Weighing Prophecy

1. Introduction

a. 2020 has been a very significant year in different ways, and there has been a significant increase in the volume and frequency of prophetic declarations in this time.

b. We must approach the subject of prophecy from a biblical perspective, not from a subjective viewpoint; the bible gives us specific direction concerning both the nature and the application of prophecy. A few scriptures give us a framework to build on.

c. Firstly, we need to establish how the bible describes prophecy. Many view prophecy as something complicated and mystical and difficult to understand. In Revelation chapter 19 the angel who is guiding John through many different events shows John the rejoicing in heaven after the destruction of the Harlot Babylon, followed by the marriage supper of the Lamb.

   i John is so overcome by what he has seen that he fell at the feet of the angel, seeking to worship him. The angel admonishes him, because he, like John is a fellow servant who holds to the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 19:10 *Worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*

d. There are two things to draw out of this. Prophecy is completely de-mystified in this verse. It tells us clearly how we are to understand prophecy from a biblical perspective – <u>prophecy is the testimony of Jesus</u>. The whole of the book of Revelation is focused on the testimony of Jesus – it is all about him and what he will do at the end of the age.

   i This gives us insight into the purpose of the prophetic in the the Body of Christ –all prophecy at its deepest level must be focused on the testimony of Jesus. In other words, it will testify of him in one form or another. Peter in his second letter tells us where true prophecy comes from:

2 Peter 1:20-21 *…no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. **21** For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

e. The Holy Spirit in the life of the believer glorifies Jesus: the primary focus of the revelation that he brings concerns Jesus. Thus the purpose of prophecy is to bring us to a place of encounter with Jesus. This will help us to be more discerning when we come to weigh or test prophetic words when we encounter them.

f. The second thing this passage underlines is to caution us against elevating the messenger to a higher place than we should. The angel in Revelation was just a messenger, and described himself as a fellow servant holding to the testimony of Jesus. John's reaction highlights for us the danger of elevating prophetic messengers to a place where we focus on <u>them</u> rather than the <u>source</u> of the message, the Holy Spirit.

   i We must beware of any temptation to elevate the messenger above the primary focus of the message.

2. Beware of deception

a. In the Olivet discourse (Mark 13, Luke 21 and Matthew 24), Jesus gave his disciples a clear warning about deception and being led astray. He highlights this as one of the greatest dangers that we need to be aware of, and how this danger will be significantly increased as we approach the last days.

Matthew 24:4-5 *And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. [5] For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray.*

Matthew 24:11 *And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.*

Matthew 24:23-26 *Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. [24] For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. [25] See, I have told you beforehand. [26] So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.*

b. Jesus is saying when it comes to prophecy and those who claim to be speaking the word of God, we need to be very careful and very discerning; there will be those who prophesy falsely, and there will be many who are false prophets.

   i False prophets are generally those who have an agenda that is at odds with the word of God. In other words, they will speak prophetically in a way that leads people away from God rather than to him.

   ii This will often be dressed up in spiritual terms – justice and freedom of choice etc. – however, what they are actually promoting is a false justice and a false peace. Many will use the word "God" in a persuasive context, making them sound authentic, but they are really promoting the "god" of this world and not the Living God. But we must not underestimate their ability to deceive many as Jesus warns us in these verses.

   iii Also there are those who prophesy falsely. Again, we need to be very careful and discerning. Prophesying falsely is where the prophetic word goes beyond what God is really saying. At best, prophesying falsely describes a prophetic word that has its origins in a genuine revelation of God, but has been so coloured and embellished by the giver of the prophecy that the truth contained within it has become obscured and distorted and no longer accomplishes what it was sent out for.

   iv At worst, prophesying falsely is where the one giving the prophecy has completely missed it, what is being prophesied is not a word from God, but is an expression of the wishful thinking or good intentions of the one giving the word.

c. In view of this, some have gone down the route of disregarding prophecy altogether. That is not a biblical approach. Prophecy, according to the bible is helpful to the body of Christ and we must not be tempted to give up on it.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not despise prophecies, [21] but test everything; hold fast what is good.

   i "Don't quench the Spirit" – don't risk putting out the fire of the Spirit that resides within you – prophecy will stoke up and add fuel to that fire so that it burns more fiercely within you.

   ii Don't despise prophecy or disregard its value, or think it has no place in your walk with the Lord. It's a gift from God that will make you more fiery on the inside. Paul recognises there is a need for caution, so he counsels them to test every prophetic word, and only take on board that which is good.

3. New Covenant Prophecy

a. Prophecy is meant to be an integral part of the New Testament church. God's promise to us is that all of us can prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:31 *For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged*

i Speaking to the church in Corinth, Paul tells us the gift of prophecy is by no means limited to a privileged few, but is a universal gift to be employed by all. This is a gift of the Spirit that we should all desire and seek God for – it is one of the primary functions of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

b. When Paul says we can all prophesy, what does he mean, what does it look like? Every local expression of the body of Christ is intended to be a prophetic community. I would describe the folks at IHOP (Kansas City, USA) as being a prophetic community – to me it looks like the biblical model. While visiting IHOP and living among the community, the spirit of prophecy permeates just about every aspect of life there. It is evident in the prayer room in the worship and prayer.

i Sitting in the prayer room has taught me that the majority of New Testament prophecy is not about new revelation – it is the Holy Spirit highlighting and bringing to the forefront specific scriptures that he wants to bring to our attention at this time.

ii Many times times we've sat in the coffee shop and someone completely unknown to us has come and given us a prophetic word.

c. God is speaking over us all the time.

Psalm 139:17 *How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!*

i His thoughts are prolific, but they don't remain thoughts – they burst forth in rejoicing and singing:

Zephaniah 3:17 *The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

ii God is thinking and speaking and singing constantly over us – all we have to do is get into that flow.

1 Corinthians 2:9-13 *"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"— [10] these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. [11] For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. [12] Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. [13] And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*

d. Those thoughts hidden in the mind of God (cf. Psalm 139) are searched out by the Spirit of God, are then made known to us so we can understand what is in the heart of God. The Spirit brings them to our minds through prophetic revelation.

i God is consistent, he never changes. He is not one thing in the way he thinks and another in the way he speaks. So the revelation of his Word is consistent with the way he thinks. We can be sure that these thoughts revealed to us by the Spirit will always be aligned to what we read in the Word of God.

ii We have this two-fold means of checking the authenticity of prophecy – the witness of the Holy Spirit within us, and the confirmation of the written Word of God.

iii If we hear a prophetic word where either one is at odds with the other, then consign that word to the reject pile. If there is any element of the genuine contained within it, God will bring it to us at another time and through another means.

e. God has given us another safeguard. Ephesians 4 – within the leadership of the local expression of the body of Christ there will be those with specific areas of gifting that equip them for leadership. This is team leadership comprising apostles, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to go alongside prophets. Each of these expressions of leadership focused on different areas of maturing the body.

   i The prophets here are not the same as the Old Testament prophets. The Old Testament prophets were involved in the revelation of the eternal Word of God. What they spoke carried the full force of the Word of God. New Testament prophets do not speak with the same authority.

Hebrews 1:1-2 *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son…*

f. The writer to Hebrews tells us that the Old Testament prophets only saw in part and no prophet had the full revelation of God. Now the fullness of that revelation has come through Jesus, he is the final word. The book of Revelation concludes the canon of scripture, and that revelation of the last days, the return of Jesus, the Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal Age brings the written word to a close.

   i Thus the authority of prophecy today is of a lesser degree than that which comprises the canon of scripture..

   ii Ephesians 4 describes 5 types of servant leaders, to work together as a team with accountability; the different type of functions all balance one another. The teacher checks scriptural accuracy. The shepherd checks the health of the flock. The evangelist equips the church to share the gospel. The apostle provides team leadership and kingdom strategy. The prophet provides insight into the mind and heart of God.

   iii 1 Corinthians 13:9 – even the best prophets only prophesy in part – like only being able to see dimly and indistinctly as through a mirror that does not reflect very well.

g. With all this in mind, how should we approach prophecy today?

4. Prophecy today

a. A growing number of prophetic voices seem to have risen in response to the many trying and difficult events that have happened recently. At the end of last year and the beginning of this there were many prophetic words concerning 20/20 vision, with some upbeat declarations of the great things God was going to do in the coming year.

   i None of them foresaw what was just around the corner the world was being plunged into a global pandemic on a scale that we have never seen before.

   ii As Coronavirus spread all around the world, there were prophetic declarations that God would miraculously bring it all to and end at Passover. As we know, that didn't happen.

b. Throughout the autumn many in the prophetic community turned their attention to the US Presidential elections – almost unanimously declaring a victory for Donald Trump. The jury is still out on the eventual outcome of those elections, and they may eventually be proved correct, nevertheless the nature of the outcome is not what was predicted.

c. These and many other examples have led many in the church to become disillusioned with prophetic ministry and those who claim to be called to be prophets. As a result, many have turned their backs on anything prophetic.

d. A secondary factor that has had the opposite effect: greater access and availability of "prophetic words" through the internet and through social media. Sadly, many Christians devote more time to following and seeking out so-called "prophetic content" on YouTube than they do to reading and encountering God in their Bibles and through prayer.

   i Many have become so fascinated with prophecy that it has become more influential in their lives and has supplanted and replaced the primacy of the Word of God.

e. Much of what passes for prophecy today is a pandering to human curiosity about the future. We want to know what's going to happen. We look to the prophets to tell us things about the future, and we have ended up with an element of the prophetic that is really nothing more than spiritual fortune-telling. That may sound harsh, but it is an increasing trend that needs to be addressed.

   i What we need in these days is prophecy that brings us face to face with the Living God and his Word, and causes us to tremble before him.

   ii In the New Testament scriptures that speak of prophets and the working of the prophetic ministry, there is nothing to say that it should be predictive. Ephesians 4 makes it clear that the role of the prophet is to work alongside other ministries in building the church and establishing it upon the apostles' teaching.

   iii We should regard prophecy that seeks to predict future events in detail with great caution and test it thoroughly against the scriptures.

f. But we must not downplay the value and importance of prophecy. It has a valuable place in the life of the church, and it is absolutely one of the tools that the Holy Spirit loves to use; and subject to some biblical checks and balances, we can become more discerning about what we receive that comes to us in the form of prophecy in our own walk with God.

1 Corinthians 14:3 *…the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.*

g. There are three goals that prophecy is designed to accomplish – upbuilding, encouraging and consolation. A popular paraphrase of this verse is that prophecy should "build up, cheer up, or stir up." Those three criteria that Paul highlights should be the first things that we look for when we hear a prophetic word. The sort of questions we should ask are

   i "Does this build me up in my faith?"

   ii "Do I find encouragement and strengthening through this word?"

   iii "Does this word lead me to press in to God for more of Him?"

h. In the prophecy rooms at IHOP, before each session those who are prophesying always give these guidelines. When they prophesy they are not looking to give direction, but to affirm us in our faith, and often it will confirm what God is already saying to us. Much of it is based on scriptures that the Lord wants to highlight or bring to our attention.

i. The prophets in the Bible were raised up for a different purpose to the role of prophets under the New Covenant operating in the church today. Biblical prophets were raised up to do two things.

   i To bring correction to one of two groups of people in Israel – governmental leaders (kings) and spiritual leaders (the Priesthood). Their prophecy was to bring a warning of where they were going wrong, to declare God's mercy through repentance, and to outline the consequences of their actions if they did not turn to God.

ii The second was to bring revelation concerning God's plan of redemption for mankind, speaking into both Jesus' first and second coming to the earth.

5. A lesson from Jesus

a. The greatest prophet of all, Jesus, illustrates some of what we've been looking at this morning. Matthew 24 begins with Jesus warning his disciples that the temple in Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. They respond by asking him when this will happen and what will be the signs of his coming at the end of the age.

i Jesus doesn't answer their question in the way that they think he will. He relates their first question to their second question so they begin to see the bigger picture. He could have told them exactly when it would be, but he didn't give them a timeframe at all.

ii He gave them a series of signs to watch out for, trends in nature and trends in society. Then he focuses in on one event, the Abomination of Desolation, leading to the events culminating in his second coming.

iii The main thrust is to encourage his disciples to watch and pray – to understand and correctly interpret the signs of the times so that they are not caught unawares or unprepared. He gave his disciples observable and tangible ways to relate spiritual realities with real-time world events in order to give them confidence in his leadership.

b. Jesus' prophetic response to their questions was not information, but preparation. He didn't give them all the answers they were looking for, but gave them revelation and understanding that would build their faith for the journey.

i Jesus wants us to be prepared for what lies ahead, and part of that preparation is to be sharpened and honed by the prophets. God will often use prophets to signal changes in spiritual seasons, strategy, and direction that he highlights by emphasising specific scriptures or specific areas of focus for prayer.

1 Corinthians 14:29 *Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.*

ii This does not mean that we sit in judgment of the prophets, but that it is the responsibility of each one of us to prayerfully consider in the light of scripture if this is a prophetic word that we should take action on. Is this something that God wants us to take note of and take action on? And if it is, let's pray and obey. Let's repent and change. Let's believe and receive. Let's go on to what God has for us in the next season.