

By Captain June Knop

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.

In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy.

Acts 2:17-19

I get really excited when I look at the passage from Joel quoted in Acts 2:17-19.

To me this passage is all about communication. What excites me is that it says that God wants to communicate with us personally, today, and it gives a clue to some of the amazing ways that he does that.

When we read our bible and we get to the last verse of Malachi and we casually flick over the page to the first verse of Matthew, we have unknowingly jumped 400 years in Jewish history.

This intertestamental time is characterised by the silence of the prophets. Along with the Torah (the first five books of the bible), the prophets had been God's major source of communication with his people in the Old Testament.

The Jews that Peter was speaking to in Acts 2:14 (just prior to the passage), understood that prophecy would cease at this time and they believed that with the coming of the Messiah it would flourish again.

This is why Peter quoted Joel here, to alert them to the fact that the Messiah had come and what they saw happening on that morning was the evidence of the reinstatement of the prophetic.

Some people however never understood this connection and believe incorrectly that the prophetic, along with other signs and wonders belongs only to the day of the apostles and beforehand.

Peter is saying, 'No you've got it wrong, this isn't the end, this is actually the new beginning'.

Catherine Booth, in the chapter on 'Filled with the Spirit' in her book *Aggressive Christianity* had this to say on the matter:

'Do you think God intended such experiences and visions only for Paul and the Apostles? Ah! There have been many since his day who have had such experiences and many more of God's people might have them...'

But what is the prophetic? What are we really talking about when we use that word?

Prophecy is simply speaking the word of God or message of God for particular circumstances or time.

God desires to talk to his people and a prophet is the mouthpiece of God and one means by which he can communicate with us.

The prophet's primary role is to introduce people to God or to call people back into a relationship with God.

In biblical times, prophets foretold the future, condemned unrighteous acts, gave encouragement, recommended courses of action to rulers or to priests and warned of judgement.

Only a small portion of the work of the prophet involves predicting the future, and even the predictions are designed to teach or to correct.

It allows room for people to think about how they should be living out God's word and

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to repent and change; therefore the future is not set in concrete. I like to think of this aspect of prophecy in terms of the words 'if' and 'but'.

'If' you continue living life in an ungodly way, then this will be the outcome, 'but' if you change your ways you are welcome to the 'feast' at the end times.

This explains why Jonah's prophesy about Nineveh didn't eventuate, because the people simply repented and future events were averted.

Prophecy is a spiritual gift and it is listed in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

I think it is important here to make a clarification between the gift of prophecy and prophetic ministry.

There is a prophetic ministry, but not all people are spiritually gifted to be prophets. Just as we are not all gifted to be evangelists, we are however still called and commissioned to share the message of God—to evangelise.

In this way we are all prophets.

As I was researching the prophetic, I visited the college library and had a look at some of the works of the Booths. I was really surprised to come across a small book edited by Bramwell Booth, called *The School of the Prophets* and it was specifically about training college.

The Booths saw the college as a facility to train people to go out and spread the Good News, and so the cadets became prophets in that sense. This was still the case when they opened the colleges here in Australia, and an article I was looking at—written in 1946 from the 'Local Officer and Bandsman' publication speaking about the Melbourne and Sydney colleges—was titled, 'Worthy Schools of the Prophets'.

Bramwell in his book *Echos and Memories*, also titled one of his chapters on William Booth, 'The Prophet'. The prophetic was very much part of our earlier tradition in this general sense, but was also recognised as a spiritual gift possessed by William in particular.

The prophetic gift exists and has relevance for today and we read in

1 Cor 14:1-4: *'Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives—especially the ability to prophesy. For if you have the ability to speak in tongues you will be talking only to God, since people won't be able to understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will be mysterious. But one who prophesies, strengthens others, encourages others and comforts them. A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the whole church.'*

Whether we have the spiritual gift of prophecy or not, we are all called to strengthen, encourage and comfort others. Again in this way we are all called to a prophetic ministry.

Luther put it this way:

'For just as through faith we are brothers of the Lord Christ, kings and priests, so we are also all prophets through Christ. For we can all state what pertains to salvation, God's glory and a Christian life.'

Some however are gifted today to be prophets and to work within the prophetic ministry because of their actual gifts, such as the gift of the Word of Wisdom (revelation, not worldly wisdom) and the gift of the Word of Knowledge (knowing unknown facts) and we know them by their abilities to communicate with God in a variety of forms.

A person, however, does not need to be a prophet for God to speak to them in the following ways. If you find that God speaks to you in any or a variety of the following ways, you may want to speak to someone about exploring your personal gifting further.

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The ways God communicates with us (How we might hear God speak)

1. Revelation

The primary way that God speaks to all believers is through the Bible which is the revelation of God in written form. The Bible has more authority than personal revelation because its authority extends to all people, everywhere, at all times.

2. He appears to believers personally

God spoke to Moses often. Numbers 5-8 says: 'Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud...He said, 'Listen to my words; when a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams, but this is not true of my servant Moses...with him I will speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles, he sees the form of the Lord...'

There are also a number of times we read in the New Testament where Jesus visited after his resurrection. On the road to Emmaus on the same day as they had visited the empty tomb, Luke 24:15 tells us that: 'Jesus himself came up and walked along with them ...'

3. Through Angels

Hebrew 1:14 tells us that Angels are: 'ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation'.

We are told in Hebrews 13:1-2, to keep on loving each other and to keep on entertaining strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Matthew 4:6 reminds us that Angels are sent to protect us also.

4. God speaks using an audible voice

I suppose the most dramatic example of this is Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:4-6: 'As he neared Damascus...suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus who you persecuting," he replied, "Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."

5. Audibly but only to your ears

An example of this would be when God called to Samuel in the middle of the night in 1 Samuel 3:1-14. Eli was there but only Samuel could hear it.

6. The internal audible voice

This is a voice that you hear in your mind. Scriptures such as Ezekiel 14:1, ('The word of the Lord came to me saying...') probably refers to this internal audible voice.

7. A Knowing or Word of knowledge

This is listed as a separate gift in the list that we looked at earlier in 1 Corinthians 12:8. There are times when a divine revelation does not come in the form of a voice or spoken message.

It may be something you simply know and there is no rational reason for how you know. This is not a learned knowledge, it is divinely imparted.

An example of this is when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well in John 4:18 and he knew that she had had five husbands and was currently living with another man that wasn't her husband.

8. Impressions

Nehemiah 7:5 gives us an example when he says, 'So God put into my heart to assemble the nobles...'; the heart being the seat of emotion and feeling.

Paul also gives an example in Acts 14:9 where he 'saw' that the lame man had faith to be healed, even though you cannot physically see faith.

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9. *Dreams Visions and Trances*

God uses dreams to speak to us in our sleep when our defences are down and we are more receptive. Visions are similar but they occur while we are awake.

We read of many of Daniels dreams in the book of Daniel and both Peter and Paul fell into trances in Acts 10:10:

'He (Peter) became hungry and wanted something to eat and while the meal was being prepared he fell into a trance.'

Acts 22:17: *'When I (Paul) returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple I fell into a trance'*. (Other translations use the word 'visionary state' here).

William Booth had a number of these type of visions and, in fact some of them were made into a book called *Visions*. The first few lines of the book read...

'I had a very curious vision of heaven the other day and I have been much perplexed as to whether I should tell it to my friends or not. The chief difficulty I find in giving it publicly arises from its apparent uncharitableness...'

The prophetic message often has hard lessons for us to learn.

10. *Through the Natural World*

God speaks to us through the natural world in at least three ways:

- The design and beauty of creation reveals the existence of the designer who is both beautiful and powerful (Romans 1:19-20).
- It illustrates spiritual principles to us, such as a lazy person can learn a lot from the hard working ant (Proverbs 6:6-11).
- God used Fire, wind and an earthquake to get a message across to Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-12).

11. *Physical manifestations in our bodies*

We read in Luke 8:45-46 of the sick woman who touched the hem of Jesus robe, but Jesus didn't feel her touch. Instead he felt healing power leave his body.

Some of you may have already experienced some of these things and for others these may seem very strange.

Over the years I have had a small handful of very special occasions where God has spoken to me through a few dreams, visions, revelations, words of knowledge, physicals manifestations in my body, strong emotional responses that are not mine and an internal audible voice.

I can't control it, I never know when it is going to happen and it happens only occasionally. I am simply praying and they happen. I was talking to God, so it shouldn't be surprising that he wanted to talk back to me.

Prayer is a conversation with God and so it's important that we take time to listen, as well as speak.

Scripture has a lot to say about what we should do with this gift and how we should treat those who have it:

1 Corinthians 14:20-25: *'Dear brothers and sisters don't be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind. It is written in scriptures, "I will speak to my own people through strange languages and through the lips of foreigners. But even then they will not listen to me says the Lord"*

'So you see that speaking in tongues is a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers. Prophecy however is for the benefit of believers not unbelievers. Even so if unbelievers come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy. But if all of you are prophesying and unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your meeting, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed and they will fall to their knees and worship God declaring, "God is truly among us"'

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1 Corinthians 14:39: *'So my dear brothers and sisters be eager to prophesy and don't forbid speaking in tongues.'*

1 Thessalonians 5:19-20: *'Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said.'*

Paul is warning us here not to ignore the gifts of the Spirit.

Sometimes spiritual gifts cause division in a church. Rather than trying to solve the problems that can arise from the use of some gifts, some Christians try and smother those gifts. This impoverishes the church.

We should not stifle the work of the Holy Spirit but encourage the full expression of these gifts to benefit the whole body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12 tells us that each part of the church is needed for the church to remain fully functional.

Ephesian 4 tells us that the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are all needed for the church and each member within, to grow and to reach maturity.

Each gifting provides a service to believers that is essential for holistic growth.

God speaks to us individually and he speaks to us corporately, but he speaks not just to inform us, he speaks so that we will change our ways, mature in our ways and act on his message.

Imagine if we were limited to only writing letters to each other today; how that would restrict communication between us. God uses a variety of means to keep in close communication and relationship with us. If we say that God does not speak in these ways today we are limiting God. That isn't his choice, that's ours.

I only gave you the beginning of that quote by Catherine Booth earlier. This is the section that it came from, within her message on prophecy and generally the works of the Holy Spirit. I strongly urge you to read it the entire chapter.

'What did Paul say? "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus", and I have been into "the third heaven and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful to utter". Do you think God intended such experiences and visions only for Paul and the Apostles? Ah! There have been many since his day who have had such experiences and many more of God's people might have them, if they would, but they are not willing to be wrapped up in his arms;...they are not willing to know him in the Spiritual sense; they are not willing to be consumed by his Spirit...if they were so longing that they could not live without it, then God would come and be revealed to them. Will you then wait in obedient faith?'

William Booth had this to say; 'Let there be free communication between you and God.'

I don't care how God does it, I just want to hear his voice. I don't want to limit my great God in any way. He can speak to me any way he chooses, even if it seems strange to me at first.

As we grow in Christ we are asked in Ephesians 4:23 to renew our minds, and grow in our understanding as well as in our behaviour.

Will you limit God to the boundaries of your experience and knowledge or will you say, 'Lord lead me into a greater understanding of you, teach me your ways?'