What is real prophetic teaching?

This is an attempt to identify and describe prophetic teaching and how it differs from the average sermon or teaching session being consumed in your average church. As requested I have also taken the opportunity to expand on some previous short comments on this subject.

Prophetic Teaching is not the gift of prophesy was given for the whole church (that provides encouragement for the church). It can not be summed up as “the ministry of a prophet”, although prophetic teaching can only be achieved on a regular basis by a prophet capable of prophetic teaching (see "ministry or gift" to clarify the difference between these).

First of all, not every prophet can teach, and observation tells me that less than half are capable of teaching prophetic stuff with any degree of quality and flexibility. There are a variety of prophetic types in the Bible (see "Types") and though we may all do a bit of sharing/teaching that does not mean all prophets have a prophetic teaching gift. Some tell stories, some tell jokes, some tell really bad jokes, and some can't remember jokes at all, in fact we're a bit like real people, but I won't push that too far. I have used the category of prophet and teacher from the article "Types" as a starting point, as it is very appropriate here.

The Prophet and Teacher

Samuel, Moses, Jesus

(1 Sam 3:21) The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. (4:1) And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

(Num 5:4) The Israelites did ... just as the LORD had instructed Moses

(Mt 7:29) … because he (Jesus) taught as one who had authority...

First of all, as often happens, it is easier to clear some of the deck by identifying many of the things that Prophetic Teaching is not.

Prophetic Teaching IS NOT

a) It is not teaching that ignores or pays lip service to Scripture

If you have heard a lot of sermons you must have heard some (and perhaps many) that appear to have little connection to the Scripture that was read. Some people are regular offenders at this. There may be a superficial link, but the preacher is far more interested in the points listed on the sermon outline than the Scripture. Of course even worse is a teaching sermon where a Scripture is read but not used or even alluded to. At times like this it is better if the preacher does not pretend any link and openly admits it is a personal revelation.

b) It is not teaching conveniently downloaded

It is not teaching conveniently downloaded from the web because you need something in a hurry and "hey this could be exiting!" - (this site is of course acceptable *!* Hmm - actually if you try teaching this stuff you are almost guaranteed to get into hot water). If you're regularly listening to recycled sermons, even if they are freshened up a bit, your pastor probably does not have the gift of prophetic teaching.

This method of operating is more of an anything or any program will do position, which is something a prophetic teacher can never do (they cant live with it, it makes them feel dirty). Of
course you may not be aware how many/much of the sermon(s) are downloaded, or even if he/she is downloading all their sermons (I once knew someone that did David Pawson sermons for six months straight).

c) It does not use any convenient Scripture as an excuse or platform

It does not use any convenient Scripture as an excuse or platform to make a prophetic revelation. It may be prophetic revelation, but it is not prophetic teaching.

Most pastors like to share a bit of personal revelation from time to time but very little of this is either new, or prophetic; it's just sharing stuff that is personally interesting, and everybody needs to do that.

I would like to be nice about this, but the fact is, most of the "revelation" I have heard spoken from the pulpit over the years was simply rubbish. Even when spoken, it was either old hat, or seemed unlikely to be true, and time has certainly proved almost all these assertions to be false predictions or false teaching, or simply a lot of imagination. They would be accurately described as very inaccurate, misleading, and nothing more than odd speculation that should have been dismissed long before it was spoken. The fact that it was normally spoken by a pastor was often exasperating to me. Even more odd to me is that it's very rare (a bit like hens teeth) for a pastor to publicly acknowledge their mistake. Anyway the point I suppose I am making here is that real prophetic teachers are by definition some of the very few that have a very high accuracy rate. To put this in perspective, I personally consider that anything under 90% is a bad batting average.

d) Prophetic teaching does not misquote or misrepresent Scripture

Some of the teaching I have heard that claims to be prophetic was actually misrepresenting the Scripture it was based on. Needless to say, God does not inspire us to misrepresent Scripture; that is just human error plain and simple. Fundamental errors like this are not uncommon are really embarrassing because they make it impossible to accept the message as prophetic, it also becomes difficult to accept that the person is really as prophetic as they like to think, and it's further embarrassing because most of the audience doesn't notice the problem (and may not even notice if they replay the message later. The fact that something sounds reasonable at face value doesn't make it accurate. Included in this section is the fact that prophetic teaching does not ignore or dismiss the inspiring work of the church fathers.

e) It does not put on an elaborate show that distracts from the message itself

These days, people expect a bit of "bang for their buck" in the form of drama, jokes, live music, etc. Unless this is inspired, it can look very tired (prophetic teaching is not boring either). Even if a presentation is good, it can still detract from the message. Also, although an excellent presentation may be entertaining, challenging, thought provoking and even inspiring, I have not yet seen one that could strictly be called prophetic because the prophetic bit is in the message not the presentation.

f) It is not a high powered pep talk

You know – the sort where you cleverly select a theme, a couple of stories, some Scripture, a few quotes from famous people and interweave them all together. This formula may provide a very interesting and enjoyable sermon; at times it may almost be like a beautiful well crafted work of art, but it is just a technique, in itself it is not prophetic teaching (and may not even be teaching).

g) It is not clever for cleverness sake (or ear tickling)

Jesus often revealed the simple purpose behind a Scripture or law. He did not, as some I have heard, create revelations that intricately link numbers with special promises no one has noticed before, and say it provides untold blessing if only the listener can grasp the freedom offered by coming out for life changing prayer, etc. Having now heard quite a few of these fancy sermons, I can honestly say I don't remember one that was worth a cracker! It may have helped boost the offering and put bums on seats, but no matter what the preacher said at the time, it was clever
teaching, not prophetic teaching (e.g. The kingly anointing produces a 5 times blessing (inc. financial) rhubarb, rhubarb, etc. ...).

**h) It does not sound like an advertising travel log**

It does **not** sound like an advertising travel log (with future dates and venues), and does **not** ask for financial contributions, because our Father already knows what we need. Once you suggest or ask for money the element of faith has been removed. For a real prophet, the two things that can not be compromised are faith and purity of the message.

**i) It is not teaching that ignores the Bible**

It is **not** teaching that develops an atmosphere where people don’t bother using a Bible or don’t normally bring them. I noticed an example this a few years ago in a medium sized Pentecostal church well known for its acceptance and frequent use of the prophetic. Almost none of the few hundred present seemed to either have a bible or be using one at the relevant moments, it was amazing (and I’m not speaking against people using electronic/PDA type Bibles – because that’s what I use all the time).

**j) It’s not standard teaching**

To finish off this section I might as well state the obvious and say it is **not** standard teaching. Some teachers are very good but that does not make them prophetic. Those that are bad but still insist on hogging most of the sermon slots may be considered prosthetic (ha-ha).

**IT IS**

**a) It is God’s love, mercy & justice**

It **is** God’s love, mercy & justice revealed by the accurate revealing of God’s purpose or intention, whether that is an easy, or a very hard message. Unfortunately I need to qualify this, because I have also heard many urgent prophetic and sometimes stirring messages that would have been accepted as genuine, except that when I reflected on them they seemed to be tainted by another agenda or two. At this point it is often necessary to throw out at least half of the message. Prophetic teaching simply does not willingly or subconsciously compromise God’s mercy and justice.

**b) It is jealous for the purity of God’s word and message**

The message is far more important than the person that carries it. Achieving the purpose of God is the reason for having the ministry, all other long term or personal purposes are of secondary importance. Therefore the purity of the message and delivering the action required in the manner requested without compromise is what is expected. Of course it is impossible for any prophet to be detached from the message, and it is a ridiculous thing to do. The purity of the message requires a zealous nature (Jn 2:17), this is an important for all prophets. Contrary to popular opinion it is possible to be zealous and also have a balanced opinion. What the purity of the message really requires is the removal of inner distractions, ambition and personal profit. An ambitious person will normally allow their personal agenda to show through and taint the message no matter how prophetic they are. Many think this is acceptable, but I’m sure God does not.

**c) It is a prophetic teacher accurately using Scripture**

It **is** a prophetic teacher **accurately** using Scripture as a platform to make a prophetic point. Other things like life experience will be included, but Scripture is the foundation for all accurate revelation, and the springboard for all that follows. I have heard a number of prophetic people that have a great deal of difficulty when it comes to accurately teaching scripture. Even if they give seminars and receive favorable reviews, and do a lot of good, these people are not prophetic
teachers. A prophetic teacher believes in achieving an accurate harmony between Scripture, the sermon message, and God’s prophetic message today.

d) It is based in humility

It is based in humility, but still has the ability cut deep and exposes hidden motivations. In other words, even though the message may be delivered gently and with sensitivity, prophetic teaching does not believe in a "politically correct," "bless only bless," or "ignore it and hope it goes away" approach. It can sometimes be uncomfortable and mistaken for criticism because the truth is not always comfortable. Comfortable approaches have become standard procedure and result in many important things never being said. As Huxley once said, "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored," and I’m sure all the Biblical prophets would have said a loud Amen to that.

It is based in humility, which is why Jesus spoke the truth even when people hated it. It is why Jesus did not mind most of his followers leaving him. Moses was called a very humble man. Many leadership seminars are based on the example of Moses, but I honestly don’t believe the people considered him great leadership material, I’m sure they considered him reliable, honest and holy, but how many times did they try to get rid of him as leader? Just like today, the controllers and those that like to be led “strongly” (always the majority of the people) tried many times to remove him, so they must have considered him a weak leader. Today its hard to believe he would be elected for the job. However, God did consider him a great leader because God sees the heart and what we are capable of. God knows that real prophetic teachers need an inner strength to carry out divine purpose, not just promote.

e) It is teaching that's also likely to discuss general future trends

It is teaching that's also likely to discuss general future trends and perhaps some specific data in future and current events. Because warning is a common task of all prophets it is rare for a prophetic type to miss an opportunity to say something they consider important. These warnings and challenges may or may not be prophetic, but on their own they are not prophetic teaching. It is only when they are harmoniously integrated with a broader message that may achieve that.

I would like to explain a mystery. The fact is, the longer you are a prophet, the more you enjoy the occasions you are 20 percent wrong or completely wrong! For the first ten years or so it is irritating to be wrong, it affects your faith and relationship with God. However for those that continue to learn, correct themselves, and persevere, there eventually comes a time when this turns around. Certainly the implications on the international stage are much higher but it is more than just that. For me it is like a mathematical equation of life, and the elements are revelation, prophetic faith and humanity. Sometimes the more serious the revelation, and the more solid your prophetic faith, the more your humanity longs and hopes you will be proved wrong.

Moses, Samuel, and Jesus (again)

These prophets developed a love of teaching. This was not restricted to analytical teaching alone. A variety of methods were used. Perhaps the best way of describing prophetic teaching is to discuss the variety of purposes or reasons it is received.

Corrective Teaching

Prophetic teaching in action often takes the form of corrective teaching, because that is sometimes the intention. The prophetic teacher is like someone that finds a painting, takes it to an expert (God) and learns that there is another far more valuable work of art underneath, which has been painted over. In this sense the prophetic teacher is like a painter and restorer – 1000’s of people can paint or think they can paint, some are good, some just think they are good, others know they are not very good but still enjoy it; a prophetic teacher is like a good painter that is also a restorer, and there are not many good restorers. The art of restoring requires much patience
and attention to detail. The task of cleaning off the surface and uncovering the masterpiece may be very time consuming. Anyone can attack a dirty floor with a scrubbing brush, but an old canvas will be destroyed with this approach, it may take many months to reveal a masterpiece, the process can be tedious, but the end result is very satisfying. The restorer strives to maintain the unique quality of the original masterpiece so others will appreciate it (I felt the urge to teach in parables).

It is a pity that not all are flexible enough to appreciate a well restored masterpiece, many prefer things to stay just as they are whether that is good or bad. Please note, I do not believe in encouraging people to promote alternative ideas just for the sake of being clever, these ideas may indeed be very clever, but of no earthly use if they distract and confuse. Over time, alternative ideas are the very things that cover, obscure, and confuse the image on the canvas.

The mark of a prophetic teacher is that they feel obligated to explain part of the original purpose or intention of the teaching, and then point out the strange way it is currently being applied. In doing this they highlight the vital purpose for the Scripture and remove the mystery, you could say they use the past to point to a more correct future. For example, when referring to regulations enforcing the honoring of parents, Jesus was able to point out how the regulations had lost all contact with the original Scripture, he revealed the intention and compared that with the current religious regulations that allowed people to avoid their duty of care allowing the opposite to happen (Mt 15:4). In other words prophetic teaching is not just an ability to look up a dictionary and explain Greek.

The prophetic teachers (listed again below) received much of their prophetic revelation by the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scripture. Even Moses did this as he was receiving and writing some of it, yet they were all different.

**Moses** spent regular time in the inner sanctuary of the tent presence of the Lord (Num 5:4). It says of Moses that he spoke to God face to face, and was responsible for writing much of the law. He taught what God said even if he did not like it. You grasp the impact of this when you consider the extreme detail that was required and recorded for all the Temple (tent) construction and furnishings. I have no doubt he spent many hours contemplating the implications of what he received and wrote.

**Samuel** grew up in the Temple ministering to the Lord (1 Sam 3:21). God spoke to him clearly, in fact it was so clear and audible to him that the first three times he thought it was a human voice. Most people just smile at this without absorbing the implications; however as a prophet I appreciate what a precious gift this was. If this was standard for Samuel then it is no wonder he was so effective as a prophetic teacher. It is no wonder he sometimes became frustrated when people preferred human opinion or human timing to God's crystal clear message. When this was combined to his study of the law the results would have been amazing. Bearing this in mind I'm glad Samuel is not alive today, because he would often be reduced to tears at how difficult it is for a real prophetic word to be accepted today.

**Jesus** (Mt 7:29) is slightly different, but you would still have to say he was intimately aware of:

1. The holy writings and their implications
2. The Father's intentions and presence
3. The Father's voice and always responded to it appropriately
4. The motivations of mankind and was not deceived

Any study on the life of these teachers will reveal that they loved to teach (what a surprise!) and no doubt would have been frustrated during periods it was not possible to teach. It was not the only thing they enjoyed but it was one of the things that defined their expression of God. If you deny a prophetic teacher the opportunity to teach they simply suffer spiritually on the inside. These days when prophetic teaching is often discouraged in church because of its uncomfortable or confrontational nature we thank God for the internet where for the moment at least it is possible to speak straight.
In contrast much of what passes for ‘prophetic teaching’ today fails the critical test because it falls for some of the following common errors:

1) It reveals political bias and is cultural motivated
2) It tries much too hard to be politically correct and avoid offence
3) It often appears to have a partial focus on earning money (You know the sort of thing: Call this number! Give Now! or Come Forward!)
4) It often appears to promote whatever the latest religious fad is, rather than encourage real faith (one of the codes for this is a prophetic call to release the "whatever" blessing if you ...). I realize this is a self promotional technique that often succeeds in putting bums on seats, but it actually replaces any real prophetic input with a superficial formula and is a distraction from the message (and in the long term it people off!)
5) Another thing that turns people off is the glossy advertizing. Some never make it past the books, CD's and glossy brochures to hear about the real Jesus. Am I just sounding off? No, I have personally talked to a seeker that turned around, walked out and never came back; even though he was desperately seeking at the time, he just couldn't accept the commercial approach to faith (Answer? - Simple, don't put the stuff anywhere near the entrance!).
6) Today's 'prophetic teaching' often appears centered on what the prophet is doing (a subtle - where he's traveling self promotion) as much as the work of the Lord. E.g. I have noticed that Elisha tried to do his prophetic work as anonymously as possible, but Gehazi (the could have been prophet) ended up traveling and making a living out of telling stories about prophets (including Elisha, 2 Ki 8:4); and God even found a way to turn this to some good - another one of God's mysterious ways.
7) It can put the emphasis on trying to resurrect aspects of our fallen humanity. E.g. Striving, self effort and good works can tend to replace faith. A recent error is to concentrate on encouraging weekly testimonies on financial breakthrough. This may be useful but is not prophetic at all, it just links conveniently into our common human obsession about money and getting paid enough. If we concentrate on something we might fix it; so it has some value, but prophetically it has very little value!
8) It can be more motivated by the newspaper and internet opinions than the voice of God.
9) Or any of the "is not's", as listed earlier.

Therefore prophetic teaching is not the gift of prophesy that was given for the whole church, because it is a gift available to anybody in the body and provides encouragement for the church (and certainly not a sermon length prophesy). It should also not be confused with the ministry of a prophet, though there may be many similarities. It is the ministry of a prophet capable of prophetic teaching (see "ministry or gift").