

## Digging up the gen on prophecy

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How about this as a list of the qualities of a prophet: vision, insight and dedication. I got the list from [www.prophet.com](http://www.prophet.com) - the website of a professional marketing firm specialising in branding consultancy. Not exactly what The Bible means by a prophet! But then what does The Bible mean when it speaks of prophets and prophecy? Come to that, are our contemporary charismatic models any closer to scriptural notions than that of the ad men?

Trouble is there is no one biblical model. Within the Old Testament alone there is great variety: Daniel is not Amos and Isaiah (or should that be the Isaiahs?) is/are not Nathan and none of the aforementioned is at all like Moses. Even within the pages of the New Testament we can't be sure if Agabus was up to the same kind of thing as John the Baptist, let alone those nice people at Corinth or the frankly rather strange John of the Apocalypse.

So when we argue for the restoration and elevation of the prophetic ministry within today's church it's clearly important to ask which particular biblical expression of prophecy we have in mind. It's not enough just to use the word and assume that what we have now is the same thing, the one thing, they had then.

I wonder if you'd allow me to get away with just raising one or two questions?

First of all, have those of us with a charismatic bent taken sufficient account of the extent to which many of the biblical prophets had a ministry that was to do with reinterpreting earlier revelation? Examples abound but check out Isaiah's deployment of the exodus motif in his utterances concerning the restoration of Judah. Alternatively there is Revelation's reworking of Ezekiel's prophecy which in turn, of course, draws heavily on the priestly material in the Pentateuch.

I wonder if in our anxiety to carve out a place for prophecy distinct from that of preaching we haven't laid ourselves wide open to the kind of prophetic word that, because it is free floating and extempore is prone to being banal, deviant or nonsensical. "Thus saith the Lord" doesn't have to be the precursor to an utterance that has dropped fresh from heaven, bypassing the rational faculties of the speaker and requiring no knowledge of what the Lord has already said in days gone by.

Then again is it ever appropriate anyway, given God's post-Pentecost indiscriminate sloshing around of the Spirit of prophecy, for anyone today to introduce an utterance with, "Thus saith the Lord ..." or "I, the Lord, say unto you ..." or by shouting just a bit too loud so you can tell it is God, not me? Pre-Pentecost, each prophet was held accountable for the validity of their oracles. Post-Pentecost, during the era of the prophethood of all believers, the responsibility for testing lies with the Spirit-endowed community.

Now of course we know this, but have we always followed through on the implications? If we are presenting a word to be tested by the church, is it not more fitting to *offer* rather than to *declaim*: to suggest what we feel God might be saying rather than drawing ourselves up to Elijah-like proportions and speaking in such a way that it becomes very difficult for anyone to test what is being said because it feels like they are sitting in judgement on what is clearly a divine pronouncement? If we trust God's wisdom in democratising the gift of the Spirit there is surely no need for us to adopt tactics a little too similar to those of the Wizard of Oz.

Whenever I have a prophetic word it seems more appropriate to preface what I have to share with words such as, "I think God might want to say to us that ...." Am I alone in believing that contemporary prophecy would benefit from being a bit more modest?

I could go on: there are many more questions. Have we contracted the prophetic gift by reducing it to the merely verbal? What does it mean for a *church* to be prophetic? Is it legitimate to address prophecy to secular powers? Is Breuggemann right to suggest that the essence of prophecy is the ability to see differently, imagining a world radically other than that prescribed by the powers that be and then having the guts and the skill to help others see it too?

But space forbids and besides the good people at prophet.com suggest that retaining an air of mystery does wonders for your marketing. See you at Swanwick.

*This article was written in anticipation of Glen's Bible readings at the Mainstream Conference 2006.*