

# Pronhecy and Prophets: A Scriptural View

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Part I

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As we have traveled and observed the gift of prophecy operating in the church, we have come to the conclusion that there is a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding, lack of teaching, and just plain bad teaching on prophecy in these last days. Thus, in this two part teaching, we will attempt to clarify what the prophetic word is and is not and what a prophet is and is not.

## Prophecy and the Prophetic Word:

Let me begin by defining prophecy. Prophecy is the word of God, usually directed at the church, about things of the Kingdom of God. Although the Bible contains entire books of prophecy, an excellent example of biblical prophecy is II Chronicles, twenty.

In that chapter, King Jehoshaphat found himself surrounded by three hostile armies. After he assembled the people of Judah and prayed a most eloquent prayer, the Spirit of God moved on Jahaziel, a Levite, and he prophesied:

"Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'" (II Chron 20:15-17 NIV).

Another example of prophecy is found in Acts, twenty-one. In that chapter the Apostle Paul was in Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem:

...a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 21:10-11 NIV).

These two excellent examples of prophecy from Scripture exemplify prophecy generally, that is, God speaking to His people concerning His acts and purposes.

That same gift of prophecy still operates today. Please note that no current prophecy from God will ever supercede, override or be in conflict with the Scripture. Genuine prophecy will always stand the test of harmony with the Scripture.

The gift of Prophecy is one of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit found in I Corinthians, chapter twelve. The gift is operative when the Holy Spirit moves on an obedient person who, under the unction of the Spirit, speaks forth God's word. The Apostle Peter explained the operation of this gift: For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (II Pet 1:21 NIV). Prophecy may be spoken, and often is, by one who is not a called prophet. It is important to recognize that a prophet is not simply someone who operates the gift of prophecy - though the prophet will certainly do that. Any Christian, under the

anointing of the Holy Spirit, may operate the gift of prophecy as described above. Just because someone prophesies does not mean that he is a prophet. It simply means that the Holy Spirit has used that individual as a vessel to speak God's word. There is a definite distinction between the prophet and one who occasionally operates the gift of prophecy. A person may learn to operate the gift of prophecy in a very short time - it takes years to make a prophet.

Now let's define what a prophet is...and is not. A prophet is a man or woman who is called by God to be His spokesperson. The prophet is one sent by God to speak the word of the Lord to an individual or group of people, most often a church. A seasoned and mature prophet is a God-called, God-trained, individual who God has shaped and molded into a spokesperson for Himself. The prophet does not belong to himself, he belongs first to God, second to the church - then to himself.

## The Call of a Prophet:

Let's look at the call of two prophets in Scripture, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Note first Isaiah's call:

Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people:..." (Is. 6:8,9 NIV).

Here we see a clear, distinct call from God to Isaiah. There is no mistaking the call.

The call of God to be a prophet may be on an individual before birth as was Jeremiah's call. His call is even more vivid than Isaiah's:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD." (Jer 1:4-8 NIV).

In Ephesians 4:11 and Romans 12:8, Paul lists the five offices or calls, among them, the prophet:

It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service... (Eph 4:11 NIV).

Individuals who are called to and matured in one of these five offices are the embodiment in their persons of the call of God to ministry. Each is Divinely endowed with the spiritual gifts necessary to carry out that call. For example, we see God directing and equipping Jeremiah as a whole person in his prophetic call:

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land-against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the

land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. (Jer 1:17-19 NIV).

In the New Testament, the prophet we know most about is John the Baptist. He was called from before his conception to be a prophet to proclaim the coming of Jesus.

Note: The call, the character and the mission of the prophet has not changed through the centuries. One who is called by God as a prophet today has the same call as the earliest prophets to Israel. Scripture does not make a distinction between New Testament and Old Testament prophets.

### **Prophet or Psychic?**

There are today many people who can foretell events in the natural or see into the spiritual realm and are thought by some to be prophets. They are not, they are psychics. A psychic has precognitive experiences (i.e., the perception of an event before it occurs) or the possession of other supernatural powers. According to the dictionary a psychic is a person who is supposedly sensitive to forces beyond the physical world. There are some individuals today who are using psychic powers in certain churches today to "prophecy."

Further, these same churches are encouraging psychics to relate false dreams and revelations. It is extremely important to recognize that not all dreams are from the Lord. Scripture makes it very clear that every person, prophets included, must examine every dream and/or vision to see if it is from the Lord or some other source. Note what the Lord told Jeremiah:

"I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:25-29 NIV).

That chapter continues with God's judgement on false oracles and false prophets. In the spiritual realm psychics are Satan's counterfeits for the genuine prophets of God.

The lack of understanding of this distinction between true prophets and those with psychic powers is causing a very serious error to be propagated in some churches today. That error is the assumption that anyone who gives a public utterance, speaks about future events, or reveals unknown facts has a prophetic call from God or is giving a prophetic word from God when he or she speaks.

### **Judging Prophetic Words:**

Scripture makes it clear that all prophetic words are to be judged. (I Cor 14:29). Even the Apostle Paul, after being supernaturally taught his doctrine by revelation from the Lord Jesus Himself, submitted that doctrine for judgement to those who were mature in the Lord. (see Gal 1:11-2:2.) Since the Scripture tells us that prophecy should be judged, three immediate questions come to mind: 1) Why?, 2) By whom?, and 3) How? We

will deal with these three questions in order.

### **Why Prophecy Should be Judged:**

When a prophetic word comes forth in an assembly a holy quiet falls over the congregation. There is the ambient assumption, particularly among young Christians, that God is speaking to His church. But the truth is that it may not be God who is speaking!

The Bible teaches us that there are three sources of prophecy: 1) the Holy Spirit (II Pet 1:21), 2) the human spirit or soul (Jer 23:17), and 3) Satanic or demonic spirits (Jer 23:13).

Many who hear prophetic words and do not know of these three possible sources tend to gullibly receive every uttered word as "from the Lord." There will always be the spiritually immature in the church and it is for their protection that prophecy is to be judged. All prophecy must be judged, including prophecy given in private gatherings or over the telephone or otherwise communicated to one individual. It must always be submitted for judgment.

### **By Whom Should Prophecy be Judged?**

There are three categories of people who are responsible for judging prophecy: prophets, pastors/elders and individual Christians, although the primary responsibility falls on the first two categories.

The Apostle Paul instructs us, "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said." (I Cor 14:29 NIV). Here Paul burdens the prophets primarily with this responsibility. But the pastor and elders are also responsible for what happens in their assembly, especially in the absence of prophets.

For this reason I believe that it is incumbent upon the pastor, or whoever has control of the pulpit at the time a prophecy comes forth, to signify to the assembly whether or not the word spoken should be received as from the Lord. If this is not done then every individual Christian, even the immature, must judge for himself...and often that judgement is incorrect! When I am in a spiritually responsible position I always comment on any prophecy that comes forth to indicate my acceptance (or rejection), and, if it is from God, I encourage obedience to that prophetic word.

### **How Should Prophecy be Judged?**

God is so faithful! He has not left us without guidance on this question. From my observation, there is a wave of prophecy sweeping across much of the American church today that is not being properly judged. For all the comments I hear regarding judging of these words, the judgement criteria seems to be whether or not the word prophesied comes to pass. As I understand the Bible, whether or not a prophesied word comes to pass is not the final criteria for judging prophecy.

There are at least three segments of Scripture that help us determine the validity of prophecy. Let's look at them:

"You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." (Deut 18:21-22 NIV).

Here, the judgement criteria is simple: if it doesn't come true, God didn't speak it.

Let's look at another passage of Scripture:

"If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them.' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer..." (Deut 13:1-3 NIV).

Here the judgement criteria becomes more specific. Note that the criteria is not only whether it comes to pass but the direction the speaker is attempting to lead the people. If it is away from God it is not of the Lord. Thus, the judgment criteria for prophecy is not whether it comes to pass, but rather, what is the source of the prophecy? Where did it come from? Did it come from the 1) Tree of Life (God), 2) a "dead" tree (i.e. the human soul or spirit), or, 3) The Tree of Death (satanic / demonic)?

I relate the source of prophecy to the basic choices given Adam in the Garden of Eden - partake of the Tree of Life and live, or the Tree of Death (i.e., Knowledge of Good and Evil) and die. The third source is what I call a "dead tree" which is prophecy out of the speaker's own soul or spirit. Only God can produce life.

An excellent example of judging the source of a prophetic utterance is provided us by the Apostle Paul. He and Silas were holding meetings in Philippi. Each day, as they passed through the market place on the way to their meetings a woman followed them shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

But the Scripture says that Paul was troubled by hearing her day after day. Why? Was it because of what she said? No, for every word she spoke was the absolute truth! Paul was troubled because the source of her information was demonic. He ultimately cast the source (demon) out of her! (see Acts 16:16-18.) So we see that even the test of a prophetic word being Scripturally accurate cannot be the final test.

The question must be asked again, "How then can we tell the source of a prophetic word?" James 3:13-18 speaks to the question:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." (Jas 3:13-18 NIV).

Examine carefully every prophetic word. What is the prophecy producing? What is its fruit? Is it producing confusion, bitterness, envy, selfish ambition, boasting or denying the truth? Or is it peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful and full of good fruit? Is it impartial and sincere - does it

"raise a harvest of righteousness"?

As James tells us, if the fruit is of the former, it is earthly (of the human soul or spirit) and unspiritual, or it is of the devil - The Tree of Death. But if its fruit is of the latter, it comes from God, the Tree of Life.

Looking back to Deuteronomy, chapter thirteen, there is one more question that must be asked: Why would God allow a false prophet to come into His church? Because:

...the Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut 13:3 NIV).

Now we know not only that there are false prophets in the church, we also know why they are there. They are there to test our hearts.

### **Prophetic Mixture:**

When judging prophecy, one more fact or factor must be considered which is that most all prophecy we hear today is a "mixture." By mixture, I am referring to the three sources of prophecy, the Divine, the human and the demonic. Hopefully, most of the prophecy we hear today is a mixture of the Divine and human. God speaks through a human instrument which of necessity allows portions of the speaker's humanity to be heard in that the speaker's perception of God's word, quality of voice, accent, figures of speech, etc. become part of the spoken word. That is permissible. In these instances we judge and then "eat the meat and leave the bones."

But there is also a mixture of the demonic and human. Demons like to play god and, if the human vessel is not well grounded in the Word of God and a mature Christian, he or she may, from time to time, be duped into speaking a "prophetic word" which is false - from the wrong source. This is particularly true if the speaker has a strong pride and/or has an unteachable spirit. Remember Paul and the slave girl who followed he and Silas. Such prophecies sound good to the undiscerning ear. But to the mature, grounded hearer, the demonic source is quickly discovered. For this reason, those who prophesy with a demonic mixture will seldom do so in the company of many mature Christians. They favor private prophecy - one on one - and often caution the hearer against submitting the prophecy for judgment saying, "Others won't understand this word...it is only for special people. You're special, etc., etc."

Mixtures of human and Divine are acceptable. The more experienced the speaker becomes at prophesying the more pure the prophecies become - less human and more Divine. But, if any portion of a prophecy is demonic, the entire prophecy is to be rejected. If that kind of prophecy comes in an assembly, a public declaration of rejection must be made. I don't believe that there will ever be mixtures of Divine and demonic because I do not believe that God will participate in such.

To simplify the judging process I have diagrammed the process in Figure 1 (below).

Most unfortunately, there are those in the body of Christ today who are caught up in the excitement of foretelling natural disasters, etc. Psychics often can see future events in the natural realm such as earthquakes, automobile accidents, etc. First, let me point out that the source of this kind of "prophetic word" can

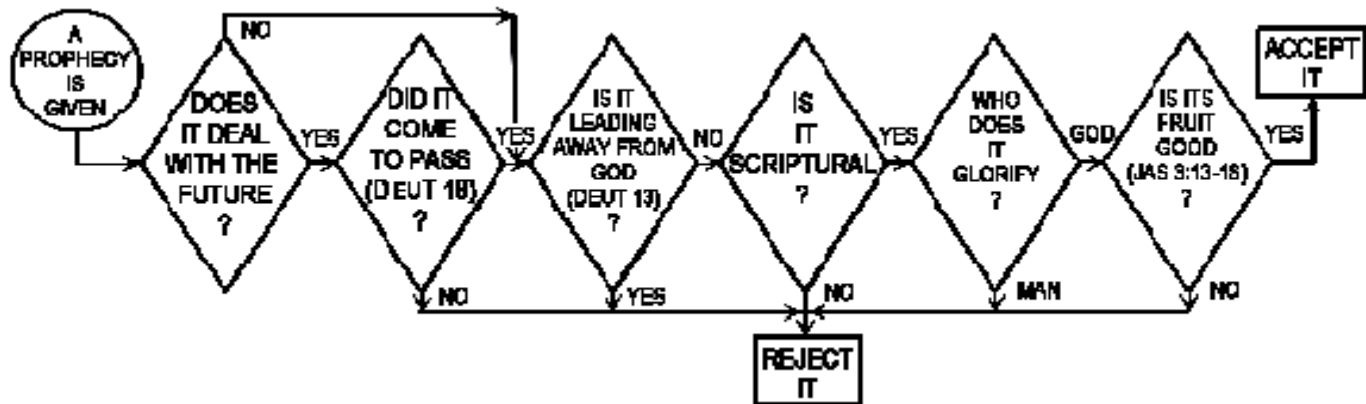


FIGURE 1

certainly be demonic since this sort of thing is worldly and Satan is the prince of this world. Further, this kind of foretelling almost always elevates the speaker and points away from Jesus and His purposes. I repeat, to have psychic powers is not the same as having a prophetic call to deliver God's word. Psychics can be wrong. God's prophetic word is never wrong. It is the word of God concerning His kingdom and would not and could not be wrong.

On every occasion in Scripture where natural phenomena is involved, it is used by the prophet as a whip to drive home the word of God. The natural event is always secondary, or consequential, to whatever God is telling the hearers. No natural phenomena prophesied in Scripture is unrelated to a conditional response to God's call or instructions. The overwhelming focus of the prophecies is on spiritual matters such as correction, guidance, personal and corporate sin, and the consequences of disobedience. For example, in I Kings, chapter seventeen, Elijah the prophet, held back rain from Israel because of King Ahab's wickedness. If a prophecy brought forth in a church today emphasizes natural phenomena relatively unrelated to God's kingdom, it is error.

Furthermore, no where in Scripture does a prophet of God resort to psychic powers such as telling someone his birthday "to establish his credibility." It is the genuine prophetic word from God that lays the heart bare, not some psychic power. (See I Cor

14:24-25).

#### Seeking the Supernatural:

A word of warning needs to be set forth here: While I Corinthians 12:31 does exhort us to "...eagerly desire the greater gifts," nowhere in Scripture are we told to seek the supernatural. The signs and wonders, miraculous powers, visions, etc. must come from God as we seek Him, not these things. Of course, this is true not only for the called prophet but for every Christian. I urge the reader of this teaching to never seek supernatural experiences. Why? There are two sources of supernatural power - the Divine and the demonic. The demonic world is eager to accommodate such persons, particularly Christians, who are seeking supernatural experiences. Therefore the Christian, be he a called prophet or not, must be content to allow the prerogative of supernatural experiences to rest fully in God's hands. If He wants us to have supernatural experiences, that's fine. But if not, that's fine too! If we seek such experiences we will most certainly have them - but they will not be from the Divine source. Do not seek supernatural powers, seek Him who is supernatural. Don't seek gifts, seek Him who is the Giver. Seek only Jesus; you cannot go wrong in so doing. In Part II of this teaching I will cover the timing and categories of the prophetic word, the evaluation of the vessel, the characteristics of a prophet, the role of the prophet in the Body of Christ, and I will conclude with some general observations of the mature prophet.

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