

**THE STRANGE THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Part nine**

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**THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND TODAY'S LOCAL CHURCH (continued)**

**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."

In spite of the way MacArthur's "*Strange Fire*" strangely bypasses Paul's teaching on the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians, there is no missing Paul's inclusion of the *gift of prophecy* in his instruction to that church. In our last study we looked at the *obvious importance of prophesy* (Paul said the church was to *desire* it) and the *difference between the gift of prophesy in I Corinthians 12 and the office of the prophet in the Old Testament and the office of apostle in the New Testament*.

Finally we talked about *what prophesy is* - an immediate application of Biblical truth from God put in the speaker's own words. It always comes out as a mixture of *divine and human*. That doesn't mean it isn't to be valued and desired. It simply means it is to be *understood as to what it really is when it is exercised*. The one *giving* the prophecy is to be teachable and humble. And those *receiving* the prophecy are to be discerning. Prophecy is to be weighed, sifted, tested. *But it's still to be cherished!*

In this teaching I want to look at three areas concerning the gift of prophecy:

- a) ***How the gift worked in the New Testament*** - seeing some *examples* from the life of Paul himself.
- b) ***Some ground rules for regulating the gift in the church*** - most of these come from I Corinthians chapter 14.
- c) ***How we can wisely open our lives up to the exercise of this gift in our congregational life*** - how we can encourage our own hearts to be used by the Holy Spirit in this area and why it's important that we do.

1) **HOW THE GIFT OF PROPHECY WORKED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Surprisingly, there are very few recorded instances of prophecy in the early church. That, in itself, should tell us something. The Holy Spirit didn't want the *weight* of prophetic utterances being likened to that of the canon of Scripture. But the examples we *do* have are instructive if studied carefully:

**Acts 21:1-4** - "And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. [2] And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. [3] When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. [4] And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."

Paul is on his way to Jerusalem. It's going to be a very dangerous trip. Tyre is one of many stops that they will make along the way. While there, perhaps at a prayer meeting, he is warned "*through the Spirit*" (most likely by prophetic utterance) not to go to Jerusalem.

But the very chapter in which those words are found my Bible has a little heading - "*Paul goes to Jerusalem.*" And after hearing what these people had said "*through the Spirit*," Jerusalem is exactly where Paul is heading.

Look at what happens a few verses later: **Acts 21:7-14** - "When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. [8] On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the

house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. [9] He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. [10] While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. [11] And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" [12] When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. [13] Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." [14] And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Now Agabus is a man of *recognized prophetic stature*. Apparently he was recognized as having a credible prophetic ministry. People knew who he was. And he, among several others, prophesies that there will be certain confrontation and bondage for Paul in Jerusalem.

Now, something has to be done with these words from Agabus because Paul *did* go on to Jerusalem. It seems to me there are only *three possible explanations*:

- i) ***Paul was openly rebellious to the Spirit of the Lord*** - He knew what the Lord wanted but just didn't care. He was determined and stubborn to just do his own thing, no matter what the Holy Spirit said. To me, this doesn't seem likely.
- ii) ***These people were all false prophets*** - They had no business at all to say the things they were saying. The problem with this explanation, of course, is Luke, writing this account of events under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said these men were speaking "*by the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 21:4).
- iii) ***I believe there is only one acceptable and Scriptural explanation to what we read here*** - These people were not false prophets. Paul was not rebellious to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Rather, ***Paul did have a different understanding of the gift of prophecy than many Christians do today.***

Now, ***Paul did run into trouble at Jerusalem***. The prophecies were true as far as they went. You can see the Spirit of the Lord trying to strengthen Paul for what was lying up the road for him.

Where the disciples went wrong is spelled out in ***Acts 21:12-14*** - "***When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.*** [13] Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." [14] And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Notice, when the people ***heard*** what the Spirit said ***they*** urged him not to go to Jerusalem (12). The disciples ***assumed*** that because the Holy Spirit was graciously ***warning*** Paul about the problems ahead, God didn't want Paul to go to Jerusalem ***at all***. But the prophecy didn't say "***Don't go***". The prophecy said, "***This is what's in store as you go.***"

And Paul went on to Jerusalem because he knew both the ***nature*** of the gift of prophecy and the binding ***call*** of God upon his life:

***Acts 9:11-16*** - "And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, [12] and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." [13] But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. [14] And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." [15] But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the

Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. [16] **For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.**

That last sentence is important. Paul knew, right from the beginning of his ministry for the Lord, that he was called to **suffer specific things** for Jesus. The prophetic word from Agabus was just a **reminder** from the Spirit about what Paul knew his life would be like all along. The prophecy was the Lord being kind to Paul - like the dentist, when just before he shoves that needle in your mouth, he says, "This is going to pinch a bit."

I think Paul already knew there would be trouble up the road - **see verse 13** - **"Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'"**

We need to watch and learn here. Paul knew from the commands of Jesus that it was the Father's will that the Gospel go out into all the world. **He didn't base his life by the directives of prophecy. He knew that wasn't the purpose of that gift.** But he took comfort as the Spirit spoke that the Lord knew all about the details of his life and that even into the future, God was graciously watching over all the events Paul couldn't even see yet. In other words, Paul wasn't **quenching** the Spirit by going on to Jerusalem. He just knew how the gifts of the Spirit worked.

## 2) **SOME OF PAUL'S GROUND RULES FOR REGULATING THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH**

Again, Paul's concern is not to **eliminate** but to **liberate** the proper Scriptural use of the gift of prophecy in the church and insure maximum fruitfulness in its ministry.

- a) **Prophecy is not an ecstatic utterance** - We've already studied how that term gets misapplied by many to speaking in tongues in Acts 2. It's a term applied to the **observing crowd** rather than those on whom the Spirit was poured out. And it's often mistakenly applied to the gift of prophecy as well.

When I say that prophecy isn't an **ecstatic utterance** I mean it is not exercised by some sort of divine manipulation. The speaker is aware of what he or she is saying. He's aware of his surroundings - what's going on around him as he speaks. Paul labors to make this point abundantly clear:

**1 Corinthians 14:27-33** - "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. [30] 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...."

Take note of Paul's assumptions in this text. Paul assumes the speaker can choose to speak or choose not to speak. He can stop if interrupted. When we are talking about either **tongues and interpretation** or the **gift of prophecy** we are not talking about **seizures** that come upon people. A person is fully in control of what is taking place. He or she controls the **loudness, the tone, the speed with which their words are uttered**. Nobody can blame the Holy Spirit for something out of order.

- b) **Prophecy should be timed to fit into what the Holy Spirit is already doing in the church service** - Paul has some important

words on this subject: **1 Corinthians 14:40** - ***“But all things should be done decently and in order.”***

There are two important adverbs here. ***Decently*** and ***orderly***. Both of those words are important. ***Decently*** means there's a rightness, a beauty in the way the prophetic word is delivered. It need not be shrill or shreaky. There should be nothing in the delivery that would lead others to think something uncontrollable is taking place.

Then Paul chooses the term ***“orderly.”*** This is not mere repetition of ***“decently.”*** ***“Orderly”*** has to do with the ***timing*** of the gift. Paul means the gift of prophecy doesn't happen in a way that is ***out of sync*** with the rest of the gathering. He means the gift fits in with everything else going on. And Paul stresses this because many times the one exercising the gift of prophecy proudly feels ***this*** is the most important part and everything else must work ***around*** it.

So we learn two separate concepts here. Not only is the ***content*** right, but the ***placement of the gift - the ordering of it*** - in the whole service is right. It fits in properly. There is an obvious symmetry in the working of the Spirit.

For example, a prophecy in the middle of the sermon, even if the ***content*** of the prophecy was good, wouldn't be life-giving to the people. It would be jarring. It would take away, not add, to the flow of what God was doing in the meeting. It wouldn't matter what was being said. Paul would stop it. And that wouldn't be quenching the Spirit. It would be obeying the New Testament.

### 3) **PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN A CHURCH SERVICE**

Let me try to suggest some things to consider:

\*Look for ***pauses in times of worship***. Remember, the sheer size of our corporate gathering necessitates carefulness here. People simply won't hear a poorly timed prophetic word. As churches grow they usually have to find creative ways of facilitating this gift. Consider going to a staff member. Share the gist of what you feel prompted to share.

\*If the service moves in this direction, look for quiet times ***around the altar***. These are frequently times of spiritual sensitivity and attentiveness.

\*Consider times ***after the Word of God has been taught and can now be underscored or nailed down with specific application from the Lord***. Again, it's important to remember the ***purpose*** of the gift of prophecy. It's not to enlighten with ***brand new revelation***. It's to ***apply*** a point that everyone already knows is contained in God's Word.

\*Remember ***all prophecy should be delivered in a loving and gracious way***. The gift is not to be exercised harshly, judgmentally or critically. It should always have the Spirit of Jesus in it.

\****The gift of prophecy should be kept as brief as possible***. I think there is wisdom in the way many refer to a ***“prophetic word.”*** This applies to both the gift of prophecy and the gift of tongues and interpretation. People cannot follow the thought of a ***wandering message***. A ***word*** of prophecy is just that - a clearly spoken, concise idea from the mind of God. The more tightly it's phrased the better it will be grasped - ***both by you as you give it, and your listeners as they receive it***.

\****The gift of prophecy should always be suspect when it is used to control individuals or hold them in check in terms of the personal***

**choices of their lives.** Never allow anyone - prophet, apostle, pastor or television personality, to take the place of Jesus as Lord of your life. Have a sense of **calling** on your life from Father God. Like Paul, don't allow anyone to **"Thus saith the Lord"** you into a wild course of action that doesn't fit in with your own sense of how God is leading your life.

I'm convinced this is the very reason Paul instructs the use of the gift of prophecy to some kind of **group** setting in the church. If not the whole congregation - which gets trickier as the church gets larger - then at least with a **number** of people gathered together. This brings **collected wisdom** and **protection** for newer Christians who might be easy prey for self-declared prophetic voices who might try to control others through their gift.

**\*Great care should always be taken to insure that prophetic application is applied, not merely appreciated.** So often you'd think the word of the Spirit was given just to excite or entertain or authenticate our Pentecostal heritage. There should always be a **usefulness** to the gift of prophecy. Like all of the Gifts of the Spirit, it should **take us somewhere**. It makes a difference. It summons to action. There's genuine, deep edification in genuine prophecy. It's not just given as a tickle:

Look at **1 Corinthians 14:24-25** - **"But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, [25] the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you."** So the gift of prophecy can even be used by God to reach the hearts of pagans.

#### 4) **HOW CAN WE OPEN UP OUR LIVES TO THE GIFT OF PROPHECY?**

- a) ***Be with God's people regularly*** - While not all prophecies are given in the main church service setting, they are all given to edify **other believers** and **further the work of God**. The more you are in the company of Christians and **alert to what God is doing at that moment** the more effectively you can be used in any of the gifts of the Spirit. ***They're presents - gifts - wrapped for the body of Christ.***
- b) ***Prepare your heart through prayer*** - The things of this world naturally **crowd out the voice of the Holy Spirit**. We grow **inattentive** to His voice. Prayer **re-orientes the focus of our lives**. It lines us up with the mind of God more than anything else.
- c) ***Fill your mind with careful study of the Word of God*** - This is so important. The Word, reverently and lovingly received (not just read) will help you to **recognize what the voice of God sounds like**. You will quickly learn to see the kinds of things that matter most to God, the way He thinks and desires to act.
- d) ***Desire to be used of God, not for your own prestige, but for His glory.*** Learn to seek God's glory more than you seek anything else. Here's a basic spiritual lesson - ***God loves to use people who don't want the applause of those around them.***
- e) ***Decide to step out in faith when the Lord prompts*** - Understand this, ***He will never give the prophecy for you.*** Paul makes it clear that all of the gifts of the Spirit are a **joint venture** between the one exercising the gift and the Spirit enabling the gift:

**Romans 12:6** - ***"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith..."***

Please note the distinction between **"having gifts"** and **"using"** them. Paul clearly says these gifts are **given by grace** and then must be **"used in proportion to our faith."** Look for strong impressions that you weren't trying to work up. Learn to examine sudden changes in the level of perception you normally experience. ***Then, before you speak, test your own motives - look at***

*what the Lord might want to do with the ideas forming in your mind. See how edifying they will be to others. Do they confirm a needed spiritual lesson (perhaps from a sermon or lesson or song)? Is this the most fruitful time to give the message? How should it be worded for maximum effectiveness?*