

## The Gifts of Grace

### Prophecy

**The Gift of Prophecy.** This manifestation of the Holy Spirit is strongly emphasised and recommended by Paul for all the Saints. It is directed at either the whole church or at specific individuals. It is a supernatural utterance in a known tongue.

The Gift of Prophecy has six main purposes:

1. **It edifies** - It builds, strengthens and makes Christians more effective.
2. **It exhorts** - It encourages, motivates and stimulates Christians.
3. **It comforts** - Its words cheer-up and comfort Christians when they are discouraged or brought under condemnation by satan.
4. **It ordains and sends** - By words of prophecy, Christians are given special Gifts, Ministries, Assignments and are sent forth by the Holy Spirit. **1 Timothy 4:14**, "*Neglect not the gift that is in you which was given to you by prophecy.*"
5. **It ministers to Unbelievers** - When unbelievers are present in the Church, the Holy Spirit may minister to them through Prophecy. **1 Corinthians 14:24**, "*But if all prophesy, and there comes in one that does not believe, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all.*"
6. **It convicts** - it convicts and converts the unbeliever.

This gift is sometimes referred to as the greatest of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit. The reason is mainly because the apostle Paul purposely singles out this gift when telling us to **seek after** the spiritual gifts. He encourages every believer to **"desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy."** With him purposely singling out the gift of prophecy in comparison to the rest of the nine gifts, Paul may be trying to tell us that the gift of prophecy is the most necessary of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit. And when you think about exactly what this gift does (its six purposes), he is probably right. However, be careful! The best and greatest gift is always the one that is needed at that moment in time. That good is prophecy when I person is in pain or has disease in his body.

The gift of prophecy is also the "gift" that has been abused most in churches today. Far too many Christians have been encouraged to prophesy without sufficient knowledge or true instruction. But let's not forget the benefits to the Body when prophecy is operating correctly. That is, under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So what is prophecy and how can you stir this gift up in you?

Firstly, when you get a Word of Prophecy directly from God, it is usually to give to someone else. And when I say a direct word, I mean that the message you receive (and deliver) will literally be 'word for word'. When you receive such a 'word' it will not be ambiguous or difficult to comprehend - either for yourself or the person it's meant for. And I must stress the importance of being able to receive a direct, clear, prophetic Word from the Lord in order to bless someone else - to help edify and build them up, or help them deal with something specific they may be struggling with. When you are the actual messenger of God, of that prophetic word, to someone specific. It carries great responsibility. Your prophecy can change the whole course of that person's life! As such, ever prophecy needs to be judged - and all need to be recorded or written down if possible.

The Bible tells us that God uses the gift of prophecy to speak edification, exhortation and comfort to other people. Here is the specific verse giving us this direct revelation on what the main use of prophecy is all about: **"But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men." (1 Corinthians 14:4)** Many times prophecy is also used to help confirm what has already been given to a person earlier on by the Lord - either through His word or by direct revelation. Many times God will **confirm** what He has already told you earlier so that you may know it was Him all along. And one of the ways that He can confirm a previous 'message' that He has given you is by a direct prophecy through another believer.

Prophecies from the Lord can deal with an extremely wide range of situations and issues - covering everything from predicting future events as in the Old Testament, to giving someone counsel, encouragement, confirmation, instruction, and possible correction when needed. Also, all prophecy needs to be properly tested, as the Bible tells us that there will always be false prophets walking among us, along with the possibility of well-meaning believers prophesying out of their own spirits or imaginations. Here is the verse giving us this direct warning: **"Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21)**. Note, all prophecy always needs to line up with Scripture. If it does not, it should be immediately rejected. God will never go against His own Word, especially when delivering a prophetic word to someone.

Again, any believer can expect the Lord manifest this gift through them at anytime, but they must be prepared to be judged on what they have spoken out. You do not have to hold the actual office of a prophet in order for God to manifest this gift through you from time to time. Yet, it is not treated to taken lightly. Being God's messenger is serious business! The Bible tells us that in the latter days God will be pouring out His Holy Spirit upon all flesh and when He does, it says our sons and daughters will be prophesying. This means that there are going to be many of you who are going to operate in this gift, and with much frequency in the coming years. However, don't forget to measure everything against God's infallible word!

When Paul says to **"desire earnestly to prophesy"** and to **"desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy,"** we get the feeling that this is something the Lord would really like to do more of with His children. Again, if you would like the Lord to manifest this gift through you from time to time, so you can be a messenger for Him to someone else, just go to Him in prayer and tell Him that you will be a happy, willing and yielded vessel should He decide to manifest this particular gift through you (at any time). And then keep your spiritual antenna up, always being open and sensitive to the Holy Spirit. There are many dangers of prophecy. One example of this is foolish prophecy, which is really nothing more than wishful thinking. It might surprise many of you, but sometimes it can be a bad idea for a small group of friends to gather and try to hear God for each other. Unfortunately, what often happens is - *what you wish God would say to that person is then what you think you hear God saying to that person*. So we need to be careful about this.

Prophecy is particularly dangerous in the key areas of life. So much damage has been done in God's name by unwise, unsafe prophecy. We should avoid, in almost every case, what I call "hatch, match, or dispatch" prophecies. What's a "hatch" prophecy? A "hatch" prophecy is when you go up to a lady and say, *"I really believe God is going to give you a baby."* Not wise. A "match" prophecy is, *"I think you two should get married,"* or worse still, when a guy goes to a girl and says, *"God has told me that we're going to get married."* Not wise. The girl might well reply, *"Well, he hasn't told me!"* "Dispatch" prophecies are about predicting death and destruction - not wise! But just as dangerous also are those prophecies where someone has a serious illness and a foolish person says, *"I really feel God has said you're going to be instantly healed."* Not helpful - it can be very dangerous. Avoid sharing these kinds of prophecy like the plague.

Prophecy can be misleading, and very damaging in foolish hands. Lives can be destroyed by the response of someone to a careless word. In fact, because of this risk, I can understand why at various points throughout history the cry has gone up, "Ban it!" But the Bible does not allow us to do that. Because of the dangers of prophecy, I would encourage you, if you do have a prophetic word for someone, have a witness present to confirm or correct what is being said, and to relieve any pressure that the person might feel. It's very wise to say things like, *"Well, I need you to weight this."* *"Please check this with one of the pastors."* *"Does this make any sense to you?"* Sometimes people deliver a prophetic word and they say, *"Does that make any sense?"* And the answer is "No." *"What do you mean, it doesn't make any sense? It was God, wasn't it?"* Well, not necessarily.

How do we recognise true prophecy then? **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21** says this: **"Do not despise prophesying."** Unfortunately, many of us, having seen some of the excesses and some of the craziness that has gone on in the name of a so-called prophet, have got to despise prophesying. Don't despise prophesying, **"but test everything, holding fast to the good."** I like that, because, to me, one of the things he seems to be saying is, *"Don't get too worried about the bad."* Obviously we reject the bad, but maybe the issue here is not necessarily pointing out everything that's wrong in a prophecy, but just letting some of that just pass us by and honing in on and holding fast to the good. It is not the prophet who we test; rather it is the prophetic words uttered. A powerful word can sometimes come from a new Christian. Equally, however, no word is true simply because it came from someone who has a good track record of hearing from God.

We are not told to test the Bible! The Bible, we know, is true. But we have to test prophetic words by what the Bible says. Don't ask God to speak to you about something He's already spoken about in the Bible. If you ever come up to me and tell me, *"God has told me that I should divorce my wife and marry another woman,"* don't expect a particularly understanding hearing. You probably won't get a very sympathetic response. You'll be told in no uncertain terms that that's a false prophecy. But actually, sometimes it's not as clear-cut as that. So trust in God's word first, and then in the leadership that He has placed around you. God has put them there to protect you, but also to confirm what He has already spoken to your heart.

If we take Paul's letter to the Corinthians seriously, we must come to the conclusion that the Gift of Prophecy is invaluable to the church. When we try to build churches without this gift being active, it is like trying to walk across Surrey on crutches: it can be done, but it is certainly the hard way. The importance of the Gift of Prophecy is seen in all the various lists and discussions of the gifts in Paul's letters. [1] The only constant gift is prophecy. [2] Whenever Paul makes an attempt to classify the gifts in terms of importance, prophecy is

given preference over all the rest (1 Corinthians 14:1). [3] Only in the two passages where Paul speaks of gifted men (prophets) rather than of the gift (prophecy) do prophets fall into second place behind apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; Ephesians 2:20). So why is prophecy so important? Just what is its purpose?

Its several functions may all be subsumed under the purpose of building up the Church. Since love for the brethren is to be the motive for desiring the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13), the purpose is to build up the brethren. The Greek word *'oikodome'* was first used of building houses, temples, and pyramids, but quickly moved to a figurative sense in secular Greek. In the context of spiritual gifts it means "building" as a process, "construction" and is "figurative of spiritual strengthening, edifying, edification, building up." The Spirit of Christ is fulfilling Jesus' promise, **"I will build (oikodomeo) my church ..."** (Mt 16:18). The Spirit is in the business of constructing people and the community. The ways in which prophecy builds up the body are spelled out in detail in 1 Corinthians 14. Here are three ways Prophecy does this:

1. **Exhortation and Encouragement.** Exhortation and assurance are two common purposes of prophecy. Paul contrasts tongues (a Godward speaking) with prophecy (a manward message): **"He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding (oikodome) and encouragement (paraklesis) and consolation" (paramuthia) - 1 Cor. 14:3.** But *'paraklesis'* has a wide range of meaning. Its root carries the idea *"to call alongside to help."* The word can denote **"encouragement, exhortation."** The word also extends to the idea of "comfort, consolation" (Romans 15:4; Colossians 4:8; 2 Corinthians 1:3). Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to His followers as *"another Paraclete,"* One who would come alongside to disciple them (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7). A vitally important way the Spirit is fulfilling this ministry of *'paraklesis'* is through the exhortation and comforting assurance of the prophetic spoken word. Hence, exhortation to obedience and service, as well as encouragement and comfort from the Spirit to those experiencing pain and trouble, are one aspect of the Spirit's building up of the church through the Gift of Prophecy.

2. **A Specific Revelation for the Occasion.** Revelation is the particular characteristic of prophecy which sets it off from preaching and teaching. Indeed, one of the primary ways the Spirit builds up the church is by means of prophecy's revelation. Although the Gift of Prophecy has a great breadth, we should not imagine that its primary purpose is the setting forth of doctrine, even though "instruction" was part of its original function (1 Corinthians 14:19). Rather, the gift of prophecy was a revelation from God with a word for the particular moment. The great value of prophecy to the church today is the contemporary Word of God to encourage and guide His people. The prophetic message is **"a word fitly spoken" (Proverbs 25:11),** directly from God, **"good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).**

3. **Conviction.** A specific revelation can be particularly powerful in bringing conviction of sin and of God's presence to unbelievers or backsliders who are present in a church gathering. Paul suggests to the Corinthians how prophecy can work in this way: **"If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).** For the outsider, prophecy can be a powerful sign of God's presence among His people. Problems with individuals in the body or with the body itself may also be pinpointed by the Gift of Prophecy. Therefore, prophecy builds up the church by converting the unbeliever and purifying the believer. The variety of ways the church is built up by prophecy accentuate its necessity for the present day church. Words of comfort and assurance, words of pleading, words of exhortation and admonition, words of exposure and correction - all of these are designed by the Spirit to bring and maintain renewal in Christ's church.

We cannot afford to despise the Gift of Prophecy. Nor can we allow its capacity for misuse and misunderstanding prevent us from embracing it. Rather we must diligently seek to curb its abuses by the guidelines of Scripture and **"test all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21),** so that the great constructive value of prophecy may be experienced by our churches. Through this unique spiritual gift the church is enabled to grow, mature and move forward according to the will of God. **"Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy ... so that the church may be edified" (1 Corinthians 14:1, 5).**

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**Prophecy** <propheteia> signifies **"the speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God"** (pro, "forth," phemi, "to speak:"); in the NT it is used (a) of the gift, e.g., Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10; 13:2; (b) either of the exercise of the gift or of that which is "prophesied," e.g., Matt. 13:14; 1 Cor. 13:8; 14:6,22; 1 Thess. 5:20,

"prophesying (s);" 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14; 2 Pet. 1:20,21; Rev. 1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7,10,18,19.

"Though much of OT prophecy was purely predictive, see Micah 5:2, e.g., and cp. John 11:51, prophecy is not necessarily, nor even primarily, fore-telling. It is the declaration of that which cannot be known by natural means, Matt. 26:68, it is the forth-telling of the will of God, whether with reference to the past, the present, or the future, see Gen. 20:7; Deut. 18:18; Rev. 10:11; 11:3. ...

"In such passages as 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20, the 'prophets' are placed after the 'Apostles,' since not the prophets of Israel are intended, but the 'gifts' of the ascended Lord, Eph. 4:8,11; cp. Acts 13:1; ...; the purpose of their ministry was to edify, to comfort, and to encourage the believers, 1 Cor. 14:3, while its effect upon unbelievers was to show that the secrets of a man's heart are known to God, to convict of sin, and to constrain to worship, 1 Cor. 14:24,25.

**Prophet** <prophetes> **"one who speaks forth or openly"**, "a proclaimer of a divine message," denoted among the Greeks an interpreter of the oracles of the gods. In the Sept. it is the translation of the word roeh, "a seer;" 1 Sam. 9:9, indicating that the "prophet" was one who had immediate intercourse with God. It also translates the word nabhi, meaning "either one in whom the message from God springs forth" or "one to whom anything is secretly communicated." Hence, in general, "the prophet" was one upon whom the Spirit of God rested, Num. 11:17-29, one, to whom and through whom God speaks, Num. 12:2; Amos 3:7,8. In the case of the OT prophets their messages were very largely the proclamation of the Divine purposes of salvation and glory to be accomplished in the future; the "prophesying" of the NT "prophets" was both a preaching of the Divine counsels of grace already accomplished and the foretelling of the purposes of God in the future.

In the NT the word is used (a) of "the OT prophets," e.g., Matt. 5:12; Mark 6:15; Luke 4:27; John 8:52; Rom. 11:3; (b) of "prophets in general," e.g., Matt. 10:41; 21:46; Mark 6:4; (c) of "John the Baptist," Matt. 21:26; Luke 1:76; (d) of "prophets in the churches," e.g., Acts 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; 1 Cor. 12:28,29; 14:29,32,37; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; (e) of "Christ, as the aforepromised Prophet," e.g., John 1:21; 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22; 7:37, or, without the article, and, without reference to the Old Testament, Mark 6:15, Luke 7:16; in Luke 24:19 it is used with aner, "a man;" John 4:19; 9:17; (f) of "two witnesses" yet to be raised up for special purposes, Rev. 11:10,18; (g) of "the Cretan poet Epimenides," Titus 1:12; (h) by metonymy, of "the writings of prophets," e.g., Luke 24:27; Acts 8:28.