



Malvern Mashal Makon 63

Do not put out the Spirit's fire (1 Thess. 5:19)

Whilst on retreat in Ffald-y Brenin recently I met a delightful couple (he is Danish and she is Irish American) who, like me, are long term 'Levites'. We had many friends and experiences in common, and shared precious times of fellowship together. At the commissioning service to send those who were leaving that day on their way, they had deeply encouraging prophecies for me, that the Lord is leading me into a new season as a 'sage' who shares the strategies of the Lord with others. ¹

There was a great deal more to the words that they had for me, which were all very encouraging. The Lord has always been so kind in sending high quality prophets when we have particularly needed to hear from Him. We will never forget sitting with John and Paula Sandford in Chester (we had invited them across to make their first UK tour). The Lord's presence was 'layers deep' as they prayed. It was at the time when we were looking to move from Chester to Shropshire, and John had a word for us that the Lord was leading us across a bridge into a spacious and evergreen place, but that the bridge was so narrow that he needed to lead us across the bridge blindfold. He most certainly did!

At another 'crossroads' time in our lives, Paul Miller and Steve Rayment from the World Prayer Centre came to visit us at our house in Shropshire. You may remember that they prophesied with remarkable accuracy about our forthcoming sojourn in Shetland (that they knew nothing about) beginning with the words, "Put on your hat coat gloves and scarf: I am sending you to a cold place" . . . and going on from there! Some years later they had a corresponding series of words when it was time for us to return to the mainland.

This encounter at Ffald-y Brenin felt somewhat similar, and was confirmed by a dear friend who brought us these words when she came to visit us a few days ago. "You are at gateway time, but this is not a normal gateway; it is very low, and you are having to dig deep and push hard to get through, but it will open up into a spacious place that represents promotion in the Lord's eyes."

I love it how the Lord brings His confirmations! Another person actually *saw* this gate in the Spirit, and specifically described various new areas of authority that the Lord was giving us in intercession as the result of things that we have been through.



We are sharing these snippets of how God has used prophets to speak to us partly because it is precious to share our pilgrimage with you in this way, but also to emphasize the authenticity of the prophetic gift itself. Over the years we have seen a number of churches shying away from remaining open to the Holy Spirit's working – often as the result of something not working out as they had hoped. We are not speaking of 'over the top hot air nonsense,' but of honest God seekers who are being influenced to become unnecessarily cautious.

In one church I was working for over thirty years ago, there was much prayer for a young man with leukaemia. There was considerable expectation on the part of many that he would be healed. The young boy's faith shone through to the end, but he went to be with the Lord. Wrongly looking on the whole episode as a failure, the church unfortunately pulled back altogether from praying for the sick for a number of years.

Paul warns in 1 Thessalonians against 'retrenching' into the seemingly safe and predictable. He who had urged Timothy to 'fan into flame the gift that was in him', pleads with them not to 'put out the Spirit's fire.' (1 Thess. 5:19) What he was effectively saying was that even if spiritual gifts were being misused in the Corinthian church, that was no excuse for the Thessalonians to hold back.

What Paul seems to be saying is "don't stop doing what you have already begun to do!" Gifts such as prophecy were doubtless already being practiced in the Thessalonian church, but we can deduce that a sober-minded leadership may have been drawing the shutters down, inhibiting and perhaps even prohibiting all manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

It is so much more powerful and creative when we give the Lord room to move in whatever way He chooses! Many years ago I was involved as an assistant missionary with a student Christian Union that had really taken off – but things can change rapidly in the student world. When the time came to appoint the next president, the committee opted for someone who looked as though he would be a 'safe pair of hands'. He unfortunately turned out to be *too* safe. Within weeks of his appointment all the joy had gone out of the meetings. Sound messages were still being given, but the life and sparkle had departed, and the number of those finding the Lord decreased sharply. Sadly, this is a far from isolated instance.



In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul had to issue some correctives regarding the proper handling of spiritual gifts. That is the proper way to handle excess, rather than leaping to ban (or deny) them altogether. Far better to set out to *empower* the Lord's people, so that they feel welcome to bring whatever He is giving, knowing that their contribution will enhance the well being and maturing of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:12, 26, 40). Proper oversight and 'administration' of the gifts is essential, but *over*-control stifles everything.

So far from moving in the *exousia* and *dunamis* of God, it brings people into something far less glorious than the freedom God has in mind for us. That is why Paul specifically forbids the forbidding of prophecy (1 Thess. 5:20, cf 1 Thess 5:11). Rather, he urges us 'to encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing'.

When we trust the Lord, and trust each other, this happens so easily. As we turn to pray and wait on the Lord, He delights to give us words and pictures that will help to shape our experience and direct our efforts.

Because prophets are the eyes of the body of Christ, removing (or limiting) their freedom means that we end up missing out on the strengthening, comfort and encouragement that comes from hearing directly from God (cf 1 Cor. 14:3). Let's put this still more strongly. By treating genuine prophecies with contempt, is it not the Holy Spirit who we are treating with contempt?

Most of us, however, have witnessed poor examples of the prophetic ministry in action. We have all seen many things on satellite television programmes that have made us cringe. Back in pre-satellite days in Thessalonica, certain apparently spiritual but in reality merely idle brothers had misunderstood what the Lord's return was all about. (1 Thess. 5:14) Being empowered with God's authority is no excuse for sitting around looking up to the heavens waiting for Him to return – or trying to get to Heaven in as undamaged a condition as possible!

It doesn't take many examples of being on the receiving end of false or substandard prophecy for our hearts to want to switch off to all consideration of the prophetic. One of the typical signs of false prophecy is to put a date on things that God is not willing to date in advance. The return of Christ Himself is an obvious example, but there are others. One very prominent leader 'dated' the time when 'revival' would break out in England. It didn't – at least, not in the way indicated, with the result that many were disillusioned, and thus predisposed to switch off to all things prophetic.

The fact that there are many "over-optimistic" prophets around does not mean that we should not accord prophecy its proper place. It simply means that everything must be tested. Since 'prophets' range from the hopelessly unrealistic, through those who are inspired as much by their own exuberance as by the Holy Spirit, right through to genuine mouthpieces for God, there is a great need for discernment in the Body of Christ – not to mention training the prophets themselves.

Paul does not spell out in detail how we should test supposed words from God. 1 John 4:1 ff and 1 Corinthians 12:3 indicate that the first test must be theological in nature, but 1 Corinthians 12:10 and 14:29 also show that discernment is a specific spiritual function that should operate in tandem with the gift of prophecy. It consists of an ability to discern whether another prophetic spokesman has genuinely brought a word from God.

John and Paula Sandford's outstanding book *The Elijah Task* is now considered a classic in this field.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0932081118/raininternati-20>





This would be a good time to mention our Pilgrim's Guide series on the website. See <http://ruachministries.org/pilgrim.htm> for the series. These include *Inspired by the Spirit*, a 'manual' on the prophetic ministry. <http://www.ruachministries.org/pilgrimsguides/inspiredbythespirit.htm>²

Many have also found Graham Cooke's teaching helpful in this respect, eg *Developing Your Prophetic Gifting*. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Developing-Prophetic-Gifting-Graham-Cooke/dp/1852401443/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1282644185&sr=1-1

No matter what the colour of the bathwater some of you may have come across, be careful not to throw out that which is born of the Spirit! Some years after writing to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote to the Roman Christians substituting the phrase "cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9) for "hold on to the good." If you have seen or been on the receiving end of false prophecy or words of knowledge – and which of us haven't? – please don't allow any trace of cynicism to enter your heart. There is every bit as much a genuine anointing as there is a counterfeit one!

Yes we are to test everything, but once tested the Lord wants us to move in settled-ness and confidence. Remember, He is looking for us to move in the freedom of His *exousia* and in the power of His *dunamis*. If we overreact and retrench into the safe and predictable, whether as individuals, fellowships or organisations, we will end up losing the clarity of His leading – as well as the joy of being led by the Lord. As John Wimber reminds us, God spells 'Love' 'r-i-s-k!'

Enjoy following up at least some of the links we have suggested.

In His service,

Robert & Rosalind

¹ (cf John Eldredge's categories of the six stages of development in the life of a man: <http://www.helium.com/items/435777-book-reviews-the-way-of-the-wild-heart-by-john-eldredge>)

² In the context of growing in discernment, you might perhaps find sections 1.7, 5.2 and 6.3 helpful.