

Nature, Content and Impact of the Gift of Prophecy in African Context

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Abstract

This article examines the nature, content and impact of the gift of prophecy in African context using 2 Peter 1:19-23 – 2:3 and 1 Corinthians 14: 1-5. The approach has been analytical or qualitative. The historical-critical method and contextual tools are used in the interpretation of the bible text. The study reveals that with the ministry of the first apostles, so with the prophets who with them became foundation of the Church, their authority is unique and unrepeatable. No Christian today with the gift of prophecy can be at par with those original prophets as organs of divine revelation. Any subsequent manifestation of the gift must be submitted to the authoritative teaching of the original apostles and prophets as contained in the Canon of the Scripture. While false prophets are regular features of the living Church of God in all ages, the Scriptures never cease to alert us to the inevitability of their existence, popularity, fraudulence and eventual judgment. As a means of checkmating them, the Lord provides his own with the discernment of Spirit. To avert comfortable conformity to the contemporary African culture, the Church must not relapse her prophetic ministry.

Introduction

Today, it appears that the prophetic movement is not only gaining momentum but also stirring up controversy as thousands of Christians seek answers to their questions about how God speaks to us through the prophetic ministry and how we should respond to his prophetic word. It is observed that some of these self-styled prophets organize people around themselves into their own desired mold by their personal interpretation of the Scriptures. It is observed too, that some of these people that parade themselves as the prophets of twenty-first century do not conspicuously set themselves up as opponents of Christianity but subtly and cunningly tell people what they wished to be true. Being driven by personal gain and lust for fame, they tell people what they want to hear and not the truth they should know. Some of them claim exceptional and unique authority as with the first apostles. To this end, Owojaiye (2019) thinks that he does not know any other ministry that has damaged the image of the Church in African public square today more than that of the self-proclaimed prophets who have perverted what Charismatic believe is a genuinely biblical prophetic ministry. If Owojaiye is right, the need, therefore, naturally arises to place the prophetic ministry in the right perspective.

What then does Paul mean by encouraging the gift of prophecy? Can any Christian today be on the same par with those original prophets, as organs of divine revelation? Is there any need to submit any subsequent manifestation of this gift to the authoritative teaching of the original apostles and prophets as contained in the Canon of Scripture? Is there, then, any subsidiary prophetic gift and ministry today? These questions are considered germane in our understanding of nature, content and impact of the gift of prophecy in today's ministry. Apparently, the men and women implicated above are deviating from the official Church's line and have to be put right in order to teach only what the Church believe. To this effect,

teaching on prophecy in 2 Peter 1:19-2:3 as well as Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 are considered relevant and thus, employed in this study.

Scholars believe that apostle Peter was not the author of 2 Peter. It was conventional then, to write a book in somebody's name. The Jews repeatedly used this method of writing. The heretics exploited this method too. False teachers took advantage of this and issued out many books under the names of the great apostles. To counter this, the Church issued out books in which they set out in order the things which they most commonly believe in the prevailing situations and which are in conformity with the apostolic faith lest, Christian faith would be wrecked and the gospel truth thwarted. Perhaps, the author of 2 Peter attached the name of Peter deliberately to his God-given message following the conventional style of the day. Perhaps, it was done in humility preferring Peter's name to his as much more appropriate and for his book to command respect and easy acceptability. Be that as it may, it was included in the New Testament. 2 Peter is considered suitable in this study given that it was written to people who were undermining the basic tenets of Christian ethics and doctrine. Unlike 2 Peter, the authorship of 1 Corinthians is non-contestable. As a result of Paul's deep attachment to the Christians in Corinth, he was bound to pen to paper when strange teachings began to divide the Church. This article is qualitative or analytical in approach. The historical-critical method and contextual tools are used in the interpretation of the bible texts.

Exegesis and Discussion

In 2 Peter 1:19 we read: *Kai echomen bebaioteron ton prophetikon logon, ho kalos poieite prosechontes hos luchno phainonti en auchmero topo, hoes hou hemera diaugase kai phosphoros anateile en tais kardiais humon* (And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts). We see that in the clause *Kai echomen bebaioteron ton prophetikon logon* (And we have the word of the prophets made more certain) that what is made "more certain" is a subject of debate by scholars. Is Peter of the opinion that the New Testament message needs the stronger support which the Old Testament provides? Or, is he saying that the Old Testament points to Christ's second coming but the promise has been underlined by the transfiguration? Barclay (2009) thinks that "what the apostles saw on the Mount of Transfiguration makes more certain that what is foretold in the prophets about the second coming must be true" (pp.359-360). Calvin (1989) seems to balance it well when he asserts that "The authority of the Word of God is the same as it was in the beginning, and then, it was given further confirmation than before by the advent of Christ" (p. 340). The bible is far from being a subjective piece of a religious quest one can supplement or challenge with one's experiences at will. The apostle's testimonies to a series of encounters do not suffice in this matter either. It rather hinges on their claim to have the right to give the only true interpretation, the unique meaning, of those events, because they heard the interpretation from the mouth of God himself. Thus, God has spoken. In other words, Peter implies that God has spoken again, confirming what he said before and giving a partial fulfilment of it as a blessed assurance of the fulfilment of his other plans and purposes. For instance, Peter has seen how the prophets had spoken not just about the glorious king, but about a suffering king; and as a witness to the suffering, he had become more certain about the glory. Consequent upon this, the onus of responsibility now lies upon us to *kalos poieite prosechontes* (do well to pay attention to it). When we refer to the prophets, we also should remember some basic distinctions. Scripture separates true prophets from false. The false prophet is windbag who has been given nothing to say, but says it most impressively. The true prophet is a spokesman of God. Scripture mentions some non-writing prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha. The writing prophets are classified into major and minor prophets. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Minor ones are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum,

Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The Minor Prophets are sometimes referred to as “The Twelve”. They are termed “minor” only because of the comparative brevity of their writings. In actuality, they deal with some very major themes. In these writings one can hear the vibrant voice of the living God.

Peter proffers two reasons why they should pay more attention to the words of the prophets: (a) It is because it is a *luchno phainonti en auchmero topo* (light shining in a dark place). The Greek word *auchmeros* used here is very strong meaning dark, gloomy. The idea of bible as light is very common (cf. Ps. 119:105); and oftentimes, the bible refers to the darkness of the world (cf. 1 Jn. 2:8; Jn. 1:5). That is to say that the word of prophets, as lamp, is our sure guide in the darkness of this world. When we abide by it and obey its precepts we shall neither stumble nor lose our way. (b) The other reason why we should pay more attention to the words of the prophets is that the Old Testament is our only guide out of the world, *hos hou hemera diaugase kai phosphoros anateile en tais kardiais humon* (until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts). “The day” probably refers to the Old Testament expectation of judgment as well as salvation. Lucas and Green (1995) think that the phrase, “the morning star rises in our hearts” probably means that the return of Christ will marry the objective promises of God with our subjective belief in them. They went on to say that until that day, we have to believe with our hearts despite the evidence of our eyes as the Old Testament remains the permanently valid voice of God until the end of history.

Apostle Peter started by asking us to pay attention, give heed to (*prosecho*) the prophets; now he has something for us to hold tenaciously to above all else: *touto proton ginostontes hoti pasa propheteia graphes idias epiluseos ou ginetai* (Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation). For Peter, the author of prophecy combines experience with rightful interpretation. For instance, in Jeremiah 1:11-14, he did not only see the almond branch and a boiling pot, but God told him what those two visions stood for. Peter makes the not-so-plain very plain by saying that: *ou gar phelemati anthropou* (prophecy never had its origin in the will of man). It never had its origin in *idios epiluseis* (one’s own interpretation) too. The prophets, in their prophetic utterances, were not just expressing a private opinion of their own, rather they were passing on a revelation which God had given them. Of course, Jeremiah quoted above did not just get into his study room with a crazy idea and firm resolution to pen down some prophecies. Instead, *alla hupo pneumatos hagiou pheromenoi elalesan apo theou anthropoid* (men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit). Unquestionably, the prophets received their message from the Spirit. It was sometimes believed that the Spirit of God used the prophets as a writer uses a pen or as musician uses a musical instrument. At any rate, the Spirit gave the prophets their message. The logical conclusion is that it is through the help of that same Spirit that the prophetic message can be understood and interpreted.

For Paul, spiritual things are spiritually discerned ((1 Cor. 2:14-15). Besides, the Jews understood dual function of the Holy Spirit as (a) the one who is instrumental in bringing God’s truth to humanity; and (b) as the one who enables them to understand the message given to them. In other words, the Scripture is not the resultant effect of one’s personal construct or rooted in one’s fanciful imagination and therefore, its interpretation cannot result from private craftiness or prejudice. It can only be interpreted by the help of the Holy Spirit by whom it was given. Noteworthy is Peter’s balancing of human authorship (men spoke) with God’s authorship (from God), despite the fact that he is fully awake to the fact that such partnership is not the work of equals, given the fact that human instruments were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Suffice it to say also that as a group of witnesses to the promises of God, God spoke to them and through them. It is quite unfortunate that in Africa today, there are a lot of self-proclaimed prophets and prophetesses who neither see nor hear from God, and who always dot their messages with “thus says the Lord”, when God had not spoken. Ezekiel refers to them as

“Foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing’ (Ezek. 13:3). Their prophecy admits zero vision and originates either in their human spirits or minds. If actually they concede a vision, it is the product of their own minds and not from the mouth of the Lord (Jer. 23:16). They are impressionist people who take advantage of numerous challenges faced by a continent that is undergoing social transformation. They speak of their own power, speak what they themselves wished, and are fools who had wrong wisdom by the word, and are then instructed by the visions of their mind.

There is also a common practice observed in some African Churches about some self-acclaimed prophets and prophetesses who at the end of every service, the members of the Church would file up to him or her to receive personal prophecy. Yes, the parishioners would take turns to consult the man or woman of God for personal guidance. The man or woman of God in question would then “play God” to the uniformed parishioners at the expense of the truth. Be that as it may, Peter teaches that the one place in which the Spirit especially resides and is operative is the Church, and no more in some individuals as is the case of the Old Testament times. If this is true, the Scripture then must be interpreted in the light of the teaching, the belief and the tradition of the Church. If we believe that God is our Father in the faith; it may be safe to say that Church is our mother in the faith. If we find that our interpretation of Scripture is at variance with the teaching of the Church, we must humbly examine ourselves and ask whether our guide has not been our private wishes rather than that of the Holy Spirit.

In 2 Peter 1:17-21, Peter renders some salient points which we will do well to underscore. First, using the language of “voice” (v.17), “word” (v.19) and “spoke” (v.21), Peter shows that the prophets of the Old Testament together with the Apostles of the New Testament shared the same authority. To hear them is to hear from God. To disobey them is to disobey God. Just as the ministry of the original prophets, so with the ministry of the apostles who with them became the foundation of the Church. We may do well to note that their authority is unique and unrepeatable. By this very fact, no Christian whatsoever can claim to be on the same par with those original prophets and apostles as organ of divine revelation. Second, Peter places an equally divine authoritative footing on the message of the first apostles and the original prophets. He linked them by the verb, *phero* (to carry along or move). God’s voice came to Jesus (v.17), and the apostles heard that voice which came from heaven (v.18). Consequently, Peter underscores that no prophecy had its origin in humankind’s craftiness, but only as the prophets were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Lukas and Green (1995) puts it concisely, “God spoke to both groups, giving them his once-for-all and irrevocable explanation of his actions” (p.84). DiGangi (1985) beautifully notes that “the prophet puts his ear to the chest of the Eternal, catches something of His heartbeat, and shares what he has heard with the Lord’s people”. So enthusiastic and certain was Peter of this parallel that he dared to call Paul’s letters by the glorious word, *graphe* (Scriptures) (2 Pet. 3:16; cf 2 Pet. 1:20). As a result, they are irreplaceable. Third, Peter graphically illustrated the coming of the Lord with the language of sight: glory (v.17), light, day, morning star (v.19). All these point to striking parallels between the first apostles and the Old Testament Prophets.

2 Peter 2: 1 reads: *Egenonto de kai pseuprophetai en to lao, hos kai en humin esontai, pseudodi daskaloi, hotives pareisaxousin haireseis apoleias kai ton agorasanta autous despoten arnoumenoi. Epagontes heatois tachinen apoleian* (But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves). Close examination reveals that this section is logically connected with what has gone before, and is carefully worded. Apostle Peter has clearly demonstrated that we have true teachers, the apostles (2 Pet. 1:116-18), and that the Old Testament was written by the true prophets (2 Pet. 1: 19-21). Now, he warns that just as there were false

prophets (*pseudoprophetai*) then, so there will be false teachers (*pseudodi daskaloi*) today. Peter is so assured of this that he announces their doom in verse 3: *ois to krima ekpala oukaregei kai he apoleia auton ou nustadzei* (their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping).

The historical line of Israel is dotted with warning against the false prophets (Deut. 13:1-3; Mt. 24: 11, 24; Acts 20:29-30; Gal. 1:6-9; Phil. 3:2; 2Thess. 2:1-3; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 1Jn. 2:18-19; Jude 3-4; Rev. 16:13-14). It appears that this stern warning turns out to become a recalling decimal in the historic life of Israelites with serious import of death penalty (Deut. 13:5, 18:20). The need to pay attention to what God actually said cannot be over-emphasized as against going after what people wanted to hear. The prophets of the old as well as Jesus, even the apostles, take their turns in sounding this warning. Perhaps, Peter calls them by his own invented phrase *pseudodi daskaloi* (false teachers) instead of *pseudoprophetai* (false prophets) because their claims disparage the supernatural. These people are no better than slanderers (2 Pet. 2:10) and scoffers (2 Pet. 3: 3). In the early Church, teachers occupied a very prominent position and sometimes were classified with prophets as possessing one of the priced higher gifts. To claim to be a teacher while in the actual sense one is a false one attracts grave consequences given that there is a clear understanding of the differences between truth and error. It is no mean thing to cause people to go astray from God and from the paths of salvation.

In every age and time, people abound who find it difficult to discern between error and truth and between true and false teachers. It is an observable fact in history that false prophets are more often than not more prominent than true prophets and sometimes leave a permanent scar on the Church as they break away with some members. Some members of the Church who may not like to follow them may eventually leave the Church in search of much purer place or denomination. Apostle Peter considers this an exercise in futility as false teaching is an ever-present reality in the Churches of all ages. Peter admonishes that we shall avoid being deluded (2 Pet. 2:1-22) or despondent (2 Pet. 3:1-10). In collaboration to this, Calvin (1989) says that, "The Spirit of God has declared once for all that the Church will never be free from this internal trouble" (p. 345). It is this conviction that prompted Peter's insistence on the need to take radical action to avoid error's consequences.

In 2 Peter 2:2-3 we read: *kai polloi exakolouthesousin auton tais aselgeiais di hous he hodos tes aletheias blasphemetheseta, kai en pleonexia plastois logois humas emporeusonta, ois to krima ekpalai ouk argei kai he apoleia auton ou nustadzei* (Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping). From the above passage, it is seen that Peter furnishes us with the blueprint on how to recognise false prophets. He marshals out their delineating features so that we can keep away from their ugly influences.

Characteristics of False Prophets

In 2 Peter 2:2-3 we see that the features that delineate the false prophets are unchanging right from the ancient times. They are:

Pursuit of fame

False prophets tell people what they want to hear and not the truth they need to hear. True prophets obliterate themselves in the message that they may project their master; deliver the message as they received it and do not corrupt or distort the message; seek to please their master and decline to follow the applause of the crowd; and call people to repentance, faith and discipleship, and do not flatter them and encourage them to enjoy their darkest and most secret wishes. The false prophets said: "Peace, peace", when there is no peace' (Jer. 6:14).

They saw visions of peace when the Lord God was saying that there was no peace (Ezek. 13:16). In the days of Jehoshaphat, Zedekiah, the false prophet, donned his horns of iron and said that Israel would push the Syrians out of the way as he pushed with these horns: Micaiah, the true prophet, foretold disaster if Jehoshaphat went to war. Of course, Zedekiah was popular and his message was accepted; but Jehoshaphat went to war with the Syrians and perished tragically (1kgs 22). This attitude makes them popular. This does not, of course, mean that anyone who is popular is automatically a false prophet, or that truth is found only in small and secret sects. It does mean that one result of having the kind of gospel these men had is a spurious repentance that is bereft of a genuine and saving faith.

Immoral

Peter teaches that false prophets lead and encourage people in shameful ways. Peter uses the Greek word *aselgia* which is a dative, feminine plural noun and which he repeats in 2 Peter 2:7 as ‘filthy’ and 2 Peter 2:18 as ‘lustful’. It means licentiousness, debauchery, sensuality and its plural meaning includes different forms of licentiousness. Jeremiah writes, “In the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers... (They) lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness” (Jer. 23:14, 23:32). False prophets appear to be at their verge of apostasy whereby falsehood is exchanged for truth and where every zest for ethical standard of living is snuffed off, and where the clamours of self-will tend to run amuck.

Personal Gain

For Peter, the false prophets are driven by greed and personal gain. Micah said, “Her priests teach for a price and her prophets tell fortunes for money” Mic. 3:11). They teach for sordid gain, (Tit. 1:11) and they identify godliness and gain making their religion money-making venture (1 Tim. 6:5). ‘Extortionist in Christ’ or ‘traffickers in Christ’ should do well to abide by Peter’s instruction to be eager to serve instead of being greedy for money (1 Pet. 5:2; cf. 1 Tim. 3:3). The duplicitous extortion of these men should sound as a warning to the Churches in Africa. In some Church Cathedrals in Africa today, the tendency has always been to revel in ‘manipulative preaching’. This is a kind of preaching in which people adopt cleverly devised ploy to uplift and stimulate the people to give before the collection is taken. Sometimes they might even ask the congregation to donate their landed property, personal cars and all that in exchange for long life and divine security. The Church members are thus subjugated to an unguarded bombard of subterfuge and naivety.

Lead People Astray

Peter observes that the many who follow the shameful ways was like the false prophets that actually serve to bring the way of truth to disrepute. Peter uses the Greek word *blasphemeo* (blaspheme). Perhaps, blaspheme is more than he intends to use here. It is rightly translated ‘slander’ in 2 Peter 2: 10-11, and ‘blaspheme’ in 2 Peter 2:12, when it refers to what these men themselves are doing. The effect of false prophets on the Church’s witness is disastrously evident. They lead people further away from God instead of closer to him. They take people in the wrong direction.

Again from the Peter’s teaching in 2 Peter 2:1-3, he furnishes us with the cause, method, effect and ultimate end of the false prophets.

Cause: The root cause of false prophecy is enshrined in the word *pleonexia*. It stands for evil ambition. *Pleon* means more, and *exia* comes from the verb *echein*, which means to have. *Pleonexia* is the desire to possess more. It is the desire to possess that which we have no right

to desire for money and for other people's goods. It is a godless pursuit for materialism. It can also mean lustful desire for someone's person or unholy ambition for prestige and power.

Method: Their method is the use of cunningly prepared arguments which they made up.

Effect: It encourages people to take the way of free morality and brings Christianity into disrepute.

Ultimate End: The ultimate end of the false prophets is destruction.

We shall now go over to 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 to understand Paul's teaching on the gift of prophecy which is neither banal nor esoteric. It strengthens the Church and at the same time remains accessible to its members as well. All Christians can exercise the gift of prophecy but relatively few can be used in such a frequency and regularity in order to be recognised as a gift from God and to the Church as prophets. It can never be over-emphasised that the gift of prophecy is never the same with the office and ministry of a prophet. As explained above, such prophets are not on a par with the original prophets in the Old Testament or the first apostles in the New Testament and need be scrutinized under the authority of the Scriptures in their conduct and content of their utterances. In Isaiah 50: 4-6 we read: "The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen as one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard, I hid not my face from mocking and spitting". Any Christian who claims prophetic ministry today cannot claim to have the same authority with the man whose words we read in the above passage. Prior (1993) discusses the importance of Isaiah 50: 4-6 to the prophetic ministry today. First, he said that the above passage has a Messianic thrust, and that Jesus is seen throughout the New Testament revelation as the Prophet par excellence, filling Moses' promise that such a person would arise. The Gospels see Jesus fulfilling this role (cf. Deut. 18:15). Besides, testimony to Jesus is "the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10), a testimony which is prospective in the Old Testament and retrospective in the New Testament. Second, he said that the lifestyle of a person that God inspires with the gift of prophecy is defined in the above passage. The daily discipline of spending time with God in order to listen to him and to hear his word is a *sine qua non* for any authentic prophetic gift. Given that every Christian is prone to discover and pursue that discipline which most effectively maintains personal contact with the Lord, the fruits of such devotional life in terms of receiving a word from God for others are open to every Christian. Third, he said that the emphasis in Isaiah 50 is on the strength and support which such a ministry will bring to 'him that is weary'- a perspective which Paul himself underlies in 1 Corinthians 14:3. Fourth, he said that it is clear from all sides that those who genuinely receive a prophetic gift need courage and resilience in bringing it faithfully to the Church. This is because there may be hostility, even rejection. In fact, Prior (1993), beautifully sums it up:

The passage from Isaiah encourages us, therefore, to expect special insight to be given by God to any sensitive and obedient believer: insight into the God's will for a specific situation or into the application of God's word to times in which we live. Such prophetic insight does not have the inherent and permanent authority of those prophets who with the apostles of Christ, provided the foundation of the Church. But continuing prophetic ministry is essential today if the Church is not going to settle down into comfortable conformity to contemporary culture (p. 238).

In 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, we read: *Diokete ten agapen, dzeloute de ta pneumatika, mallonde hina propheteuete, Ho de prophteuete, Ho gar lalon glosse ouk anthropois lalei alla theo. Oudeis gar akouei, pneumarti de lalei musteria; Ho de propheteuon anthropois lalei oikodomen kai paraklesin kai paramuthian. Ho lalon glosse heauton oikodomei. Ho de propheteuon ekklesian oikodomei. Thelo de pantas humas lalein glossais, mallon de hina*

propheteuete, meidzon de ho propheteuon he ho lalon glossais ektos ei me diermeneue, hina he ekklesia oikodomen labe (Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with the spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the Church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the Church may be edified).

It is true we are looking at 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, but the major concern on Paul's heart throughout the Chapter is the edification of the Church at Corinth (vv.5, 12, 26). Elsewhere, he has urged upon the Corinthians to use the right materials in building properly on 'the Church's one foundation... Jesus Christ her Lord' (1 Cor. 3:10-16). He has also stressed the irreplaceable power of love as uniquely conducive to such edification, rather than knowledge on which the Corinthians laid so much emphasis. The thrust of Paul's teaching is that their corporate worship should strengthen, not split or shake the building. Now let us look at the above passage, 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 and see Paul's teaching on the gift of prophecy and the results the gift will bring in the local Church when it is properly used.

First, Paul teaches that the purpose of the gift of prophecy is *oikodomen* (building up) a Christian congregation. Paul labours fervently to build up the Church. Any word of prophecy which weakens or shakes the faith of others is to be abjectly rejected. Prophecy must always be received in the warm fellowship of God's people and not in the cold comfort of personal arrangement. It is a pity that what is obtainable in some Churches in Africa is what may be termed as "spiritualized prophetic manipulation". This is a tendency whereby someone sails under false spiritual means to influence his or her victims for his or her own selfish ends under the name of personal prophecy. That is why Paul insists that the gift is intended for the edification of the whole Church and does not enjoy the monopoly of few Christians. This obnoxious use of the gift can be checked as the gift is encouraged and exercised in the gathered life of God's people.

Second, Paul teaches that another purpose of the gift is *parakalesin* (exhorting and encouraging) the weak in the Church. This, shares the same root as the word John used in John 14: 16 to describe the Holy Spirit as *Paraclete*, Advocate and Counsellor. A cross section of Churches in Africa reveals some people who are discontented and dissatisfied about their present condition of life, some are depressed and discouraged while some have their dreams and aspirations never realised. Persistent efforts and struggles seem to yield little as critical self-examinations show nothing but failures and incompetency. Some preachers are adding insult to the injury by stressing the already stressed up people and by milking them financially through their manipulative prophetic preaching. Personal prophecies are given to some already devastated people and thereby leaving them more devastated. Such prophecy like, "you are going to embark on a fatal road accident if you embark on your journey", "you are going to die in two weeks time", "you are going to die in a plane crash unless you sow your car as a seed to avert such a disastrous crash", "you are going to suffer loss of money, car and all that", and the list seems to be unending. But Paul teaches that within the Christian fellowship everyone should find something to cheer the heart and give strength for action.

Third, the purpose of the gift of prophecy is *paramuthian* (consoling and cheering up) the broken hearted within the assembly of God. It has the import of allaying the fears of God's people as well as enabling them to be calm under the pressures of life. It helps to calm the tempest and storms of fear, anxiety and despair. Bittlenger (cited by Prior, 1993) thinks that it helps us rest in the presence of JesusIt leads away from the hectic bustle of daily affairs, away from the restlessness of this life, into the great peace of God" (p. 244).

If what Paul has taught above is the impact prophecy can have on the Church, little wonder, then that Paul wants every Christian to desire such a gift. What then does Paul mean by the gift of prophecy? Mbach (2000) thinks that “the gift of prophecy is the Spirit-given ability to expound publicly the truth (of a predictive nature as well as explanatory) from God in order to exhort, edify or console believers, and convince non-believers of God’s truth” (p.63). Prior (1993) explains that “the gift of prophesying is basically the explanation of the present in the light of the revelation of God” (p. 235). He thinks that the closet term we would call it today is “expository preaching”, unfolding the mind of God and applying it to daily struggles of life. Barclay (2009) collaborates this idea when he writes that the gift of prophecy has nothing to do with foretelling the future but everything to do with forthtelling the will and the message of God and that preaching very nearly gives the meaning. Also, Green (1982) defines the gift of prophecy as “a word from the Lord through a member of his body, inspired by his spirit and given to build up the rest of the body” (p. 74). It has to be stated over and over again that this gift may be an inspired speech but must not be placed on the same par with the original apostles and the Old Testament prophets. Morris (1985) points out that “it is often difficult to be sure whether a man claiming to be a prophet should be believed or not. Every believer must ‘test the spirits’ (1 Jn. 4:1), because false prophets were many” (p. 169). Paul is aware of this, and that is why he included *diakriseis pneumatou* (discerning of spirits) as one of the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10). This could refer to the Spirit-given ability to discern the presence and the nature of evil spirits in a person, place or situation. Prior (1993) thinks that in a broad sense, it probably means an ability to recognize from what source any purported spiritual manifestation comes. He notes that of such source the bible seems to identify three: the Holy Spirit, the human spirit and evils spirits. This stresses the importance of the exercise of this gift within the worshipping life of the body of Christ. However, it is possible for someone who is gifted in discerning ministry to slip into the error of seeing evil spirit in any unusual situation or behaviour. If we read Paul correctly, we would understand that this gift is made available to any member of the body and are distributed by the Spirit in the worshipping community to meet a particular need.

The gift of prophecy is mostly abused today as majority of Africans mistake divination and soothsaying for prophecy and as still, some of Africans are interested in knowing something about their future or the reasons behind their present predicament. More often than not, some self-acclaimed prophets mistake their own wishes or impressions on their minds as the will of God or ascribe to the Holy Spirit an inspiration which originates from Satan or from natural dislikes. Abogunrin (1991) opines that “Africa most probably has the largest number of prophets, many of whom are cheats and ravenous wolves in long robes” (p. 132). A lot of unutterable things go on in the Church cathedrals in the name of “Thus says the Lord”. Sequel to these abuses, a lot of Christians are yet to understand that prophetic revelations are not infallible given that a lot depends on the temperament of the prophet in question. It is for this reason that God also gives the gift of discernment. They are the men who can discern and unmask evil spirits or lying spirits which imitate the Holy Spirit that set out to lead the faithful Christians astray. Unfortunately, in Africa, these men who are to act as checks on the excesses of such men have a thankless ministry given that they are often referred to as ‘dead woods’ or ‘demon-possessed’ by the so-called prophets or prophetesses.

Placing the Prophetic Ministry in the Right Perspective

The prophets are integral part of the revelation process whose climax is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken by His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). They prepared the way for the Way, summoning people to repentance and announcing the advent of the Redeemer. The apostles affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke

about. They showed how his atoning death and mighty resurrection fulfilled the promises in the prophetic writings (Acts 2:22-36; 1 Cor.15:3-4).

The prophets are not revelation robots. The Spirit of God neither obliterates their personalities nor renders them oblivious to the conditions around them. They speak of their own particular set of circumstances and their own individual styles. Yet no prophetic Scripture originated in the fertile imagination of any prophet. As Peter notes: “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). That is why Paul affirms the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament writings, of which the prophets form so vital a part: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3: 16-17).

The Old Testament Prophets are the mouthpiece of God. Through them, we hear the vibrant voice of God; when they speak, it is God speaking through them. To hear them is to hear from God; and to disobey them, is to disobey God. However, the focal point of biblical revelation is Jesus Christ. To him do the prophets and apostles bear witness: “These are the Scriptures that testify about Me” (Jn. 5:39) but in “these last days, God spoke to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). Whoever sees Jesus has seen God. To hear Jesus is to hear from God; and to disobey Jesus is to disobey God. The first Apostles of Christ spoke God’s very word. To hear them is to hear from God, and to disobey them is tantamount to disobedience to God. As with the ministry of the first apostles, so with the prophets who with them became the foundation of the Church and this is exceptionally their prerogative. The gift of prophecy today is nothing other than a word from the Lord through a member of his body, inspired by his spirit and given to build up the rest of the body which is majorly forth-telling than foretelling. This gift may be an inspired speech and the gifted must not be placed on the same par with the original apostles and the Old Testament prophets. The impact of the gift of prophecy on the Church is for comfort, edification and exhortation. In anticipation of excesses and manipulative tendencies of the enemy, the gift of discernment is given to checkmate them.

Conclusion

The first Apostles and the Old Testament Prophets command equal divine and authoritative footing. God spoke to both groups, giving them his once-for-all and irrevocable explanations of his actions. Whatever, Paul means in encouraging the gift of prophecy, he does not imply that any Christian can be on a par with those original prophets and first apostles as organs of divine revelation. Consequently, any subsequent manifestation of the gift must be submitted to the authoritative teaching of the original apostles and prophets as contained in the Canon of the Scripture. The gift of prophecy today is intended for the edification of the whole Church, not so much of an individual Christian. While false prophets are regular features of the living Church of God in all ages, the Scriptures never cease to alert us to the inevitability of their existence, popularity, fraudulence and eventual judgment. As a means of checkmating them, the Lord provides his own with the discernment of Spirit. To avert comfortable conformity to the contemporary African culture, the Church must not relapse her prophetic ministry.

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