

5th July 2020 10am Prophecy

Talk for Knights' Meadow Community Church by Andrew Attwood

It's nice to talk about a subject that is dear to my heart, the subject of prophecy, and the practice of prophesying. You may well know this: prophecy has been dear to my heart ever since I became a Christian. I was 19 when I became a Christian, and from the outset, there was a really strong sense that I was going to be able to hear from God and I should desire it and, like it says in this passage in 1 Corinthians 14, he actually says "Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy."

I can remember one of the most formative experiences for me, probably within about two or three, maybe three or four weeks of becoming a Christian, was hanging out with a guy called Steve who really was very prophetic. He was up in the north-east. And I remember saying to him, "Steve, I kind of want what you've got, because you get to hear God," and he was a plumber and an electrician by trade, you know, big bloke with great big hands, and he put his big hands on my shoulders and he said, "God, like, Elijah did to Elisha, whatever I've got, give it to Andrew" and absolutely nothing happened.... until the next day when I went for a walk around my home town, and every time I got to the end of the street, I began to discern a kind of prompt in my head that would say, 'turn left' or 'turn right', or 'go straight ahead', and I thought, "What on earth is that?" but I decided to believe in the voice just to see if it might be God, and spent about an hour, walking around the town learning to go left and right according to this prompting. And that was the beginning for me, of God switching on prophetic insight, and since that day, maybe 30-something years ago, it has absolutely been part of my walk, I would say foundation. I'm a Bible-believing Christian, I believe in the authority of Scripture, and I believe therefore, I have to believe in the gift of prophecy because it's in the Bible. And I think it hasn't ceased. I think the encouragement of the Scriptures is to continue pursuing spiritual gifts, and especially prophecy, because it has such a profound positive influence on the local church.

Just to set prophecy in context, though, in terms of the whole narrative of the whole of the Bible story, you will be familiar with the idea of prophets in the Old Testament, starting all the way back with people like Moses, through to others, all the way through to people like Elijah and others like that. And we kind of have pictures in our head as to who they were and what they were like. The call of the prophet in Old Testament times under the covenant was more particular, they had a particular role that was just for them. And in Old Testament terms they spoke the very words of God, which is why their words made it into the Bible. That's not the same as New Testament prophecy. The equivalent of Old Testament prophets are New Testament apostles, because the apostles bring us the very word of God now, which is why their words end up in the Bible. New Testament prophecy is different. You will remember that famous passage that was preceding the one we just heard, 1 Corinthians 13. Paul says quite explicitly in there, "We prophesy imperfectly." He's talking in general terms, "We New Testament people prophesy imperfectly." So it's not like we're speaking authoritative words like the words of the Bible.

And so, New Testament prophecy needs to be handled differently, but it does mean this: since Pentecost, since the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on everybody who was open to Him, and the possibility of prophesying now is more general, the possibility of hearing God is much more general. In fact, I would regard it as part of the birthright of Christians. If you were to turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of John chapter 10, but if you were to turn to verses 14 to 16 – let me read that to you. John 10 verses 14 to 16 is the familiar passage about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, and He says this.

¹⁴ 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

So there is something fundamental about Christians who hear the voice of the shepherd, like sheep hear the voice of their particular Shepherd, we are to be discerning and hearing the voice of Jesus. It's a mark of who we are. It's part of our birthright. It's also interestingly a pointer to a witness to Jesus in the world. You don't need to look this up now but it might be worth noting it: in Revelation 19 verse 10, it says that "the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus." I'll say that line again. "The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus." In other words, everything that is authentically prophetic points people back to Jesus and the Holy Spirit is obsessed with Jesus. The Holy Spirit loves Jesus and so every time the Holy Spirit speaks, He's inclined to point people back towards Him. So the testimony of Jesus is kind of amplified by the Spirit of Prophecy. That's how it works.

But let's go back to 1 Corinthians 14, because one of the things that we need to realise is, the prophetic gift is super, super normal. It is an extraordinarily normal feature of church life in the early church. The most explicit description we have of how church meetings function in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. It's Paul describing all the different facets of what the Corinthians should be doing and he was kind of putting some correctives in there because they were not so good at it. And he talks about them eating together, he talks about them breaking bread and sharing wine together to remember Jesus. He talks about them using different gifts like healing and prophecy, he talked about them taking it in turns to prophesy, he also talks about them having people with them who weren't Christians yet, and that if you prophesied well, that could help some of them be responsive to the presence of God. So there's a real normality to this.

Just think for a moment how you feel about Zooming these days. I don't know whether Zooming is feeling normal yet? Does it feel awkward? Does it feel normal? Think back to the meetings that you used to have in the school hall, there were normal things that you would have experienced and you would have expected, you would have expected someone to lead, you would have expected someone to sing, you would have expected a screen with words on, you would have expected teas and coffees afterwards. Prophecy – is that normal? Prophecy is an expected experience. And that's why Paul is describing not just "Please prophesy if you think you can." He's saying "when you prophesy," there's a kind of expectation that it's going to happen. So it just needs to be managed as to how to do it well.

The thing that you'll find also though, is that prophecy usually needs kick-starting with encouragement. In Romans 12, there's a whole list of different kinds of gifts that Paul there is encouraging too. And he says in Romans 12:6, he says, "If your gift is to prophesy, prophesy." What he means is, on the occasion when the Spirit rests on you and you feel prompted to share something, do it! So Paul the apostle is saying, "when you feel that nudge, go for it!" It's a bit like waiting on the starting blocks to me. I've always been a huge enthusiast of prophecy, because I know that it does so much good. I find myself thinking, "Okay, Lord, I'm just waiting for the firing gun – just 'Ready, steady, go!'" because I love it, because I know that it does some good, but it may be that for you, there's an element of tragedy, there's an element of anxiety or unfamiliarity with what it's like to prophesy. I'm hoping that this talk nudges you further forward in daring to have a go.

Now, I said earlier that New Testament prophesying requires discernment. It's not like it's got the same authority as the Bible, so we should never, ever, ever think that when people have prophesied, we give it equal status to what the Scriptures say, but what it does say is there are ways and means of discerning. So I don't know if you've still got your Bibles to hand, but if you were to go back to 1 Corinthians 14, you will find all kinds of guidance in there. 1 Corinthians 14, and if you go to verse 29. It starts with some very very practical guidance, the fact that it's in here in the Bible means that Paul expected it to happen. 1 Corinthians 14 starting at verse 29 says this,

²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.

³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.

³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

Paul is speaking to a particular church that was rabidly enthusiastic about prophecy. It was almost like when they began their meetings there was like a cacophony of prophesying going on because everybody was sensing the prompting of God's Spirit. And Paul was trying to bring a little bit of control and order to it and say, "We can't quite hear what's going on." So don't think just because you've got an urge in your heart to say something, you have to say it straight away. You can control that. Just wait. And maybe when one or two or three have done something, others can kind of pray about it and see if you can sift what's human, what's divine, what's from somewhere else.

You see in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 [NIVUK]. Paul says, "Don't quench the Spirit" and he says [paraphrased] "when it comes to gifts, hold on to that which is good, disregard the bad, hold on to that which is good." It's almost like sifting. You know in Old Testament times and, and even agricultural cultures these days where you used to sift, sort the wheat from the chaff. They used to throw the wheat into the air in the wind and the chaff, the light stuff, would blow away, and the wheat would fall to the ground so they could say, "Ah, there's the good stuff." So there's something about learning to share what we think God might be saying but recognising almost inevitably, there's going to be a little bit of you and me mingled in what we share. That's why our prophesying isn't perfect. Yeah? I used to say in my old church, I said, "Well, I don't know if this is from God, it might be the cheese sandwich I had last night. But anyway..." In other words, there's life experience that mingles into the kinds of things we share, so we have to be a bit more pragmatic about saying, "Well, how much of that was really from God?" I personally find that encouraging. If I was told, conversely, "If you're going to prophesy, it had better be 100% correct otherwise we're going to stone you like they did in the Old Testament," I wouldn't open my mouth, because I'd be too afraid. However, because New Testament prophecy is already understood to be imperfect, it means we can have a go with what we've got, trusting that the body of Christ, the local church, will say, "Thank you for that, Andrew, maybe that was from God, maybe it wasn't that bit. I'm not so sure, but thank you anyway." In other words, it helps me with my 'L' plates in prophecy to simply have a go and not worry about it being perfect, because I know it can't be. But there may be some real nuggets of gold in there. There may be some real diamonds in there that are really important for some people to hear.

So, what's it like to prophesy? I'm guessing that a number of you are familiar with this by experience. I'm guessing most of you could say, and it may be interesting to get some hands raised on this. Who can say that they've discerned God's guidance or direction in their lives? Any hands? Okay. Is there anybody here who can say when they've been in either in times of prayer or even not, they've sensed God show them something or speak something to them that they thought, "I think that might be God"? Okay. No, but some. Now, that means that

the prophetic spirit is already familiar with this church, the prophetic spirit is already used to nudging you into sharing things. Here's something that I would want to encourage you with just off the bat. One of God's greatest gifts to us is our imagination. Okay? God gives us a mind, and an ability to dream and think, and consider, we are a unique creature on the planet that can write plays, we can make movies, we can write stories that have never existed before, we can create things in our heads. God uses what is natural to us to speak through us. If you want to get into the habit of prophesying more, you need to allow God to breathe on your imaginative capacities, where He drops thoughts and ideas and phrases and pictures, or even whole scenes easily into your consciousness. Are you a picture kind of person? are you a word kind of person? Be open! Be open to the possibility of God influencing you in all kinds of different ways.

Now you may be nervous, thinking, "Yeah, but what if all kinds of rogue crazy stuff comes into my imagination?" That's the point of having a Bible. I've been reading the Bible now for 30-something years, and I love it and I pore myself over it and I read it and I read it and I listen to it on audio. Why? Because the Holy Spirit wrote the Bible. If I expose myself to the reliable authoritative voice of God through Scripture, my imagination is already getting tuned in to what kinds of things He's likely to say, what kind of things He's likely to show. So my own discernment is heightened if I know what the Bible teaches. It means I'm not going to prophesy crazy stuff.

So I just want to say to you that there is something about stretching yourself out so that God can breathe on your imagination and begin to prompt you perhaps more than He has done before.

Let me just return to the very start of 1 Corinthians 14 verses 1 to 3 [NIVUK84 made gender-neutral] because this, I think, is a really significant motivator. It says here, **"Everyone who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."** Now when I look at you guys, when I think of Knights' Meadow as a community, I think to myself, "How badly do I want to encourage, strengthen and comfort you guys who I care about?" A lot! I would really like to strengthen, encourage and comfort you. Could we just have a quick show of hands. Who would like your church to be strengthened, encouraged and comforted? Yes, that's easy, isn't it. That's super easy. We all want this. Guess what, prophecy does this. Biblically-based, Spirit-inspired prophecy does this big time. So if you are wanting to see this church encouraged as in 'had courage put in it', to do what I'm saying, strengthened so it can go further, comforted when it needs God's consolation in difficult times, prophecy is really, really the thing you should be going for. It's like just the best thing in your kit bag. It's going to take your church further forward.

But not only that, prophecy does other things. Can you turn with me to Acts 13, because this is a really significant piece of change that happens in the history of the early church. In Acts 13, right at the beginning, it's describing people who are based in Antioch now. There's been a newly established church in Antioch, this is made up of mostly Gentiles, but there's quite an international feel to the Antioch church, and it says this in the first few verses:

¹ In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

This is a church that's having a worship meeting, and a prayer meeting, and it's a time of fasting. Again, another feature of early church is that they have periods where they fasted. It's interesting, isn't it? This particular gathering

if Antioch was very, very multicultural, you've got people of different colour and races, people with all kinds of different backgrounds, but this is the key thing: when they prayed, when they worshipped, when they fasted, they were open to the Holy Spirit speaking a new word. They didn't make presumptions, they didn't go, "We know what God's like, we know how to do church, we're fine." They actually were wide open to the Holy Spirit's voice saying something new. Not only were they open to the Holy Spirit saying something new, they were even open to change. Now Barnabas and Saul becoming Paul, they were key people in Antioch. These were people of influence. They were people of great value to the local church. And yet this group sincerely made space for God to say something that was going to effectively take Barnabas and Paul away to do some church planting, to do some mission work, somewhere else. That's the spirit of prophecy orchestrating the revival movement of the early church, and they were open to it.

The leader of the early church was Jesus Christ by the power of His Holy Spirit. My aspiration in Kenilworth is that people don't see me as the leader of St John's Church. I'm kind of facilitating the fact that Jesus is the ultimate leader of our church, facilitating what the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ is guiding us into. I want to point people to what He is saying, so that we can be in step with Him. So not only does prophecy encourage, strengthen and comfort, He guides, He gives strategic pointers. He says, "You - here! You - there!" Now, that's more scary. I have to admit to you, it's more scary, because it takes us out of our comfort zones. But I don't know about you, the very best place to be is where God is speaking and where God is sending. I would say something to you that I think defines being a disciple. For me, after 30-something years, I think being a disciple in practice is fundamentally hearing from God and doing what He says, hearing what God is saying to me, and doing what He's told me to do. Now that can be tiny things, that can be big things, but the point is, if God speaks by His Spirit, if I'm a disciple, I go where He leads. That's what it means to be a follower. So I just want to encourage you, this is fundamental to being a follower of Jesus Christ, hearing from God and daring to go.

Okay. I'm going to pause teaching there, because my guess is, that's all pretty clear. I'm pretty sure that there's not a great deal of contention over anything I've said there.

What I would like to do now though, with your permission, with your encouragement, is to see if we can be open now, just for a few minutes, to the practice of hearing God's voice.

[Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> with help from Hamish Blair]

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