

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

What Was [is?] NT Prophecy?

PRAY.

Find Acts 21. Our topic this morning is prophecy; not the end times kind, but the spiritual gift. Here's some political prophesies you might see the national pundits make:

- The Supreme Court's going to grow more conservative in the next 4 years.
- The President will introduce legislation to fix the tax code and SS.
- Europe will give new Sec. of State Condi Rice the cold shoulder.
- The Iraq war will drag on with little real hope that a democracy will emerge.

But what if political observers like George Will, Nicholas Christof or Mort Zuckermann could do more than make educated, biased guesses? What if they actually had authoritative political information? (They do sometimes, but we call them white house leaks!)

What if Christians in the Church got accurate authoritative information—beyond what Scripture addresses? What if we knew accurately *if*—or where—Keystone's going to get some more property? Or, of more importance, what if someone could tell us authoritatively that if 50% of our adults and teens pray and fast one day a week next year, we'll see 120 people come to Christ? Or someone learned their rebellious son was going to turn around sometime in the next 18 months?

The spiritual gift of prophecy. Prophecy is a message God gives a person to tell to His people. It may be about the future, about the present, or even a reminder from the past. We know about OT prophets like Moses, Samuel, Isaiah and Daniel. But there were also people in the early church with this gift, and may well be people in the church *today* with it. Let's read about it. READ Acts 21:1-11.

Body:

Spiritual gifts are abilities God gives Christians to serve the Church. In this text, Luke mentions this gift of prophecy 3 times:

1. **A prophecy of warning (4).** *Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*

Apparently, God told them Paul would be in danger in Jerusalem. Which, Paul already knew. God had told Him to expect prison and hardships there (20:22-23). But in *that* warning (22) God said Paul *must* go to Jerusalem. These new friends are saying he *shouldn't*. So we should understand the prophetic part of their message in Tyre, was, "there's danger in Jerusalem." Their *own* message was, "So don't go." This was their love and concern speaking, not God.

2. **A prophetic family affair. (9)**

In v.9, Paul and his friends stay at the home of one of the early church's legends: Philip was the Acts 8 evangelist who took the gospel to Samaria and Africa (Ethiopian diplomat). He had 4 unmarried daughters who prophesied. No mention of a prophecy about Paul, but the way Luke sandwiches this between the warning at Tyre and Agabus' warning suggests these women *also* had dire words for Paul from God.

(By the way, some believe this is sanction for women becoming pastor-teachers. However the NT distinguishes between preaching and prophesying: preaching is the public use of the gift of teaching—namely apostolic, doctrinal truth. Pprophesying is something else entirely [more later].)

3. **The prophet Agabus tells Paul his future (10).**

It is the prophecies in vv.10-11 that are the most fascinating, and gives us important insight into what NT prophecy was, and wasn't (is & isn't). Agabus was no crackpot. He and Paul had known each other for years. They ministered together in Antioch. This is the guy in Acts 11:28 who predicted a famine would hit the Roman empire [occurred during Emperor Claudius]. So, the church began collecting money awhile for Judean Christians.

Agabus gave Paul a moving prophecy complete with visuals as he bound himself with Paul's sash. "The Holy Spirit says..." But what *he* says the HS says, turned out to be inaccurate. Which would have been lethal had he lived 500 years earlier, in OT times. READ Deut.18:17-22. OT prophets who got it wrong, were executed.

He said the Jews would bind Paul (actually the Romans did (22:23-24, 29) *He* said the Jews would turn him over to the Gentiles (actually, the Gentile Romans rescued Paul *from* the Jews who were trying to kill him (22:30, 23:10). No OT prophet ever got details this wrong and by *OT* criteria, Agabus should have been put to death. Yet, not a word of censure, or judgment, not so much as a correction by Paul. *This* kind of prophecy was *different* from OT prophecy.

Some churches "sign gifts" like miracles, healing, speaking in tongues, and prophecy. They want their people to pursue them. But other churches think God stopped giving these gifts 1900 years ago. That they were just for those days to confirm the authority of His apostles in. Once the apostles completed the NT, once they died, so did these sign gifts; gone by about A.D.100. After all, 1 Cor.13:8-12 says that when the *perfect* comes, gifts like tongues and prophecy will cease. They believe the *perfect*, is the finished NT; the apostles' *teachings* written down.

These Christians are especially nervous that claims of modern prophecy violate the final warning at the end of the Bible (Rev.22:18: if you add to the words of this prophecy [Bible], you'll face the plagues described in the book.)

Churches like ours fall somewhere between eagerly embracing prophecy, and rejecting it. For example, we're not convinced 1 Cor.13's comments about the *perfect* refer to the completed Bible. Without the time to explain, I'll simply say I believe this refers to Christ's second coming.

On the other hand, we're not convinced that *all* modern claims to gifts like prophecy, are true gifts from God. Perhaps in a few cases, Satan's the source; a *counterfeit* of God's gift (2 Thess.2:9). In more cases, I suspect well-meaning Christians long for some kind of supernatural confirmation of their faith, and end up fulfilling their own wishes.

But does this explain away all tongues, all healings, all miracles, all prophecy today? I doubt it. And even if it would today, perhaps it wouldn't tomorrow. God is sovereign, He can do *as* he pleases, *when* he pleases. Let me spend my final 10 minutes with some concluding questions and answers.

1. What *isn't* NT prophecy? Not Scripture.

- The writer of the OT were prophets; but although there *were* prophets in the NT times, they didn't write the NT: apostles did. (Eph.2:20)
- Not all NT prophecy was retained (1 Cor.14:29-33; yet if these are God's words, wouldn't they be lost?)
- Agabus' prophecy had errors (2 Tim.3:16; Ps.12:6)

2. What is NT prophecy? [if not Scripture, the very words of God] Something God spontaneously brings to your mind (may be for yourself or for another Christian; may or may not have to do with the future; may simply be advice, or encouragement, or confirmation, or stimulation/motivation). It's not likely to be in specific words, but rather a more general idea that your own mind then fleshes out. (See Grudem's *the Gift of Prophecy*.)

3. Is NT prophecy for today's church? Likely. Prophets or prophecy are mentioned in Scripture nearly 600 times. Plus, in some cases it's referred to without mentioning a form of the word. So apparently, this matters to God, and His people. It won't do to dismiss it out of hand—whether because we are uncomfortable with it, or because of its great potential for abuse. (1 Thess.5:19-20)

Just a caution: it's doubtful that this is some sort of universal gift given to a most Christians. Not counting Jesus, there are only a handful of prophets mentioned in the NT and a total of 21 people who prophesied at one time or another. Nevertheless, Paul *urged* Christians to seek the gift (1 Cor.14:1, 29). He values it highly

4. How do we evaluate prophecies?

- None of God's words today will contradict any of His words from yesterday (Numb.23:19).
- Spiritual discernment (1 Thess.5:21; 1 Cor.14:29 says Christians are to "weigh" prophesies. In other words, don't just automatically assume you're getting the straight scoop. If you are walking by faith and not by sight, growing in the Lord, you should have some confirmation in your own spirit if someone tells you something they say is from God. A woman just 3 months away from her wedding to a godly man, told me she was accosted by a woman who warned her, "God told me to tell you shouldn't marry him." She was devastated as you can imagine and wrestled over this for some time. She eventually concluded that was *not* from God, went ahead and married him, and time seems to have proven the other woman wrong.

There is potential for error, for manipulation, for pride.

Dr. Wayne Grudem who has written the definitive book on NT prophecy gives some wonderful advice: would-be prophets, when you speak for God: instead of beginning as the OT prophets did, "Thus says the Lord...", say, "I *think* this is what God is saying to me for you." A little humility can be of great value to the speaker, and the receiver.

Concl:

Our position statement on prophecy and other sign gifts says they may be used privately, but not in the public worship services. One of my seminary professors was a pastor in Scotland for several years. And one Sunday a woman missionary's presentation included some sort of prophetic message. As she finished, he had the unenviable job of telling the congregation "disregard everything this woman said."

Even many charismatic leaders today admit that prophecy's been being abused by manipulative people, egocentric people, *and*, well-meaning people. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that of the four random gift lists in the NT, prophesy is listed in 3 of them explicitly, and at least vaguely in the other one. Paul devotes an entire *chapter* to it: 1 Cor.14. If prophecy *is* given today, then certainly it is meant to bless the church. Therefore, we should do our best to both *understand* it, and use it wisely if God chooses to give the gift.