

## **Who's to Blame?**

### *The Spiritual Realm and Personal Responsibility/Authority*

September 2008

A very disturbing river runs through the Pentecostal/charismatic movement, a river of mysticism and random weirdness that is viewed as spiritual maturity. But this spiritual phooey actually sets itself against spiritual maturity, and Christian thinking! I speak now of those weird moments in a service where prophets speak God's message for that specific congregation and moment in time. That very thing is biblical and desperately needed in our world today. But have you ever been in a service where something didn't feel right about the message or the spirit of the message, or didn't even seem to line up with Scripture? I have several times. These random acts of spiritual weirdness must be considered biblically.

How do we carry out the desire of God's Word, to have prophetic utterances, prophetic wisdom, displayed to us in a community of faith, and yet avoid the other side of the tracks, the place we dare not venture into? The prophetic office is not only a high calling, but also a high responsibility, much like that of the preacher and the Bible teacher. From whom much is given, so much is always required! Paul placed prophecy on the high end of importance in the congregation of Corinthians (1 Cor 14:5).

But what does it mean to be used by God in prophecy to His people? Well, one of our chief examples lies in observing general

characteristics of the prophets of Israel in the Old Testament. Many people look at the prophets as soothsayers or fortune tellers, or even future-tellers. But that is only a minor part of what a prophet's portfolio looked like in Israel. Sure, Moses said that if they did predict the future, it must come to pass (Deut 18:21-22). But a prophet's job was to speak God's word to God's people in God's time.

Prophets must speak God's message. Moses provided some qualifications for the office of prophet in Deuteronomy. Two passages in particular help us to understand the office of prophet. One passage in Deut 13:1-5 specifically lays the primary qualification of a prophet. Prophets of the Lord speak to draw people to the Lord. They do not say things that would lead God's people away from Him. If a prophet says anything that leads God's people away from Him, that person is not a prophet of God. We must also notice that prophets did not confuse people. Pick any prophet in the Old Testament and read one of their prophecies. You'll know immediately whether God is angry with His people or is promising them hope and blessing. Messages from the Lord should not confuse us as to the driving principle God is presenting through human prophets.

Another passage mentioned already concerns specifically the foreshadowing of Jesus as the ultimate Prophet for God's

people, but tells us that if a person prophecies and the prophecy about the future does not come to pass, that person is not a true prophet (Deut 18:15-22). Recently, with certain prophetic movements that have arisen, the prophet's life has not been evaluated. We spend so much time legitimizing certain people with the title of prophet or apostle or other leadership terms when we should be listening to God, not becoming sidetracked with legitimacy. Moses said if it does not come true, then the prophet wasn't from God. It's that simple. There is no room for conditions to that statement or points of interest. God doesn't fool around with the prophetic office because when prophets stand up and say, "Thus says the Lord," the people of God expect that it is definitely from the Lord. God has little empathy for those who lead His people astray.

The prophets in biblical times lived in a certain time and spoke to a certain crowd. What made them prophets was not their ability to tell the future, but their ability to speak to issues and problems they saw in their society and in the people of God. The prophet's role was to call to obedience people not living the ethics of God out in their world. They also communicated God's sovereign plan to the people. They pointed out the faults of the community and demanded that the people turn to God away from these evil practices, or that they do something they had neglected. Prophets in the Church today need to do the same, call out the sin and wickedness inside and outside the body of Christ and demand that we turn back to God.

Old Testament prophets were tied to the message of the spirit of God's Torah, His law and instruction for His people in the Old Testament. That means that everything they

said to the people was backed up by Scripture. God does not say something that contradicts what we already know about Him. God does not change. His Word to His people does not change. God's attributes and character do not change. So His prophetic word for His church will only glorify Him more and remind the people of who He is, will provide comfort and power for those who have forgotten His power. And it will NEVER go against what Scripture has already proclaimed about God, His plan for the world, and His revelation of Himself to us.

Oftentimes, the prophets had a specific message for their specific audience that would be fulfilled again as time went on. We see this because God ultimately fulfilled these prophecies through Christ. The message for that time and people could be spoken later to a situation like the one the prophet spoke to. Where did the notion that a prophecy could not be written down come from? That's a mystic principle! If this were true, we would not have the prophetic writings in the Old Testament! God's Word is not for a moment in time, but is good for encouragement, exhortation, comfort, guidance all of the time. A true word from God hits the spot more than once because everyone experiences similar situations in which they need God to speak to them.

Let me illustrate this principle. Every semester at seminary, when the work load and life catch up and bottleneck, inevitably God sends us a message in our chapel service reminding us that He is our source for encouragement, for strength, for rest. This happens almost every semester. We students get so caught up in our assignments, papers, tests, that we allow our relationship with God and others to suffer, that we allow those things in our lives to

surpass the greatness and awesomeness of God. But He makes a house call to remind us that we must seek Him first, and the rest will follow.

To be sure, humans are deeply intermeshed in the process of speaking for God. But Scripture tells us that we can control ourselves (1 Cor 14:30-33, 40). This is not some out-of-body mystical experience. God is a God of order. He does not confuse and interrupt Himself in a service or at any time. Notice in that passage in 1 Corinthians that other prophets must weigh what is prophesied (1 Cor 29). What is said by human prophets is subject to evaluation. This is up to the pastor and to the elders of a community. They have the challenging job of hearing from God and making sure that prophets speak His words to His people at the proper time. But prophets must also step up and take responsibility for human failings.

We need to take responsibility for human involvement in spiritual weirdness. Because this is a word from God Himself, it begs us to make sure we are hearing from Him and not someone or something else. Humans are prone to error. When such error occurs, the responsible path to action is to

admit it and ask for God to continue to use you. No one is perfect, but when we don't admit to wrongful use of this all-important prophetic office, we muddy the waters for God to speak to His people in an effective fashion. God decides who is prophet. God can use anyone but we must be humble and teachable in our gifting, and we must be accurate to Scripture.

The purpose of prophecy and messages from God in the church is to encourage, exhort, comfort (Scripture). But when we represent God and His speech to His people, we must be humble vessels and must always live in a reverence of God and His awesomeness. The church needs God's word today more than ever, His leading, His fatherly loving. But when we don't take responsibility for the messages God gives us, or the messages that are not from Him, how does that help the church? If we become responsible in our gifting of prophetic speaking for God, God will always be glorified and His church will continue to reach the world for Him. Our ability to be responsible in this matter will empower God's people to overrun the darkness with the message of God's glorious light.