Old Testament vs New Testament Prophecy

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Prophecy has always been an exciting way in which God reveals Himself and His thoughts to His people. From the very first pages of the Bible we find God prophesying many thousands of years into the future regarding the cosmic power struggle between Satan ('the serpent') and Jesus ('the seed') (Genesis 3:15). Many of the adventure stories in the Old Testament (OT) revolve around the powerful way in which God used His prophets in the lives of others. As we consider God's ministry through these prophets, the natural question arises: is there a difference between the ministry of the OT prophets and the prophetic ministry in the New Testament (NT), and even in our churches today? And if so, what are the differences?

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It is perhaps easy to think that OT prophecy and NT prophecy are completely different, but they're actually not. Prophecy is always rooted in the same source — the Holy Spirit. 'I am the Lord, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed.' (Malachi 3:6)

Similarities Between Old & New Testament Prophecy

Under both covenants, the same power is present to reveal God's heart, but in the New there is an illumination of the Old through the lens of Jesus. Yet we perhaps overlook how similar OT and NT prophecy is. Let's take a look at some examples:

1. The Same Source is Speaking

We see the ministry of the Holy Spirit actively transforming, indwelling (or filling), restraining, and empowering for service in both testaments. The Spirit 'came upon' Joshua (Numbers 27:18), David (1 Samuel 16:12-13) and even Saul (1 Samuel 10:10), who immediately began prophesying. In the book of Judges, we see the Spirit 'coming upon' the various judges who were acting as prophets; people whom God raised up to deliver Israel. The key difference in the NT is the permanent indwelling of the Spirit in all believers as He is poured out 'on all flesh'. 'But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you'. (John 14:17)

2. The Presence of Gifts of the Spirit

Although terminology was different in the OT, gifts of the Spirit were evidently operating to perform God's purposes. For example, "wisdom gifts", words of knowledge, words of wisdom, prophecy, and discerning spirits were all in operation (1 Kings 14:4-6).
These gifts are still given by the Spirit today. 'There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all.' (1 Corinthians 12:4)

3. Manifestations

The Gospel message has always been accompanied by signs and wonders. For example, when Paul and Barnabas were in Iconium, 'The two apostles were there a long time, speaking freely, openly, and confidently as they presented the clear evidence of God's gifts, God corroborating their work with miracles and wonders.' (Acts 14:3)
Strange things have always happened when prophets and prophecy are powerfully present. In the OT there were floating axes, leprous arms, wild dancing and tongues getting stuck. Compare this with the NT where people are struck dumb, spontaneously speaking in tongues and appearing drunk.

4. Prophecy Requiring Reverence with Evidence of God's Presence

In the OT when people ignored or misused prophecy (e.g. 1 Kings 13), they were punished for it. An OT prophet was validated as being genuine when his prediction came to pass. 'If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.' (Deuteronomy 18:22) Today, we have the responsibility of testing the prophecy of others and allowing our prophecy to be tested. A significant difference is that in the NT, we no longer stone prophets when their predictions are false!

Differences Between Old & New Testament Prophecy

Now let's turn to some important differences between OT and NT prophecy.

1. In the OT, Prophets were The Mouthpiece of God
OT prophets had the singular role of bringing God's word — instruction, warnings, prophecies, and so on — directly to His people.

NT believers have a relationship with God and can hear Him speaking to them personally. There is no longer a reliance upon the words of the prophets as the sole means of hearing God's voice. When prophecy is brought to bear upon the leadership of a modern-day church, it is designed to bring confirmation, clarity and empowerment to the vision of the church.

Modern-day prophets sometimes get it wrong in this area when they insist that leaders are wrong and that they alone hear correctly from God. This leads to the belief that prophetic input carries greater weight than others.

2. The OT was an Era of Law and Judgment
In OT, prophets had the unpopular job of pronouncing warnings and judgments upon people and nations. The NT is an era of God's grace and prophecy is for 'strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.' (1 Corinthians 14:3)

'Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers.' (Acts 15:32)

NT prophecy is always consistent with the ministry of Jesus and His revelation of the Father. A prophetic word can sometimes address error, but the prophetic motive is always redemptive and it is brought in love and humility.

Modern-day prophets can easily lapse into an OT approach and this is demonstrated when:

- prophecy only points out error, condemns or warns
- prophets call for repentance with an underlying attitude of criticism or judgment.

3. In the OT, a Prophet Could Stand Alone Before God (1 Kings 17:1)
In the NT, Paul is clear that we as a church are made up of many members with different gifts in one body, in one team. As with other spiritual gifts, prophecy is not meant to be a stand-alone ministry in the church. Prophecy is incomplete without the added value of the other gifts in the church body. (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Any person who is prophesying needs those with gifts of discernment, leadership and wisdom to complete their contribution to the church. (1 Corinthians 14:29-33) In the NT, we see less of the individual prophet and more of prophetic teams. Some examples of this are: Judas and Silas

(Acts 15:32), prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1), the team from Jerusalem (Acts 11:27).

A purely OT approach would tend towards prophecy in isolation, separation from the community and a lack of accountability.

4. OT Prophets were Expected to Speak the Perfect, Inspired Word of God
In the NT church, prophetic words are subject to being weighed. 'For we know in part and we prophesy in part,' (1 Corinthians 13:9) This is why prophecy must be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29). All prophecies must be tested by the standard of Scripture. 'Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.' (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

> We should never resist feedback on our prophetic words nor react negatively when our prophetic words are not acted upon.

In conclusion, NT prophetic ministry needs an environment of humility, cooperation and grace to operate as Jesus intended it to. We should never resist feedback on our prophetic words nor react negatively when our prophetic words are not acted upon. Prophecy is a rich gift from God for the encouragement and equipping of others to produce fruit in the church. It is a servant ministry in the church. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

The danger of a purely OT paradigm of prophetic ministry is that it sends a message of exclusivity and creates an unhealthy reliance upon the prophetic minister. The fruit of a healthy NT prophetic ministry is unity. The picture that Paul gives is of a healthy body with each part being unique but working and growing together into Christ-likeness.