

WEIGHING PROPHECY

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Although the New Testament says we should be diligent to ‘test the spirits’ (Matt 24: 24-25, 1 Tim 4:11; John 4:1-6) this isn’t as easy as it sounds. Evangelicals increasingly disagree on the basics: including what is truth or error. So when it comes to a particular prophecy, it is hardly surprising if believers within the same local church or para-church organization differ as to what weight, if any, should be placed on it. It can also be emotionally difficult to give a prophecy a different weight from others, especially if they are the person giving the prophecy, or they are believed to have a prophetic ministry.

Our main problem (unless we are cessationists) is to know *how* to weigh prophecy. In practice it is often a very subjective exercise. This needn’t be the case, as we are meant to weigh prophecies in light of Scripture as a whole. Scripture also provides specific guidelines.

OT EXAMPLES

For example, the ways outlined in the Old Testament to test the words of a prophet (Deut 13:1-5; Jer 23:25-40 etc). This means those who say their predictions don’t have to be 100% accurate, or whose predictions come to pass but are preaching another Jesus & / or who are neo-Gnostics (of which there are an increasing number, including on the religious TV channels), are all ‘false prophets’. But even if the words of a prophet pass this particular maxim, we still have to decide what weight (importance, etc) to give them.

One crucially important maxim is to ensure we don’t give any of today’s prophets,

and therefore anything they say, the same weight as an OT prophet.

NT INSTRUCTIONS

The Apostle Paul’s instructions in 1 Cor 14:29ff (“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said..”) are primarily with respect to those who exercise a prophetic ministry. These instructions, which Paul says are “the Lord’s commands”, infer:

- (i) they are prophecies given by those who were already recognized by their own local church as prophets;
- (ii) that their spiritual character was consequently known and approved by their own local church (cf. Matt 7:15-17); and
- (iii) that they each submitted to others in their own local church – a characteristic of NT ministry, epitomised by Paul who, despite believing himself to be directly called into divine service by the Lord Jesus in a manner equivalent to the twelve apostles, could not only be sent out (with Barnabas) by his own local church in Antioch (Acts 13:3) but on his return ‘taught and preached the word *with many others*’ (Acts 15:35).

These instructions are also universal, as in conclusion Paul wrote (vs 36-37) “*Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.*”

The relatively few references in the NT to the activity of prophets in the early Church

also all suggest they fulfilled their ministry alongside others with a recognised prophetic ministry: rather than acting solo, akin to OT prophets. **Acts 11:27-30** *“During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.). The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”* **Acts 13: 1-3** *“Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon..., Lucius ..., Manaen ...and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”* In both instances there was more than one recognised prophet present; and what was said was weighed by the others, who also decided how to practically respond. The general picture in Acts mirrors Paul’s instructions to the believers in Corinth, and vice-versa.

APPLYING THE TEST

Whilst we don’t know the actual words of the prophecies given to Timothy, apart from them being exhortations to ‘fight the good fight of faith’; there was more than one prophecy given, and others present (including Paul) witnessed to them being from the Holy Spirit (**1 Tim 1: 18-19**). It is therefore possible that those who gave the prophecies to Timothy already had a recognised prophetic ministry, akin to the situation in the church in Jerusalem and in Antioch.

The practical reason why those with a prophetic ministry today shouldn’t be given the same weight as OT prophets, is because under the provisions of the New Covenant all true believers have received an anointing, not just those with a prophetic ministry (**1 John 2:20**). This is integral to us all being members of the one body, the church (which is a new creation in Christ); and why all of today’s prophets should be subject to the instructions given in **1 Cor 14:29ff**.

The writer to the Hebrews also says God (the Father) doesn’t speak today through prophets in the same way as in the OT (**Heb 1:1-2**). In the prophecies mentioned in **Acts 11:27-28 & 13: 1-3** and **1 Tim 1: 18-19**, which are all specifically stated, in hindsight, to be ‘from the Holy Spirit’, there are no ‘Thus says the LORD...’ Whilst one cannot formulate teaching on an omission, it may nevertheless be significant. For - in contradistinction to an OT prophet - how can a prophecy be uttered *on the understanding it needs to be weighed by others*, if the person giving the utterance has already weighed it? [When Ananias was given a message for Saul of Tarsus, he said it was ‘from the Lord Jesus’, but this was an integral part of Jesus’ unique commissioning of Paul. Furthermore, Ananias didn’t claim to have a prophetic ministry - the NT designates him as a “disciple” - and he only confirmed what the Lord Jesus had previously told Paul.]

ENCOURAGEMENT TO CLARITY

If someone believes they have a prophetic ministry, they should be encouraged to follow (as much as is practically possible) the Apostle Paul’s instructions. If nothing else, it would help counter the increasing tendency of some to trust in their own ‘unique hotline to God’, rather than allowing

others (with whom they are in partnership etc) to weigh their words, and genuinely accept their assessment.

On the other hand, we shouldn't automatically dismiss the utterances of those who fail to follow Paul's instructions. The Holy Spirit can (if he chooses) speak through the mouth of a donkey, and (on one occasion) the ungodly Caiaphas prophesied accurately.

Even so, we still need to ensure we don't give anywhere near the same weight to a supposed 'word from the Lord' compared to the weight we must always give to the prophetic utterances that constitute the OT & NT (the Canon of which is complete). There are also a number of additional biblical maxims to help us weigh prophecies more objectively.