*. And, at the same time, it should also *keep each of us humble and teachable* as we follow the leading of the Spirit in our church. I shouldn't receive anything that isn't Scriptural out of fear that I might be quenching the Spirit. And you shouldn't be offended if ever corrected.

That's what **1 Corinthians 14:30-33** is all about - "**If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. [33] For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints....**"

This passage is beautiful. It's a picture of the *proper attitude* when exercising this gift. The second speaker can *help out* the first. Maybe a point needs clarification or simplifying. Perhaps correction will be added by someone else on some detail. The important point to notice is *the first speaker can submit to the second. And he can still live at peace with him!*

I can still hear what the Lord was saying through you. I don't have to judge your performance as perfect to be helped and admonished by the Lord through your prophecy. O how different the church could be if the gifts weren't shunned and ignored out of fear of fanaticism or abuse. How different and liberating it would be if the preciousness of the gifts could be preserved while honoring the timeless instruction of Father God's unchanging truth!

5) **WHY PROPHECY IS STILL SO IMPORTANT FOR THE CHURCH TODAY**

Paul says some important things in **1 Corinthians 14:1-3** - "**Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people *for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.***"

If a prophetic gift leaves nothing but condemnation and a bad taste it was not a properly exercised gift of prophecy. Prophecy brings *an immediate application of divine truth for a particular time or situation in His church*. While always lining up with the eternal principles of God's Word, it is more than a *general direction* for all times. General instruction is received from the regular teaching ministry of the Word. It becomes possible for us to hear the Bible religiously - reverently - and yet *distinctly*. The gift of prophecy can help to apply a principle of Biblical truth *up close*.

Another thought. *The gift or prophecy is a specific, one time application of truth for that particular moment*. I can still

remember when a lady in this church said to me, "Let's take all the prophecies given in our church and put them into a book!" That would be a terrible idea. Look at the New Testament. Notice how few recorded prophecies there are. They're for the moment - for particular situations. They shouldn't be canonized. **Teaching regulates the church - not prophecies.** That's why pastors, or leaders or elders must be able to **teach**, not necessarily able to **prophecy**.

But prophecy **can** speak God's mind into some specific situation in the life of a church. It keeps the church from just turning thoughtlessly into habit and routine. It keeps us listening for help from the Holy Spirit in our worship, our prayer times. It can direct our minds to repentance. The gift of prophecy takes an eternal principle from God's Word and cuts it into a current situation where it is in danger of being missed, overlooked or ignored.

God wants to get His foot into everything we do. He wants to keep us from relying just on our own expertise and instincts. Perhaps we need to hear all over again Paul's words - "**Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophecy.**"

When it's exercised scripturally - when it's submitted to the collective wisdom of the body and its leadership - when it's given in humility - it has great capacity to bring the life of our Lord into His church all over again.

The Holy Spirit waits to be welcomed before He works. **It's not simply a matter of allowing.** It's never adequate to simply say, "seek not - forbid not". That's nonsense. The **second** part of that statement is Biblical. The **first** is the exact **opposite** of Scriptural teaching. It is miles removed from the call of the Spirit to the New Testament church. He's to be hungered after. Sought. **Earnestly desired.** Let's all cultivate a Scripturally ordered, inviting attitude to the gracious workings of the Spirit of God in our midst.