

Using the Prophetic Gift at Neighborhood Church of Chico

August 2011 – Rev. 1.0

Introduction

In His incomparable mercy and grace, the triune God speaks continually to His people, in a variety of ways, for their comfort, correction, discipline, and guidance.¹ Because an intimate relationship with the Lord is at the heart of the Christian life and mission, and because communication is central to any relationship, it is essential we learn to listen to, discern, understand, and obey God's voice. The extent to which we do so will largely determine our effectiveness in carrying out His command to love one another (John 13:34; 15:12,17) and His commission to disciple the nations (Mt 28:19-20). Thus, at Neighborhood Church, hearing God accurately, in the name of the Lord Jesus, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, is a top priority.

One of the ways the Lord speaks to His people is by means of the gift of prophecy, one of several spiritual gifts (*charismata*) with which His Spirit graces His Church.² “Prophecy” is a transliteration of the Greek word *prophēteia*, which is semantically related to the Hebrew term *nebû'âh*. Essentially, a prophet is one who is “authorized to speak for another.”³ Prophecy may contain predictive elements but not necessarily so. It may also embody elements of praise, proclamation, instruction, warning, and guidance.

Under the terms of God's covenant with Israel, Yahweh called and commissioned a number of men and women with the prophetic gift. Still, prophecy was relatively rare. However, there were intimations in the later prophetic literature suggesting that the gift would someday be more widely distributed among God's people, an idea Moses had previously endorsed!⁴ This theme is especially prominent in Joel: “And

¹ See, for example, Heb 1:1-2; Eph 4:11-13; 1 Cor 12:27-31; 14:1-40. All Scriptural quotations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

² See Romans 12:6-8, 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

³ Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 505.

⁴ See, for example, Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-27; Joel 2:28-29. In response to Joshua's concern that God's Spirit had fallen on two leaders, Eldad and Medad, so that they prophesied within the camp of Israel, Moses replied: “I wish that all Yahweh's people were prophets and that Yahweh would put his Spirit on them!” (v.29).

afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29).

Thus, at Pentecost, the apostles recognized the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: God was now sending His Spirit on His people, regardless of age or sex, to carry out Spirit-empowered ministry (Acts 2:16-20, 33), including prophecy. Subsequent episodes in the life of the early Church indicate the early Christians were acutely aware of the Spirit’s activity in and through them.⁵ They knew they could accomplish Christ’s commission only insofar as they were led and empowered by God’s Spirit.

The Apostle Paul made clear that prophets were foundational to the Church’s life and an immense blessing to God’s people.⁶ Further, the exercise of the prophetic gift makes an important contribution to the life of each local assembly (1 Cor 14:1-5). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul sets forth guidelines for the orderly use of the prophetic gift in a church in an embryonic leadership phase.⁷ Here, he emphasizes that corporate church gatherings, while marked with spontaneity and creativity, must also do things “in a fitting and orderly way,” noting that “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Cor 14:26-40). Paul’s intent is to give freedom to God’s Spirit within proper limits prescribed by Scripture, love, and cultural sensitivity.

The designated leaders within each local assembly are charged with overseeing the individuals and ministries within their sphere of influence. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon them to insure the Church is using prophetic gifts in ways that honor the Lord and edify the body. It is for this reason we have prepared this document, as a guide for the appropriate exercise of these gifts at Neighborhood Church. The intent of these guidelines is not to limit the Spirit’s expression in anyway, but to provide appropriate parameters for optimizing prophetic ministry in a way that is congruent with the biblical witness and sensitive to local cultural considerations.

⁵A few of the many examples include Acts 3:12; 4:8, 31; 5:3-10; 10:44-47; 11:27-28; 21:4-11.

⁶Paul coupled prophets with the Apostles as constituting the “foundation” of the Church (Eph 2:20). In 1 Cor 12:28, prophets are listed second (apparently in order of importance) behind apostles and before teachers. Similarly, in Eph 4:11, they are listed second behind apostles in Paul’s enumeration of the five trans-local ecclesial leadership positions of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher. It is important to note that these are not local church positions, which are delineated elsewhere as elders and deacons (e.g., 1 Tim 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9). Rather, they are gifts to the corporate Body, Christ’s universal Church. For the importance of prophets, see also Eph 3:5 and Rev 18:20.

⁷At the time Paul wrote the Corinthian correspondence (c.A.D.53-56), the church had a fluid, pre-episcopal leadership structure. Accordingly, there are no explicit references, in either of the letters, to elders or deacons. The scholarly consensus is that the normative pattern of clerical leadership during this period of the Church’s development consisted of the dual offices of elder/overseer/pastor (*episkopos, presbyteros, poimen*) and deacon (*diakonos*). See 1 Tim 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, Phil 1:1.

The document is structured as follows: in addition to the introduction and conclusion, the document comprises two sections. Section one provides several guidelines for giving prophetic words in both individual and corporate settings. It opens with a list of eight general guidelines addressing a range of foundational considerations. Section two outlines how prophetic words will be evaluated at NC. We turn first to how prophetic words are to be given at the church.

Section 1: Giving Prophetic Words

A. General Guidelines

1. **Prophetic words are to be delivered in love.** If you are not motivated by love, please do not share your message. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 12-14, that all the gifts are important and valuable. However, it is equally clear that love is more important still: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1,2).
2. **Prophecy strengthens, encourages and comforts God’s people; it does not condemn or judge (1 Cor 14:3).** This is not to say a prophetic word is not sometimes hard to hear: there will be times when the Lord gives a strong prophetic warning (e.g., Acts 11:27-29; 21:10-11; Rev 2-3). But this is always done in love and requires great humility, maturity, and wisdom when delivering such a message. If the message is for an individual, seek confirmation and wise counsel before delivering it. If it is for the entire body, write it down and submit it to the elders for prayer and evaluation. The general rule of thumb is: If the message you have received is corrective in nature, be sure you have heard accurately, spend extra time in prayer, examine the tone and your motives, get godly counsel, and then proceed carefully.
3. **Submission and accountability to the church’s authority are a required part of prophetic ministry at Neighborhood Church.** God has made church leaders responsible for the oversight of individual churches (Heb 13:17; 1 Tim 3:5; 1 Peter 5:1-3). All the guidelines contained in this document are designed by its leaders for the protection and benefit of the entire body. If you are not able to submit to the leaders and adhere to the guidelines, then we respectfully ask you to refrain from doing prophetic ministry here in any capacity.
4. **Be careful to speak only what the Lord says.** Sometimes the Lord will give you only part of a message for his intended recipient (1 Cor 13:9). Speak only what He has made clear to you. Trying to “fill in the blanks” might give a

false understanding and hinder the recipient from receiving the larger message.

5. **If God gives interpretation then share it, but do not force one.** Sometimes the Lord will give an impression or picture without specific words, leaving the messenger with the responsibility to use his/her own words to convey what was sensed or seen. In these cases, it is wise to seek understanding from the Lord before sharing it with the intended recipient. When you do share it, be clear and keep it short. Do not over-explain. If you can't do that, it is best to wait until you have clarity (cf. Num 22:35).
6. **After delivering a prophetic word, let it go and let God take it from there.** It is not your responsibility to convince the recipient or to see that the word is carried out. Your job is to faithfully deliver the message. If the recipient does not seem to take the word seriously, pray for them and for God's will to be done. And give the person grace to make his/her own decisions based on the whole council of God given to them (see Acts 21:10-14).
7. **Speak as you regularly do. Don't dramatize or over-spiritualize.** One of our church values is to be "naturally supernatural." Using Jacobean (King James) English does not increase your authority. And we ask that you do not use phrases like, "Thus says the Lord God..." Just be yourself and stay true to the tone used by the Holy Spirit when He gave the word to you.
8. **Use an appropriate volume. Don't shout.** The Bible does not indicate shouting is necessary or desirable, so we ask that you use a normal conversational tone out of consideration for others. Prophecy, exercised in the proper way, will cause people to look to the Lord. Shouting can be a distraction and take the focus off the Lord and onto you.

B. Guidelines for Ministering to Individuals

1. **Prophetic words are best given in the context of relationship.** The stronger your relationship with the recipient, the better the chance he/she will receive what you have to say. This does not suggest that you must always have a prior relationship with the recipient. But it does mean that, in those instances when God calls you to give a message to someone you do not know, you go above and beyond to insure you do so with grace and tact, recognizing that love is the paramount concern and trust is easily violated.
2. **Do not give words about "mates, dates, or babies."** Too often these kinds of words are less than 100% accurate and are hurtful to the recipient. If you feel God has given you a message about one these areas, we expect you to take it

to prayer and keep it between yourself and God. If you feel that not sharing it would constitute an act of disobedience, share your concern with an elder. On occasion, you may be allowed to share your message with the recipient within the right context, providing accountability for you and support for them as they process the word. The intent here is not to inhibit God's voice but to protect His people from undue harm.

3. **Do not give directive words.** Messages like: "God says, 'sell your house'" and "God is calling you to move to..." are easily misunderstood and abused. If you receive a strong impression that God is directing someone to take such action, share it with an elder, who will help counsel you and guide the process. He/she may or may not allow you to share the word with the recipient, depending on the circumstances.

C. Guidelines for Ministering to the Entire Church Body

1. **All words concerning the church body, its leaders, or its direction must be submitted to the elders for evaluation.** If, during a worship service, you receive a prophetic word you believe is to be shared at that particular service, you must submit it to the person facilitating the service. The facilitator is typically seated in the front row and is not the one preaching that morning. Once you have submitted the word, the facilitator will decide what to do with it. It is his/her responsibility from that point on, not yours. The facilitator may share the word; he/she may ask you to do it; or he/she may decide that, given the flow of the morning, it is best not to share it at that time. Whatever the case, this is a decision he/she (trusting the Holy Spirit and perhaps consulting with another elder or pastor) is given the responsibility to make.

Section 2: Evaluating Prophetic Words

Scripture is clear that we are not to receive every revelation as though it were from God. This would be naïve and irresponsible. The shepherds of the church must guard the church from error, for "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). Accordingly, we are to "test the spirits," and "weigh carefully" prophetic messages, ensuring that they are consistent with the Biblical witness (1 Jn 4:1-2; 1 Thess 5:19-22; 1 Cor 14:29; cf. Acts 17:11).

The Apostle Paul wrote we are, on the one hand, not to "put out the Spirit's fire" nor "treat prophecies with contempt." On the other hand, we must "test everything, hold onto the good, and avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:19-22). How do we do this?

Testing prophetic words requires a Spirit-directed, balanced approach, which incorporates prayer, reason, tradition, and experience all within the framework of Scripture. This is called “theological method,” and it is the means by which the Church has evaluated truth claims from its earliest days. In short, the method involves critically assessing a truth claim by examining Scripture, responsibly interpreted according to the proper application of reason, congruent with the consensual tradition, and informed by experience and prayer.

So, for example, when a prophetic word is submitted for evaluation, these are the kinds of questions that will be asked by the church leadership: Are there any Scriptural principles this violates? Any that it promotes? Is the tone appropriate? Is this an example of “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15)? Is it reasonable? If not, are there good reasons to believe God is saying it anyway? What are the potential consequences (positive and negative) if we act on this? Are there any precedents: has God spoken this way before? Is this consistent with, or a departure from, the received tradition? How has the Church historically understood a message like this? How responsible and mature is the messenger? What is their track record when it comes to accurate prophetic words? What is the fruit of this? Does it display the fruit of the Spirit or the acts of the flesh (Gal 5:19-23)? Is it likely to promote deeper repentance, greater love for God, His word, His people, and the world, or not?

The intent of this kind of critical assessment is not to quench or limit the freedom of God’s Spirit. To the contrary, it is to listen carefully for His voice amid the chorus of other voices, human and demonic, that can impersonate Him and mislead the Church. It is our good faith effort to reliably steward the wonderful gift of prophesy, so it can be used optimally to strengthen, encourage, and edify God’s people.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul wrote that we should “eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” because of the positive influence the gift has on the body (1 Cor 14:1ff.). At Neighborhood Church, we want to encounter the Lord deeply, hear His voice clearly, and obey Him promptly and consistently. So, we are eager to have Him speak to us prophetically as well as through the other declarative ministries of the Church, such as teaching and preaching.

We are committed to continue to grow in our understanding and stewardship of prophetic ministry. We are also committed to provide solid teaching on the subject and will offer sermons, classes, and other educational opportunities as part of our overall discipleship program. Finally, we are committed to faithfully cultivate the prophetic gift in a responsible, Biblically informed way. We will update this document in the future as circumstances may dictate.

May God be honored and adored by His people, and may Neighborhood Church be a place where His voice is treasured and heeded, to the glory of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, now and forever!

Approved by Board of Trustees: August 24, 2011.