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Sermon: Church Growth and the Prophets by Ben S. prepared by Olive P.

Reading: 1Corinthians 14:1-25

This is the last in our series on prophesy. We have been focusing on the Old Testament prophets but I trust that we understand that what happens in the Old Testament comes into the New Testament and applies to us too. When we talk about New Testament prophesy we can think about how people became noted for prophesying after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost like the daughters of Phillip. The gift of prophesy was acknowledged in the New Testament Church and people were called prophets notably in Antioch. I want to discuss how prophesy applies to us and link it to church growth. With growth comes change and change can make things very difficult. Never the less, the Spirit of God wants to grow the church. May the Lord turn our hearts to desire what he wants for the Church.

Three foundational principles about prophesy:

1. New Testament prophesy is not different from Old Testament prophesy otherwise it would have a different name. God puts his word into the mouth of a person in an accountable way. (Deut. 18)
2. We have the scriptures through the gift of prophesy but that is the exceptional form of prophesy. Prophecy is normally a verbal ministry.
3. The written word is the plumb-line for the spoken word. Everything that is spoken must be faithful to the revealed word of God as written in the scriptures. If it is not, it must be rejected.

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” (Ephesians 4:11-12) It is clearly Christ who has done this and the reference is to New Testament ministries including prophets. The function of these gifts is so that you, the church, may be built up and equipped to do the work God is calling you to do in the church and in the world. The outcome and operation of these gifts is two-fold; they enable you to do your work and they make the church grow. God is still drawing people into his kingdom. Primarily these men and women were talking. It is through the tongue, then, that the church will grow. When we read James one of his great concerns was the way Christians use their tongues. What you do and don't say is so important. It can do great mischief or great good. The tongue is absolutely crucial to the building up of the church. Can you envisage the outcome if God would speak through us? The church would grow. We all have a tongue and how we use it has great consequences for church growth.

God is love so when the church is loveless, as it was in Corinth, there is a major disconnect between the church and God and his people. 1Corinthians 13 is at the heart of Paul's letter because love needed to be at the heart of the church. Chapter 14 tells us how to get love back into the church. We grow and mature when we are loved. That is how we draw people in. The answer is about what, how and when we speak. The sense of 'God is with us' is in how we communicate so a person senses God and is converted. Paul makes a comparison between tongues and prophesy. (1Cor. 14) The reference to tongues

is other human languages especially in a multi-national city like Corinth. Speaking in tongues is set against prophecy as the lesser gift because people understand what you are saying when you prophesy. If they hear you speaking in tongues they are left out in the cold, alienated and estranged. Love brings people in and explains the situation, no secrets. Love talks to people and makes itself understood. We have a responsibility to bring people into the truth, into the love of God. What good would it do you if I read the Psalms to you in Hebrew? All nice and erudite but of no use to those who don't understand Hebrew. In Corinth they needed a common language for worship but if anyone had a word in another language it had to be translated so everyone could understand because that's the loving thing to do. The effects on the people (V3) are that they get stronger. God wants to strengthen, encourage and comfort you. He wants you to have more peace, be bolder and stronger by communicating his word to you. This is something you can do to and for each other. You can strengthen, comfort and encourage each other by the word of God. That is your work of service. In doing this the church will grow in both senses.

Just to be clear, the church is believers. The unbelieving will have their best opportunity of being added to the church when they meet Christians who are talking to each other in this way. When they come into contact with people who are comforting, strengthening and encouraging this is so unlike the pub or at work. This is different because the kingdom is here. Believers are doing what Christ said, "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34) Is the disposition of your heart to give your tongue to Jesus in 2022; to be eager to prophesy; (v39) to desire this above everything else? "Get a hold of my tongue Lord and use it to your glory!" God wants to speak to you and through you.

A story: He had been through an absolutely torrid time. His wife had left him. He poured out his heart to his pastor who only said five words, "God will never divorce you". Those five faithful words sustained that person through the many months of dreadful trial. Five helpful words: "Can I pray for you?"

You can evaluate and test whether the ministry you are listening to is the right ministry. If you are not being strengthened, comforted and encouraged. there is a problem. They are not the sort of people we should be listening to. That's true of ministers as well as each other. Be careful of letting into your hearts the words of people who are not like that. Words of correction that come from God will never condemn, judge or crush you but will encourage you to lay hold of the truth and run with it. "Please Lord Jesus may the manifestation of this gift continue with us throughout this New Year and until the lord Jesus comes."

All our words come from our heart. Proverbs 4:23 "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Ps 19:14 "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer." Luke 6:45 "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

The church will be built up or ruined by what we say. If we strengthen each other, comfort each other, encourage each other, it doesn't matter what's happening in the world the church will grow.