

for you. His atonement is so profound and his death so precious that it saves us even though we may sin, as you did in childbirth. John Calvin taught that we could be sure of our salvation.”

Now Mrs Brewster had a come-back, and we had a good chat. The actors certainly knew their stuff and had a good grasp of Puritan theology. But the really interesting bit was the reaction of the crowd. They seemed amazed—they were not used to theology as a part of everyday conversation. Or perhaps they were amazed at my broad Strine accent. The most interesting reaction was the lady next to Jane, who said to her friend, “I’m not gonna listen to this garbage”, and walked out.

I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon. This is American public religion and the modern view of history. You can talk about God (you know when they win an Emmy they all thank their mother, their producer and God), but you can’t mention Jesus. The concept of ‘God’ is amorphous, vague yet sort of inspiring, but the person of Jesus is offensive. Yanks love the pilgrims for their courage, but they do not love the Christ who was the source of their endurance. Religion has moved out of the public arena and become thoroughly privatized. Even mentioning the atonement that Christ won on the cross is unbelievably embarrassing. At least Australians seem less hypocritically pagan. ■

Love  
Ed

# Prophecy without the Packaging

I heard this definition recently: “The gift of prophecy: something we try not to think about in case our Evangelical armour turns out to have a chink in it”. Emotive, isn’t it? But is prophecy really such an anti-evangelical activity? Most Christians seem to have one of two approaches to prophecy:

- 1 The ‘intuitive approach’ is epitomised as follows: “I heard a prophecy the other day—really edifying... How did I know it was from God? I just *knew*—not only was it scriptural, but there was this inner conviction from the Spirit that I’ve learned to discern and rely on.”
- 2 The other approach is epitomised in the ‘Lead Balloon’ of *Briefing* #45/46: “I am desperately hoping that I *won’t* be given any further prophecies.” The writer had read Ezekiel 13:1-7 and developed three fears. First, there is the danger of God’s judgement if the prophecy is not from God. Second, the impossibility of knowing if it *is* from God. Third (he implied), the problem of the authority of a prophecy—even assuming it is from God, do we add it to Scripture? He concluded, “Speak only God’s Word as the words of God”.

But there is a tension between this view and passages in the New Testament which seem to encourage prophecy. I would like to consider the Lead Balloon’s objections in the light (mainly) of 1 Cor 14.

Regarding false prophecy, it must be remembered that OT and NT prophets differ. If Isaiah spoke, it was God speaking, and disobeying Isaiah was rebellion against God. But prophets in the NT didn’t have that sort of authority. In Acts 21:4, for example, Paul is urged by prophecy not to go to Jerusalem, but ignores the warning. In 1 Cor 14:37 we see that prophets are under Apostolic authority.

Further, when OT prophets made a mistake they were stoned to death! But NT prophecy was not expected to be infallible—in 1 Cor 14:29 prophecy is submitted to the congregation for evaluation, the implication being that prophecies were of mixed quality (cf 1 Thess 5:20). In other words, NT and OT prophecy are different, and the warnings in Ezekiel 13 do not apply to NT prophets. It was not the prophet but the prophecy which was judged in the NT church [see W Grudem *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (UPA, 1982)].

If this is true, then what *is* prophecy in the

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NT? 1 Cor 14:29-30 suggests that it is a revelation from God spontaneously received and then spoken out to build up the church. A broad range of 'revelations' in the NT are spoken of as prophecy: guidance, warnings, predictions (sometimes), and personal information. But 1 Cor 14:25 suggests that these 'revelations' were very specific—no rogue generalisations!

Unfortunately, this only makes the Lead Balloon's second and third objections all the more acute. A 'revelation' is a subjective experience, and because the experience is rooted in myself, it is unverifiable. As an English philosopher once said, "The man to whom God spoke in a dream could equally be the man who dreamed that God spoke to him" (Hobbs). A prophecy may edify, it may be doctrinally sound, it may seem right intuitively—but none of these things are sufficient ways of verifying that it comes from God. Objective verification has only one source—the Bible. I don't believe intuition is a valid test of knowledge. And yet, prophecies were greatly valued in the NT church.

I can only conclude that it is not necessary to know the origins of a prophecy in order to act upon it. A prophecy is accepted for its potential to edify, not for its divine origin; and one can conclude it was from God only in retrospect.

This is not so unusual—indeed, there are many things hidden in the counsels of God which we discover only after they are manifest, such as the conversion of the elect. Guidance is another example—we decide how best to serve God in the future from what we know of his will, and only upon looking back do we perceive the hand of God upon the events of our lives. Thus, extra-biblical 'revelations' can never form the primary basis for any action. The 'intuitive approach' to prophecy is in error, for it leads us away from Scripture.

Finally, the third objection—if prophecy is divine revelation, why does it not carry divine authority? We have already pointed out that NT prophecy was of varied quality and was subject to the evaluation of the church. One may be tempted to wonder how it could be considered revelation at all! D A Carson addresses these issues in his book *Showing the Spirit* (Lancer, 1988 pp 160-165), where he makes two helpful points.

First he suggests that NT prophecy is genuine revelation, but is *not always interpreted properly* by the prophet (see Acts 21)—the results aren't guaranteed. Second, he points out that 'revelation' in the Bible is a much broader term than "Revelation" in systematic theology (Matt 11:27, 1 Cor 2:10, Phil 3:15). It includes, for example, the subjective realisation that the gospel is true. Thus prophetic revelation is *truly from God*, even though not in the same league as canonical Revelation.

So what are we left with? A ministry of prophecy in the church is not to be denied or feared, given that it is 'prophecy' with a small 'p', and 'revelation' with a small 'r'. And in fact I suspect that this ministry is regularly exercised in Evangelical churches, whenever God gives a Christian special insight or discernment for the building up of a fellow believer or a congregation. All we lack is the label and the packaging. ■

ANDREW SHEAD

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*Andrew Shead is the Assistant Lay Minister at St Paul's, Wahroonga.*