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## **Prophetic Authority**

### **Introduction**

Often in scripture God will speak powerfully and authoritatively through a prophet to bring a needed message into a ministry situation. A prophetic word may be just what is required to catalyze an important ministry project or to launch people into the purposes of God. This word-based demonstration of God's presence captures and convicts the hearts of the hearers and provides the spiritual fuel needed to get things moving.

### **What is Prophetic Authority?**

**Definition:** Prophetic authority is a form of spiritual authority expressed via a revelatory power base - the gift of prophecy.

Prophetic authority occurs when a prophetically gifted person delivers an authoritative and accurate word of God into a situation. The prophetic message has authority because as a spokesmen for God, the word is backed by the full authority of God himself.

**Why prophetic authority is a powerful leadership tool.** - The purpose of this article is to consider the role of prophetic authority from a leadership perspective. To start out, let's look at a few Biblical examples of ways God uses prophetic authority as a powerful leadership tool.

### **God uses prophetic authority to...**

- Mobilize people for large scale works of God – Moses
- Appoint new leadership – Samuel (both Saul and David)
- Provide for leadership transitions – Samuel
- Correct leaders who sin – Nathan (David after sinning with Bathsheba).
- Confront leaders who begin trusting more in ministry resources than God for success – Gad (When Satan incited David to count the fighting men) 1Chronicles 21.
- Call to account leaders who forget that leadership involves caring for people – Ezekiel (to the shepherds who cared for themselves but not the sheep)
- Help leaders understand God's hand in history – Daniel
- Jumpstart a stalled out ministry project – Haggai (rebuilding the temple).
- Bolster morale during difficult ministry tasks – Zechariah, Haggai (to those rebuilding the temple)
- Call leaders to account when compromising God's standards – Malachi (to the priest who accepted blemished sacrifices)
- Prepare people for the coming of the Messiah –John the Baptist.

- Remind leaders of the cost of following Christ - Agabus (to Paul before arriving in Jerusalem)

**The Nature of Prophetic Authority** - The authority resides primarily in the message, and secondarily in the messenger. The prophetic message carries authority because it comes from God, and prophetic messenger, as the bearer of the message and one sent by God, by association shares in this authority.

**The constraint of prophetic authority** – Because the authority resides first in the message and not the messenger, prophetic authority comes with some constraints. The prophets authority is limited by the desire of God to communicate through him or her. Some prophets had long careers and were consistently used by God over a long period of time – like Samuel, Jeremiah. Some prophets appear once, are used powerfully, and then are not heard from again – such as the man of God from Judah who delivered a confrontative message against Jeroboam as he stood ready to offer a sacrifice on the altar. (1Kings 13) In that case we do not even know the prophet's name.

### **Similarity with other forms of Spiritual Authority**

Prophetic authority is similar to other forms of spiritual authority<sup>1</sup>, here are 3 ways.

- 1) **Response to Prophetic Authority is Response to God Himself.** In a sense, the prophet is a middleman, simply delivering the message. Like other forms of spiritual authority – The accountability ultimately occurs between the source of the message – God and the recipient of the message – the listener
- 2) **Confirmed and Defended by God** - And like other forms of spiritual authority, the leader, in this case the prophet, doesn't need to defend the prophetic message. God will confirm the message and do any defending that needs to happen.
- 3) **External, and Internal Component** - Prophetic authority, like spiritual authority, has both an internal and external component, ultimately, spiritual authority is conferred by God on a leader, but it is also something that can, and should, be recognized by followers.

**Example – Samuel** - Samuel is a good example of someone who operated with prophetic authority. His prophetic authority was both:

**Confirmed by God** – “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.” 1 Samuel 3:19

**Recognized by the people** – “ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.” 1 Samuel 3:20

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<sup>1</sup> See the article on spiritual authority.

**Speaking Truth to Power - The interaction between Prophetic Authority and Positional Authority** – Often God sent prophets to confront leaders who had gone astray. Prophets were the ones who boldly spoke truth to power. This is likely due to the reality that the prophets were the only ones with enough authority to confront powerful leaders –like the kings of Israel. The reason they had authority was because they came to that earthly king, in the name and authority of the Great King – God Himself. God would often accompany their words by a demonstration of power – hands that shriveled, shadows that went backwards, altars that split, leprosy, fire from heaven, drought. Some kings repented and responded. Others refused to respond, like one king of Israel who acknowledged,

"There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad." 2 Chronicles 18:7.

**Implications for Today's Leaders** - It's not unusual for strong leaders, especially task oriented leaders, to find themselves in the same place as many of the Old Testament kings, with little functional accountability. For the leader with a heart for God, prophetic correctives can curb abuses of power and bring the leader in line with God's purposes. Leaders should welcome those willing to speak the truth, even when it's hard to hear.

**Sometimes Prophetic Authority is welcomed sometimes it isn't.**

Not all people willingly recognize or favorably respond to prophetic authority. This is equally true in the case of both leaders and followers. Many in fact not only disobey the message, but persecuted the messenger. Surely not an incentive for those responding to a prophetic call. The Bible has plenty examples of prophets who faced rejection when speaking to the people they were sent to serve. Old Testament examples abound, including both Joseph and Jeremiah who share the honor of being thrown in a pit for their prophecies. The most obvious New Testament example is Christ who is crucified by leaders who have "no room" for His words (John 8:37). Speaking of negative receptions, Old Testament prophets are among those mentioned in Hebrews 11 who

"...faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." Hebrews 11:36-38

**Why do people respond positively to prophetic authority?** In any given case, a number of factors likely contribute. But at its root the reason for a positive response might be simply stated as this: Due to either the prior or present work of the Holy Spirit. The heart of the hearer is obediently sensitized to respond favorably to God's message through the prophet.

**Why do people not respond positively to prophetic authority?** Likewise when a negative response occurs, a combination of factors might be pointed to. But ultimately the problem could be summarized as this: The heart of the hearer has been hardened against the work of

the Holy Spirit and in such state does not respond positively to the grace of God extended through that prophetic message.

**God's promise of prophetic authority for the God-sent prophet**– Biblical prophets faced many challenges, some external – from listeners who did not want to hear from God, some internal – their own fears and insecurities. In speaking for God the leader finds themselves in a mismatched and awkward spot. In one combined moment of ministry you have a powerful and authoritative message – the prophecy, presented a very human and often vulnerable person – the prophet. Many of the listeners in the Bible only saw the prophet at the moment of delivering the message – which often appeared to be done with great confidence. But the Bible gives us a behind the scenes look at the human side of the prophets. We see that prophets ran from God– Jonah, and become discouraged, even suicidal – Elijah.

Considering the emotional and physical risk when speaking for God, it's no wonder that from time to time, God provides promises to prophetic spokespeople to assure them that they can expect God's authoritative backing when delivering the message.

#### **A sampling of God's promises to prophetic spokespeople of His full backing**

Person the promise was given to	Scripture reference	Scriptural Promise
Moses	Exodus 4:15	"... I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do."
Isaiah	Isa. 58:1	"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.
Jeremiah	Jer. 1:19	They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.
Luke 12:11	Jesus' Disciples	"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."

**Conclusion** – Prophetic authority plays an important leadership role in the Bible. Leaders and followers alike need to hear clearly from God. When the prophetic spokesman sounds the trumpet clearly, the result is often mobilization for ministry.

**Note** - The functional equivalent of prophetic occurs in the New Testament when leaders who have the gift of prophecy hear from God and speak into situations. This prophetic function occurs both in itinerant and church-based ministries. The qualities describing Old Testament prophetic authority occur almost identically with the leaders use of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament.