

## The Gift of Prophecy

*For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day stars arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.—II Peter 1:16-21.*

IT HAS always been God's nature to reveal himself to man. In the beginning man was made to have fellowship with his Creator. Adam and Eve, under the idyllic conditions of Eden, conversed freely with their Creator, face to face and unashamed. But when sin entered into the world through the fall of our first parents, the barrier of man's guilt was placed between them and their God. Adam and Eve could no longer tolerate the presence of God as they had in their innocence, but hid themselves when they heard the voice of God in the garden.

Ever since that day there has been a veil between man and his Creator. The man of flesh cannot look upon God and live: for the glory and power and splendor of God would consume him. Yet when man fell, God did not retire into the silence and leave men forever in ignorance of him. Adam

still heard God's voice; he received the ministry of angels; he received the ministry of the Holy Spirit which is the voice of prophecy. God revealed himself, his nature, his purposes, and his laws to Adam; and Adam taught his children to offer sacrifice as a symbol of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the Redeemer who was to come to atone for sin. The whole history of God's dealings with men since that day is eloquent with the fact that God still desires men to know him, his nature, his purposes, his plan of salvation; that he still desires men to have fellowship with him to the limit of their capacity.

### THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

The gift of prophecy continued to bless the prophets of Old Testament times, whose writings largely make up the Old Testament canon of Scripture. These all pointed forward to the Messiah who should come. The pinnacle of God's revelation of himself was of course the revelation which came in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus the ineffable glory of Deity was veiled in human flesh so that men could tolerate it, see it, understand it, and respond to it. Thus Jesus was the greatest of the prophets, for it is a prophet's task to take the things of God and reveal and declare them to mankind. Because Jesus did this in a special and unsurpassed and unique way, he is the polestar of all prophecy. He was the prophet to whom all other prophets pointed, whether they came before him or after him in point of time.

When Jesus neared the end of his earthly ministry he gave to his disciples several promises concerning the Comforter, the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the Spirit of prophecy and the revelation of God to man. That Comforter was to teach them all things, to bring all things to their remembrance, to testify of Jesus so that they might also bear witness of him to others. It was to guide them into *all* truth. It was to glorify Christ. It was to take the things of God and show them to men. It was the intention of God and of his Son that this gift of

revelation and prophecy should continue to bless men until they should be brought again into God's presence in a resurrected and glorified body, capable of understanding and appreciating and abiding in the infinite brightness and glory and majesty of their Creator.

That gift of prophecy continued in the New Testament church after Jesus' ascension. It was diffused widely through the church on the day of Pentecost. Prophecy continued to be an important part of the ministry of the apostles, the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Philip, the evangelist, had four daughters who are mentioned as having prophetic powers. Agabus foretold a famine in Jerusalem and collected money in Antioch for the relief of the Jerusalem saints. He also prophesied to Paul, foretelling his imprisonment and death. There are almost innumerable instances or examples of the operation of this Spirit of prophecy under which men bore witness of Christ. By its power Cornelius was sent to Peter, and Peter was prepared to receive Cornelius and the other Gentiles. By it Philip was instructed for his encounter with the eunuch; and Paul was sent into Macedonia. By it Peter accused and condemned Ananias and Sapphira, who attempted to deceive God. By the gift of prophecy Paul and Barnabas and others were called into active service in the ministry and priesthood of the church. From age to age, from creation until now, God has revealed himself through the operations of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy. At no time has he left himself without witness. So eager has God been to reveal himself to the understanding of men that Amos was led to exclaim, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). It is still the nature of God to reveal himself to receptive men.

#### WHAT IS THE GIFT OF PROPHECY?

What are the functions of a prophet who receives and manifests to others this gift of prophecy? Many people have

the idea that a prophet is a sort of glorified fortune-teller whose first and only function is to foretell the future. That may be one of his functions, but at best it is a minor one. When a prophet is directed to foretell the future, his predictions are nearly always conditional. The future of men, individually or collectively, is not written inexorably for them in advance by fate; rather do men determine their own future by their own choices and actions, by their own neglects and sins and follies, as well as by their righteous deeds and good works. The prophet warns of impending doom so that the people may repent and escape that doom. He prophesies of a golden age that men may so shape their deeds as to press toward it.

#### THE FUNCTION OF A PROPHET

The primary function of a prophet, then, is not to be a foreteller of future events, but to be a forthteller, so that men may know how to shape future events by their own choices and acts. The prophet is gifted with special insight and the Spirit of prophecy which enable him to see and know the things of God, to understand the mind and will of God, to know what God wants him to proclaim to the people. Then in the power of that same Spirit, the prophet goes to the people and *tells forth* that which the Spirit of prophecy has given him. The Spirit of prophecy does not rob the prophet of his intelligence, nor does it compel him to act as a mere mouthpiece or puppet. Rather does it quicken his own understanding, and give him such impulsion that Jeremiah likens the word of the Lord to a fire shut up in his bones. Under such impulsion the prophet must *tell forth!*

When the gift of prophecy comes to a prophet, or just to an ordinary man, it will perform certain functions. Because there are so many facets of God's nature and so many of his laws and purposes which need to be revealed from time to time, the gift of prophecy will vary in function and nature.

But there are certain things which it can be depended upon to do. Whenever, wherever, however, or to whomsoever the gift of prophecy comes, it always bears witness and testimony to the divinity of Christ. "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy," says John the Revelator (Revelations 19:10). In New Testament times and on down to the present day the primary function of a prophet and of the gift of prophecy which comes through the prophet is to tell forth to men in power that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Savior of the world.

The gift of prophecy may function to tell forth or proclaim the nature, the purpose, the will of God in inspired preaching, teaching, or writing which bear witness also to the divinity of Jesus. One important function of the prophet and of the spirit of prophecy is to take the things of God and reveal them to men who need to know God, men to whom God desires to make himself known.

Prophets may exhort to repentance and a better life, they may warn, they may reprove and condemn. They may foretell the evil consequences that will ensue if their warnings are not heeded. They may denounce wickedness in high places or low. They may point out hidden sins of which the sinner himself is unaware, not in a spirit of recrimination, but in love and mercy and in an effort to call the sinner into a closer relationship with his God. On the other hand, they may cheer and commend those who are discouraged and baffled, they may enlighten those who are in darkness and bewilderment but who desire to know.

Another highly important function of the prophet is to interpret God's truth in terms which can be understood by his own generation. We find constant difficulty in properly interpreting the messages of the ancient prophets and applying them to our day, because we live under altogether different conditions than the conditions under which those ancient prophets worked and taught and spoke the word of God. We are surrounded

by different people, different concepts, different inventions, different social customs, and even a different geography. The great principles of God's truth remain the same under all conditions and in all ages, but that truth and those principles need to be prophetically reinterpreted for each succeeding generation in order that it might have full opportunity to know God in the best possible way.

Ofttimes through necessity or expediency prophecy is cloaked in symbolic or obscure language. Then it becomes necessary that one who tries centuries later to interpret that prophecy be one who is in complete harmony and sympathy with the spirit which dictated that prophecy in the beginning, or else there is no understanding. For example, Nephi, one of the early American prophets whose writings are found in the Book of Mormon, discovered that his people did not understand the prophecies of Isaiah which were included in the Scriptures which his people had brought to this continent, but he added, "Nevertheless they are plain unto all those that *are filled with the spirit of prophecy*" (II Nephi 11:5). The spirit of prophecy which gives prophecy in the first place also enables us to understand prophecy anciently given, and to interpret it for our day, to restate ancient revealed truth in modern language and in terms of modern conditions and needs.

Another common function of the gift of prophecy is the calling of men to priesthood responsibility, as Aaron was called through the prophetic ministry of Moses. It was the spirit of prophecy which called Barnabas and Saul when that Spirit came to certain prophets and teachers at Antioch and said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul" (See Acts 13:1, 2). Unless the gift of prophecy is still functioning in the church, no man can be properly called to priesthood responsibility and authority.

Latter Day Saints believe that this gift of prophecy, which is one of the spiritual gifts enumerated by Paul in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians, should still be enjoyed in the church

today. It is just as necessary today as it ever was: to bear witness and testimony of Christ, to reveal the nature and will of God; to commend and strengthen and cheer, to reprove and condemn and warn of sin, to teach us all things, to bring all things to our remembrance, to guide us into all truth, to receive the things of God and show them unto men. Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come, and the spirit of prophecy is still needed to guide men into all truth.

Paul says, near the close of the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians,

“Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”—  
I Corinthians 13:8-10.

Yes, there will come a day when prophecy shall fail, but not yet. Not until “that which is come,” not until we stand in a perfect, resurrected, glorified form before God and know him as he knows us, face to face. Then we shall need no more of the fragmentary shadows which we have been pleased to call revelation and prophecy, for revelation will be complete and perfect. Then all our fragmentary knowledge shall vanish away, just as the small pools of water on a beach vanish before the perfect immensity of the incoming tide. Then there will not need to be any more gifts of tongues, for we shall all speak one universal language, the language of God. Until then, the gift of prophecy must continue in the church of Christ as one of the signs following the believer and as one of the signs which denote life and intelligence in the body of the living Christ.

We testify humbly and soberly that the spirit of prophecy still moves in the church, that the voice of prophetic ministry

is heard in our assemblies from time to time, that the will of God is still expressed to us through the ministry of our prophet and leader who receives instruction for the church as a whole, and that the spirit of prophecy is also dispersed among our membership, bearing witness to Jesus the Christ and helping us to understand the things of God.