

"WHAT ABOUT IMPRESSIONS?"

(excerpt from *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Are Important*)
(Thomas R. Schreiner)

We have seen that there are decisive reasons for saying that New Testament prophecy, just like Old Testament prophecy, is inerrant and infallible. What most call prophecy in churches today, in my judgment, isn't the New Testament gift of prophecy, for New Testament prophecy is inerrant. We should not, however, conclude that what happens in charismatic churches today is demonic. It is better to characterize what is happening today as the sharing of impressions rather than prophecy. God may impress something on a person's heart and mind, and he may use such impressions to help others in their spiritual walk. It is a matter of definition; what some people call prophecies are actually impressions, where someone senses that God is leading them to speak to someone or to make some kind of statement about a situation.

The word impression is a better description than the word prophecy here because impressions may be a mixture of truth and error. Sometimes, in a most remarkable way they might be completely right! God may lay something on someone's heart, and it may be exactly right and exactly what a person needs to hear. Sometimes the impression may be quite astonishing and clearly miraculous, though this is quite rare. On the other hand, sometimes impressions are totally wrong, and it is evident that the words shared are neither helpful nor true. And some impressions may be a mixture of truth and error. Those whose impressions are wrong aren't false prophets. After all, in my view, impressions aren't prophecies anyway! There is a danger, of course, of relying too much on impressions, and I will say more about that shortly.

The difference between cessationists¹ and continuationists² is in some ways insignificant at the practical level when it comes to prophecy, for what continuationists call prophecy, cessationists call impressions. As a cessationist, I affirm that God may speak to his people through impressions. And there are occasions where impressions are startlingly accurate.

Is the debate on prophecy, then, just semantic? I don't think so, for it is important to accurately define terms that are in Scripture. In my estimation, what modern-day charismatics practice isn't the same thing as the gift of prophecy in Scripture, and it is important to have scriptural clarity on the nature of prophecy, especially since the charismatic view opens up the church to the danger of false prophets. Furthermore, many charismatics don't have the careful



¹ A "cessationists" believes the miraculous gifts have ceased to be normative.

² A "continuationists" believes that the miraculous gifts continue to be normative.

reservations and qualifications in defining prophecy that we find in excellent scholars like Wayne Grudem and Sam Storms, and these less careful charismatics sometimes use their so-called prophecies in a way that endangers the final and sole authority of Scripture. The claim to have a prophecy can be used as a club or even a form of abuse over those who are naïve or immature. Impressions should not, therefore, be confused with prophecy.

God can use impressions for our good, but they aren't the same thing as prophecy and need to be distinguished from prophecy. *They can't be of great importance because Scripture doesn't address them.*³ It doesn't follow that impressions are useless, for we share many thoughts with others as believers that aren't the actual words of God in conversations, in small groups, and even in larger meetings. We don't dismiss the value of such insights even if they are not inspired words. We are reminded, however, that we should not overestimate impressions, and that we need to be careful so that people don't rely on them. Jonathan Edwards rightly warns,

I would therefore entreat the people of God to be very cautious how they give heed to such things. I have seen them fail in very many instances; and know by experience that impressions being made with great power, and upon the minds of true saints, yea, eminent saints; and presently after, yea, in the midst of, extraordinary exercises of grace and sweet communion with God, and attended with texts of Scripture strongly impressed on the mind, are no sure signs of there being revelations from heaven: for I have known such impressions [to] fail, and prove vain by the event, in some instances attended with all these circumstances. I know that they leave the sure word of prophecy (the Bible), that God has given us to be a light shining in a dark place, to follow such impressions and impulses, leave the guidance of the pole star to follow a Jack-with-a-lantern⁴. And no wonder therefore that sometimes they are led a dreadful dance, and into woeful extravagancies.

Edwards wisely warns us about the danger of relying on impressions. Some people are quite confident by nature and confuse their own certainty with the leading of the Spirit. We see that God may use impressions, but they should not be the norm in our lives and we should not rely on them for guidance.

³ emphasis added

⁴ A "Jack-with-a-lantern" is a designation for a family of fairy-beings characterized by their fiery appearance and their tendency to lead nighttime wayfarers astray.