

Thoughts on the Place of Prophetic Input to Bolster Our Hearing Capacity (by Dan Steigerwald)

One avenue that God sometimes uses to speak to individual leaders, leadership communities and churches is the prophetic. Many experience a tension when it comes to this kind of input. They may believe Scripture is somehow brought into competition with extra-biblical revelation. Or perhaps they have seen or experienced abuse or misuse of the prophetic gift or orientation. Maybe that involved overly negative or critical input that proved more harmful than helpful. Or perhaps it involved peculiar individuals bringing strange and bizarre words, images or revelations. Recognizing that there are diverse views on this subject, I would like to offer some brief thoughts on how missional leaders might embrace a balanced operation of the prophetic as an aid to their listening and discernment.

Several years ago a number of missional pioneers and church planters gathered in Portland for a weekend to converse about the role of the prophetic, since that term is used quite prolifically in the broader missional conversation and also has a history in more charismatic sectors of the body of Christ. Christian Associates (CA) sponsored the event, which required each participant to write a short paper and lead the group in conversation about it for an hour. As event organizer I decided to frame our subject focus question for the weekend in a way that invited participants to explore two angles on exercising the prophetic: *How and in what ways is the church prophetic to culture? What is the place of the prophetic gift in the church today?*

Most people attending wrote short essays about the prophetic in relation to culture, either describing the prophetic as the voice of God communicated through certain Christians calling the church out of its capitulation to culture to a deeper and truer walk with Christ; or they wrote about the prophetic as the living out of a godly lifestyle in community such that the surrounding culture might hear and get a taste of God's now and coming *shalom*. The former included calling the church to resist culture's excesses, such as busyness, individualism and narcissism, competitiveness and our driven-ness to be recognized as the best at everything, American civil religion, etc. The latter, more missional vein involved aspects of identifying, calling out, and affirming God's movements in culture among general humankind made in the *imago Dei* (image of God). The premise was that when God's people live in community in ways that affirm that which is good in culture, while at the same time resisting the destructive scripts by showing better alternative ways to live, the church becomes a clearer "prophetic" sign and foretaste of the Kingdom it represents.

As our conversations progressed over the weekend, I noticed that the term "prophetic" tended to be viewed mainly as the act of calling people – both in the church and outside the church – to a Jesus way of life. People or churches were also said to be moving "prophetically" when they were beating a particular social justice drum. Prophetic was used to describe a disposition or posture of certain people too. Individuals who leaned toward the prophetic or prophet orientation on the five-fold spectrum mentioned in Ephesians 4:17 were described as people exhibiting a holy restlessness, a fidgeting that would not be assuaged until others were somehow called into greater conformity with the image and way of Jesus. To be prophetic meant one was a questioner or a critic of the status

quo. Or they had a passion for truth and for honoring Christ in all situations, along with a penchant for drawing attention to when they thought this was not happening. The basic portrait was of a person who was agitated, somewhat cynical and even a bit of troublemaker (in a good sense) – always stirring up the pot.

In contrast to these descriptions of the prophetic, little attention was given to the idea of the prophetic involving Christians receiving input from God useful to helping individuals or churches discern/judge a given situation, make an important decision, or find encouragement and comfort from God. Fortunately, a couple of folks at the weekend gathering actually wrote about a balanced and Scripturally-informed use of the prophetic “gift.” This gift was described as the capacity to see a situation as God sees it. It involved a special ability by grace to gain input from God that offered consolation, encouragement and strengthening to an individual or church (consistent with the Apostle Paul’s description of the purposes of the gift in I Corinthians 14:3 – “Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.”). This input could come in a variety of forms, such as, an image, a dream, a specific Scripture, or a word of encouragement.

One pastor who attended defined using a prophetic gift as a situation “where someone, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, says what God is saying to a person, a group, a nation, or a situation. The person acts as God’s voice...and this may be about the future, but also often about the past and present.” The pastor contended that Peter’s Acts 2 citing of Joel 2 at Pentecost represented him pointing to a fulfillment of what Joel was looking towards – the time after Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit when many normal Christians would on occasion move in a prophetic gift. (Joel prophesied: “Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions and your old men dream dreams.”). Reference was also made to Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to seek the higher gifts, especially prophecy, and to allow prophecy in church gatherings, so that even unbelievers might be moved to see their state and need for God (I Cor. 14:24-25). So there was a primary emphasis on prophetic input as a means of building up the body of Christ, with some secondary application to non-Christians (interestingly, at Pentecost the disciples were speaking in foreign tongues of God’s marvelous acts – prophetic words *with a missional impetus* intended to draw attention and glory to God among visitors to Jerusalem from many nations).

As we seek to be better listeners to God, I think we need to preserve this wider sweep of application regarding the prophetic. In other words, we *in leadership community* need to allow room for those fellow listeners who challenge the status quo, who “see” (after hearing) how things ought to be different for God’s glory and the good of the world. We need to hear what they have to say. At the same time we do a great disservice to the Kingdom if we fail to let God be God and speak or move in ways that prophetically-gifted people are best wired to discern, whether by image, words, dreams symbols, etc. Leaders must not dismiss these diverse avenues of input. They can add clarity and strengthen conviction about what “seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28) either to do or receive or relinquish in the name of a humble response to God and wisdom.

So, I'm making a strong bid for the proper place of diverse prophetic input in both our individual and our communal listening. Toward that end, here's some parting questions I think leadership communities need to wrestle with:

- **How can we create community cultures that preserve and live into the tension between a "safe" way that quenches the Spirit by shutting down those who contradict or radically inform the status quo, and an ungrounded posture that gives too much sway to every wind of input that purports to be "of the Lord"?** Are we as leaders willing to provide channels or ways through which prophetic input might flow? It is a messy arena wrought with the dangers of people speaking out of their own minds, hurts and agendas; and also the challenges of evaluating and interpreting perspectives, images, words, dreams or actions that might appear at first glance to be nonsensical or even ridiculous. But may we heed the Apostle Paul's warning: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold onto the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 1:4-5).
- **Related to this first question, how do we go about identifying and screening those who move in a prophetic orientation?** In my experience God gives this giftedness to local churches, and it is [especially] important to include those in our communal hearing who over time have demonstrated accuracy and helpfulness in their input.
- **How do we as leaders record and return to prophetic input that has come our way in earlier days?** The Apostle Paul reminded Timothy not to neglect the gift that was given him "through a prophetic message" when his body of elders laid hands on him. A vital component of good leadership listening involves periodically accessing those ways and means God has used to guide, contour and inform us in the earlier formation of our individual and communal stories. In times of uncertainty or confusion, such streams of historic, discerned input can help leaders and the body of Christ navigate by "the last thing that God has clearly spoken to us" (as Youth With A Mission's founder, Loren Cunningham, used to say).
- **What about the role of Prophets and foretelling the future?** Is there any sense of a prophetic office in the church today, similar to that stature and function held by prophets in the bible? I tend to think that the New Covenant, where the Spirit is given to all who follow Christ, renders the old office of the prophet obsolete. Also, we do not properly accept any prophetic word as being on par with the authority of Scripture, and no "word" will legitimately trump Scripture. We do not need Prophets (big P) any more than we need modern-day Apostles, though most Evangelicals would agree that there seems to be some specially gifted in the body for apostolic ministry (and prophetic ministry, and pastoral ministry, and evangelistic ministry, etc.). This does not negate the possibility of God providing prophetic input that speaks to the future. But such input needs to be held lightly and be tested against Scripture, wisdom, experience and other ways of validating or confirming direction. As some have said, our first rule-of-thumb should be James 1:5: "If any lacks wisdom, let him ask God..."