



# The Prophetic Calling

The ministry of a prophet was considered so significant by the Biblical writers, that their actual moment of commissioning is often recorded for us.<sup>(1)</sup> They were love-gifts from God, for even when the message they brought was challenging, it was still God's mercy and kindness to show people how things really stood.<sup>(2)</sup>

Elijah is unusual because we know nothing of him until the moment God sends him to Ahab to warn the king of the impending drought. He is still more exceptional in that every time the Lord commanded him to do something, he seems to have done it straightaway!

*The testimony of Jesus is still the spirit of prophesy.*<sup>(3)</sup> The Lord not only invites but *instructs* His people to be eager to prophesy.<sup>(4)</sup> Our nation has long nurtured a relative abundance of Bible teachers, but the people of God are far more effective wherever there is also a prophetic dimension<sup>(5)</sup> to interpret things, whether about the condition of our hearts or wider matters.<sup>(6)</sup> If the Church in Antioch included prophets as well as teachers, in the ministry team, then why shouldn't ours?<sup>(7)</sup>

The ministry of the prophet in the local church is normally to bring the Lord's word to individual people, or to help the church itself to grow in the beauty and knowledge of God. In some cases, however, prophets bring insights for the whole Church, or which concern specific issues, and even nations.

In His great task of restoring His bride, and bringing in His Kingdom, Jesus is raising up a people to make Himself known in our land: a

New Testament equivalent of a prophetic nation.<sup>(8)</sup> But let us not be narrow in our interpretation of what the prophetic ministry should consist of. I believe in watchmen who are concerned for their professions as well as for their Churches or their geographical regions. For example, the work of the Musicians Network has a prophetic edge <http://musicians-network.net> and <http://epiphanymusic.org.uk/about/> as they sound the praise of God in ways that people can relate to in their everyday lives.

## How can we tell when someone is being raised up for the prophetic ministry?

Character and personality are important: God gave them to us, and He wants to express something of His own heart through them. A prophetic person will nearly always have an above average ability to *feel* issues deeply – and then to turn 'sight into insight' and feelings into prayer. In other words, much of a prophet's work is done in secret, going to God on behalf of men, before going to people on behalf of God.

Then, as John and Paula Sandford make so clear in their outstanding book *The Elijah Task*, we do well to be aware that prophets are almost always trained and tested by means of unusual twists and turns in their life, together with extended periods in the wilderness – what Graham Cook calls PITS – prophets in training! Such challenges are necessary to develop sufficient maturity to enable them to exercise their ministry safely. Corporate



discernment is needed to determine whether people's testing experiences really are a sign of God's calling or simply the consequences of living in a complicated world.

### Testing the Vocation

It is no light matter to identify someone as being a prophet. Equally, we must not be hasty to dismiss someone who prophesies incorrectly as a 'false prophet'. Discernment is the key. Whilst the Old Testament inclines towards the concept of the Lord speaking in a fixed, authoritative manner, we should not be tempted to think that prophets today likewise become mere channels for the voice of God: we are not 'taken over' by the voice of God, as mediums are in séances. The best of us make many mistakes – but we learn from them. If we want to share what we believe to be on God's heart with His people, we do well to examine our track record carefully to see what has happened to the words we have shared previously.

We may find we are strong in some areas but woefully wide of the mark in others – in which case we need to play to our strengths and to triple check anything in the areas where we know ourselves to be weak.

Pastors and leaders with only a superficial knowledge of the person concerned may conclude that they are seriously off course, when in fact this is only the case in certain *areas* of their life. In such cases, gentle restoration is the key! (Gal. 6:1-5)

### Identifying false prophets

How then *do* we recognise false prophets? It is vital that we do, because they can wreak great havoc. One key is to look for the direction of the heart. Proud and stubborn attitudes are a major warning sign. Serious problems are also indicated when a person is certain that they are right, and is unwilling to be challenged concerning their viewpoint. This is presumption – wishful thinking pushed too far – and false prophets are presumptuous!

The false prophet refuses to heed warnings, and continually dreams up new excuses to prolong his delusion. Typically, these people are loan-rangers who brook no correction, unwise-

ly supposing themselves to be superior to those who could help to set them straight. It is the work of superheated flesh and subtle demons to lead many godly souls astray in such ways.

We are wise to take note of checks in our spirit when someone brings a word from the Lord, especially if our own hesitation is accompanied by warnings from other mature Christians. But let's be aware that a false sense of loyalty to somebody (or an instinctive dislike of them for that matter!) can make it harder for us to perceive when a person is in genuine error.

Since it is only with hindsight that we can see how everything fits together, we should be wary of people who claim to know too much. There is a type of prophecy that is dangerously akin to divination in its attempt to predict the future. Man has an innate desire for inappropriate foreknowledge, and it is all too easy to distort 'prophecy' to feed this craving. It fits too well with the western obsession to know, to plan and to schedule. Authentic prophecy, by contrast, is primarily concerned with revealing the heart of God.

Why, then, do so many make such elaborate attempts to predict the exact sequence of the end-time prophecies? We are simply not meant to know all the details in advance. Much still waits to be shaped by our prayers and repentance. Trying to work out ahead of time exactly how matters will develop is usually self-defeating – just as the even the exact sequence of events concerning the Nativity or Calvary could not have been foreseen from the hints given in Old Testament prophecies.

We should never assume that we know how or when God will bring what He has promised to pass. Hearing from Him is the all-important starting point, but then we must continue to seek Him for the unfolding of the details. Jesus taught so much on the need for perseverance, precisely because what God asks of us nearly always appears impossible at first sight. Giving birth to a vision requires great stamina!

Prophecies of blessing need to be prayed through to fulfilment, just as warnings need to be taken seriously in order to be averted. Most



prophecies are best considered as being conditional on our response, rather than deterministic.<sup>(9)</sup> Jonah's doomsday words against Nineveh, for instance, appeared to present the city with an inescapable ultimatum but disaster was averted when the people repented.<sup>(10)</sup>

## Stepping out

Like Jonah, those called to the prophetic ministry will usually be asked to step out at a certain moment on their journey, even to the point of having to stake their all on God's ability to deliver. There are times when prophecy requires direct action: it is a biblical norm. We must learn, at first hand, the absolute faithfulness of our God. Hesitation weakens our faith and strengthens the hand of the enemy. As Derek Prince pointed out, God had a harder job persuading Jonah to fulfil his mission than He did in bringing sinful Nineveh to its knees in repentance!

Has He been asking you to step out on in some way recently?

If you are hesitant, remember that there will always be opportunities to doubt – especially during those periods when everything seems to be going backwards. Nothing of lasting value is accomplished for the kingdom without courage.

The best of us is only a mixture, but those who persevere beyond the testings and setbacks reach a greater fullness of the Lord's wisdom, and are able to function with considerable confidence in the precious ministry that is at the heart of the prophetic calling – just as Elijah and Elisha did.

## References

- (1) Moses in Exodus 3, Amos in Amos 7, Isaiah in Isaiah 6, Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1 and Ezekiel in Ezekiel 2-3.
- (2) At times of crisis, it was the word of the Lord through the prophets which, again and again, saved the nation from its enemies. *Eg* 2 Kings 3:9-27; 1 Kings 22:7-28; 2 Samuel 2:18-25; 2 Chronicles 20; Hosea 12:10,13; Jeremiah 23:28-29; Amos 3:7
- (3) 1 Corinthians 14:1, 3-5, 19, Revelation 19:10 Nowhere is it assumed in Scripture that prophecy was purely for the old dispensation, or for the early days of the Church only. The Scriptures were never intended to dispense with the need to seek the will of God over spe-

cific issues.

(4) John 16:13-15 *'When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to Me by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is Mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is Mine and make it known to you.'*

(5) Cf Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Corinthians 12:28

(6) When the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, He intended to raise up a nation which would be a demonstration to the world of what a righteous society could be like, when it lived under the rule of God. In this plan, the prophets had a vital role.

(7) Acts 13:1

(8) Cf Exodus 29:5-6

(9) That is, automatically bound to happen.

(10) Jonah 3:4-10 cf 1 Kings 20:29