

Chapter 53: Gifts of the Holy Spirit (2a)

How should we understand and use specific spiritual gifts?

- A. Prophecy: The gift of prophecy in the NT is telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.
1. The New Testament Counterparts to Old Testament Prophets Are New Testament Apostles
 - Old Testament prophets spoke and wrote words that had absolute divine authority. They prefaced words with "Thus says the Lord," so to disobey a prophet's voice was to disobey God. (Deut 18:18-19)
 - In the New Testament, people who spoke and wrote God's very words and had them recorded in Scripture were not called "prophets" but "apostles." They are the counterparts to Old Testament prophets. When the apostles wanted to establish their unique authority, they never appealed to the title "prophet" but "apostle." (Ro 1:1; 2 Pe 3:2; 1 Co 2:13)
 2. The Meaning of the Word Prophet in the Time of the New Testament
 - The word prophet (*prophētēs*) in the time of the New Testament generally meant "one who speaks on the basis of some external influence." In everyday use it could mean "one who predicts the future" or "spokesman" (without any connotations of divine authority). (Titus 1:12)
 - The words "prophet" and "prophecy" were *sometimes* used of the apostles in contexts that emphasized the Holy Spirit's revealing of things to them (Rev. 22:7). But the words *much more commonly* referred to ordinary Christians who simply reported something that God had brought to their minds (1 Cor. 14:29).
 3. Indications That "Prophets" Did Not Speak With Authority Equal to the Words of Scripture
 - a. Acts 21:4: "And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."
 - Paul disobeyed this, which he never would have done if this prophecy contained God's very words and had authority equal to Scripture.
 - b. Acts 21:10-11, 31-33:
 - There are a few discrepancies between Agabus' prophecy and what actually took place:
 - The Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul
 - The Jews, rather than delivering him voluntarily, tried to kill Paul and he had to be rescued by force.
 - This text could be explained by supposing that Agabus had a vision of Paul as a prisoner of the Romans in Jerusalem, surrounded by an angry mob of Jews. His own interpretation of such a "vision" or "revelation" from the Holy Spirit would be that the Jews had bound Paul and handed him over to the Romans. This is exactly the kind of fallible prophecy that would fit the definition of New Testament congregational prophecy—reporting in one's own words something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.
 - c. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21: "Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good."
 - If the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equaled God's Word in authority, Paul would never have had to tell the Thessalonians not to despise it (they honored God's Word: see 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:13).
 - By encouraging them to "test everything" and "hold fast what is good," Paul implies that prophecies contain some things that are good and some things that are not good. This is something that could never be said of the words of an Old Testament prophet or a New Testament apostle.
 - d. 1 Corinthians 14:29-38:
 - When Paul says, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said" (29), he suggests that they should listen carefully and sift the good from the bad, accepting some and rejecting the rest. It is unimaginable that an Old Testament prophet would qualify his words in the same way.
 - "If a revelation is made to one sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one" (30-31). If prophets had been speaking God's very words, equal to Scripture, it is hard to imagine that Paul would say they should be interrupted and not be allowed to finish their message.
 - e. Apostolic Preparations for Their Absence
 - The apostles encourage their successors to listen to the Scriptures, not the existing prophets, once the apostles were gone. (2 Pe 1:19-20)
 - There certainly were prophets prophesying in many local congregations after the death of the apostles. It seems that they did not have authority equal to the apostles, and the authors of Scripture knew that.
 - f. Conclusion: Ordinary congregational prophecy in the NT churches was not speaking "the words of God" in the sense of more Scripture or anything like it in authority.
 - Today: we should not consider any words that people claim "from the Lord" to be equal to Scripture in authority, but rather merely human words reporting what God may/ may not have brought to mind.
 4. How Should We Speak About the Authority of Prophecy Today?
 - There is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted.
 - But much confusion results from prefacing prophecies with "Thus says the Lord," a phrase no New Testament prophet is recorded to have spoken.

- If someone thinks God is bringing something to mind which should be reported to the congregation, there is nothing wrong with saying, "I think the Lord is putting on my mind that..." or "It seems to me that the Lord is showing us..." or a similar expression.
5. A Spontaneous "Revelation" Made Prophecy Different From Other Gifts
 - When Paul refers to a "revelation" given to someone (1 Cor 14:30), he is referring to something that God may suddenly bring to mind in such a way that that person has a sense that it is from God. When the person shares this with the congregation in his or her own words, it is "prophecy" in the New Testament definition.
 6. The Difference Between Prophecy and Teaching
 - All New Testament *prophecy* was based on spontaneous prompting from the Holy Spirit.
 - By contrast, *no teaching* in the New Testament is said to be based on "revelation." Rather, teaching is an explanation and application of Scripture.
 - Therefore, prophecy has less authority than teaching, and prophecies in the church are always to be subject to the authoritative teaching of Scripture.
 - If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in NT terms) a teaching.
But if a message is a report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.
 7. Objection: This Makes Prophecy "Too Subjective."
 - Often those making this objection are the very ones who need this subjective process most in their own Christian lives!
 - This gift requires waiting on the Lord, listening for him, hearing his prompting in our hearts. This is an important aspect of the Christian life.
 8. Prophecies Could Include Any Edifying Content
 - Prophecy is not only "predicting the future." In fact, anything that edified could have been included. (1 Co 14:3)
 - An additional indication of the value of prophecy was that it could speak to the needs of people's hearts in a spontaneous, direct way.
 9. Many People in the Congregation Could Prophecy (1 Cor 14:31)
 - This does not mean that all will actually be able to prophecy. (See 1 Cor 12:29)
 - It does mean that anyone who receives a "revelation" from God has permission to prophecy within Paul's guidelines, and it suggests that many will.
 10. Paul Says Christians Should "Earnestly Desire" Prophecy (1 Cor 14:1)
 11. Encouraging and Regulating Prophecy in the Local Church
 1. Pray seriously for the Lord's wisdom on how and when to approach this subject in the church
 2. There should be teaching on this subject in the regular Bible teaching times
 3. The church should be patient and proceed slowly—church leaders should not be "domineering," and a patient approach will avoid frightening people away or alienating them unnecessarily.
 4. The church should recognize and encourage this gift in ways it has already been functioning in the church.
 5. Opportunities for the gift of prophecy to be used might be made in less formal worship services/small groups.
 6. If the gift of prophecy begins to be used in a church, the church should place even more emphasis on the superior value of Scripture as the source to which Christians can always go to hear the voice of the living God.
- B. Teaching: Teaching is the ability to explain Scripture and apply it to people's lives. (Acts 18:11)
- Far from being based on a spontaneous revelation that came during the worship service of the church (as prophecy was), this kind of teaching was the repetition and explanation of authentic apostolic teaching. (1 Cor 4:17)
- C. Miracles (1 Cor 12:28)
- The Greek word for "miracles" is the plural form of the word *dynamis*, ("power"). The term may refer to any kind of activity where God's mighty power is evident.
 - Since Paul does not define "works of miracles" any more specifically than this, the gift of miracles may include the working of divine power in deliverance from danger, in intervention to meet special physical needs, in judgment on those who oppose the gospel message, in spiritual warfare, and in any other way in which God's power is manifested in an evident way.

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