

TC Ministries

Equipping the Church for the Work of Ministry

PROPHECY

Seeking it, Receiving it, Responding to it

What Christians Believe Series

Tony Case



Is prophecy
really necessary?



What should I do if
someone has a personal
prophecy for me?



Is all prophecy
accurate?



If you would like to know more
about this topic, or have any
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PROPHETS AND THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

The New Testament refers to both the **Gift of Prophecy**, a gift of the Spirit that all may aspire to (1 Cor 14:1), and the **Office of the Prophet**, which carries with it much more responsibility, being an Ascension Gift Ministry (Eph 4:11) whom Paul says are a 'gift' to the church.

Personal prophetic words are supported by Scripture, particularly when they come from recognised leaders in the church. Such people will have been released into the prophetic ministry, or operate under the recognised mantle and office of a Prophet, and should therefore have a track record of both accuracy and accountability. If, however, there is any doubt, you should check with the pastor or leadership team.

Prophecy Requires Wisdom

The gifts of the Holy Spirit can be used wisely or foolishly, which may come as a great surprise to those who have had little experience in this realm. From even a cursory reading of the first book of Corinthians we see Paul was dealing with a church that, although alive and vibrant in many ways, was dysfunctional in the area of spiritual gifts. Paul considered their actions and practices inappropriate, in need of some positive, but firm, correction.

Today, we still need to be wise in our use of these powerful and influential gifts God has allowed His children access to.

Personal Prophecy

There are several examples in the New Testament of personal prophecy:

- ◆ Peter received a word for Cornelius in Acts 10:20.
- ◆ The Prophet Agabus warned Paul of his coming arrest in Acts 21:10.
- ◆ Paul gave a prophetic warning about the shipwreck in Acts 27:22, which included instructions on how to save all lives on board.
- ◆ The Prophet Agabus predicted a famine in Acts 11:28 which was a word for the whole church
- ◆ Although not strictly a word of prophecy, Philip received a word from God for the Ethiopian in Acts 8:30.

The context in each of these events was where an individual or group received a prophetic 'word' from a 'prophetic' person for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort (1 Cor 14:3).

A Word of Encouragement

A genuine word of prophecy can be a tremendous source of blessing and encouragement, particularly in times of great need. A word from God, delivered in its season, can be an event which is pivotal to our faith, motivating us to believe God for greater, or even seemingly impossible things (Matt 19:26).

As with all things in God, the potential for misunderstanding and misuse of prophecy exists, and difficulties can arise in several ways.

Godly church leaders will want you to receive everything God has for you. If this includes a special word occasionally, then they want you to receive it, consider it, and allow God to teach and mature you through it.

The purpose of prophecy is not to manipulate, distress or confuse anyone but to build them up through edification, exhortation and consolation. It is wise, therefore, to have biblical guidelines, safeguards and precautions in place when we enter this realm of spiritual gifts, especially when we either desire to give a prophetic word, or desire to receive one for ourselves.

God is perfect, and His Word never fails. However, we are not so perfect. In our eagerness and enthusiasm we can be guilty of misrepresenting God, with potentially serious consequences for both the giver and receiver of prophecy.

True prophecy is a gift from God and still used very effectively by the Holy Spirit today. However, it takes wisdom and a degree of maturity to understand that as well as the genuine article, there is false prophecy and there are false prophets both inside and outside the church. We must learn to discern the difference. To do so we must follow some simple and practical guidelines.

DISTRIBUTION OF PROPHECY

The Prophecy Initiative

1 Cor 12:4-11 teaches that the Holy Spirit distributes His gifts to various individuals as, when and how He chooses. There are different gifts, and the Holy Spirit discharges their allocation within the church with a view to inspiring, encouraging, blessing and consoling His church.

1 Cor 14:1 teaches that we are to pursue love, the primary subject of the previous chapter, yet *earnestly desire* spiritual gifts, *especially* that we might *prophesy*.

So, on one hand the Holy Spirit distributes gifts as He chooses, and on the other we are told to earnestly desire prophecy. This should not be confusing. It is God's desire to bestow gifts upon His children, but our responsibility is to desire them and receive them. If we don't want to prophesy, it is highly likely we won't, regardless of whether it is God's desire to use us in such a manner or not!

Prophecy and Teaching

There is a common misconception among some churches that prophecy and teaching are one and the same thing. This is often promoted by those who struggle with issues surrounding the baptism in the Holy Spirit and other miraculous gifts, such as speaking in tongues or divine healing.

We cannot cover those topics here in any detail other than to say that Prophets and Teachers are both Ascension Gift Ministries (Eph 4:11). Teaching is not mentioned as one of the nine-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit outlined in 1 Cor 12:4-11, however it is gift of grace mentioned in Rom 12:7.

Also, in Rom 12:6-8 prophecy and teaching are mentioned separately. In the original Greek the words are different and have completely different meanings.

EARNESTLY DESIRE PROPHECY

Prophetic Words In The Church

We are taught to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). We are also encouraged to excel in gifts that build up the church, such as prophecy (1 Cor 14:12).

Prophecy, when given to the church body, is meant to build and encourage. (1 Cor 14:4). It is unusual for God to use prophecy for the purposes of revealing sin or bringing a word of discipline. That is more within the realm of the gifts of **Word of Knowledge** or **Discerning of Spirits**. Prophecy is usually uplifting, positive and encouraging.

Certainly, if someone has a tendency to speak only in negative or condemnatory terms, checking that person's authenticity would be in order. Likewise, if a person has no clearly discernible authority structure under which they are accountable, is a cause for concern, no matter how good or relevant their prophecies might sound.

Usually two or three prophecies in a church service are enough, and they should be carefully weighed by the leadership. Paul's instruction in 1 Cor 14:26-29 should not be taken as law, but as a guideline for good order. When the Holy Spirit so chooses, prophecies and tongues and interpretations may exceed this number, but this would be unusual rather than normal practice.

For the sake of order each prophecy should be in turn, and harmonise with the general flow of the meeting. If necessary, particularly where it is the practice of the church, permission to prophesy should be sought from the leadership first.

1 Cor 14:32 teaches us that the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. This means everything can and should be done decently and in order. No one should override another person, for God is a God of order, not confusion (1 Cor 14:33).

This is not to say that the Holy Spirit won't sometimes "take over" a meeting with the church's order of service being put aside. There may or may not be preaching when this happens, and worship may well become the main focus of the service. When the Spirit of God takes control there is a divine order to things, and those in leadership will discern when this is taking place and move aside accordingly.

Personal Prophetic Words

Scripture places a primary concern on testing prophets rather than prophecies, though both are commanded. Caution should always be taken when allowing someone to lay hands on you or give you a 'word' from the Lord. Here are some guidelines which may help if this situation should ever arise:

- ◆ Always have a witness. Never receive a word of prophecy without having someone within earshot who can help confirm that it was indeed from God.
- ◆ Be aware of the credentials of a person wishing to prophesy over you. When visiting another church use common sense and try to be discerning. I have received some very 'off-the-wall' prophecies while visiting other churches over the years, which in my view were not God at all! Be wise, not foolish.
- ◆ Never take prophecy on face value alone. Reserve the right to receive or reject the prophecy. 1 Cor 14:20 teaches us not to be children in our thinking, but mature. I once had a man come to my office and deliver the most awful prophecy you ever heard, predicting the destruction of my business if I did not do what this false prophet was saying. He was surprised and offended when I resolutely rejected his prophecy and proceeded to eject him from my office. My business went from strength to strength over the next few decades until the day I retired, and continues to do so under new family ownership. However this man lost his business, his wife divorced him and he no longer goes to church. Beware of those who would manipulate or abuse you according to their own hidden agenda.

- ◆ Finally, be sensitive in your spirit to the times God will use personal prophecy to encourage, inspire or direct you. Of course, everything must be confirmed by the Word of God and your own inner witness before being taken on board. If necessary, put the prophecy on the shelf until God brings it to pass. Do not try to 'make' prophecies happen. This will only lead to heartache and disappointment.

Some Simple Guidelines

1. Don't stifle or despise prophecy, but always test it (1 Thess 5:19-22).
2. Ensure any prophetic word **always** conforms to Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17).
3. Make sure the prophecy 'rings true' with the 'inner witness' of your own spirit (John 10:2-5).
4. Be cautious of directional prophecy. Predictions, especially concerning times, dates, relationships, etc. are reserved for the most mature and experienced to deliver. Use common sense, and always seek mature counsel before making important, life changing decisions.
5. Wait on God to further clarify and confirm your prophecy. Sometimes a word from the Lord requires prayerful consideration. Pray about what you have received and look to the Bible and those who are mature in the things of God to direct you. Understand that when you receive a revelation about a situation it does not automatically mean you have the power or means to change it. Sometimes a word of prophecy will give you the necessary insight to go deeper into God for an answer which will truly come from heaven.
6. When you are clear on the interpretation, and confident God is speaking to you, then you have only one obligation – to act in faith. Be a doer of the word and not a hearer only, deceiving yourself (Jam 1:22). Cultivate and practise an attitude of 'expectancy', because God will never lie to you or let you down.

IMMATURITY AND CORRECTION - Immature Prophets

Sometimes people will try to use their gifting to gain recognition in the Church. Some may have a genuine desire to be used by God, and some may even be prophetically gifted. A good church will always be far more interested in character than gifting. Whether you are a gifted musician, singer, preacher, prophet or whatever, it is unlikely you will be used as God intends until certain qualities of character, commitment and accountability have been developed, and are obvious, at least to the leadership of the church.

Do not be misled or confused – gifts are gifts. By their very nature they cost nothing. After all, it doesn't take much character to speak in tongues or prophesy. In fact, it sometimes takes more character to **not** prophesy – to hold back, check with God and the church leadership, before delivering your message. If our mouth becomes engaged before our brain does we may well find ourselves in hot water. Not that new people should be discouraged from using their gifts. On the contrary, we should strongly encourage their gifts, and if things don't always come out as expected it still provides a learning experience leading to maturity. We need to be encouraged, not discouraged.

However, it is the qualities of character such as integrity, faithfulness, loyalty, honesty and so on which will endear us to our church and open doors for us to use our gifts in service for the kingdom.

A Word About Correction

There are two aspects to correction. The first is where the deliverer of a prophecy is out of order, or in need of some correction. The other is when the one delivering the prophecy uses it as a method of bringing correction, to either an individual, or the church.

Firstly, it should be noted that bringing correction and discipline are primarily reserved for the pastor or the leadership that hold positions of trust and responsibility. This is not to say that we cannot address situations we find ourselves in that need correcting. However, as far as prophecy is concerned it is for best reserved for those with some maturity experience, who have perhaps had their concerns confirmed by the church leadership.

Secondly, the church is called to work and function as a body in harmony with all of its members, and it is the responsibility of the church leadership to watch over it and keep it healthy (Heb 13:17). Prophecies which are corrective, judgmental, condemnatory or just plain negative are likely be judged as out of order.

Ideally, if such a prophecy can be corrected privately with the individual concerned, and perhaps covering the situation publicly if necessary without embarrassing anyone, it should be done. But if a church has a persistent problem with an individual who refuses to submit, then it may need to be dealt with publicly.

These things happen in all churches from time to time. Having a strong leadership structure and a faithful congregation can help, as is being part of a church that teaches balance and accountability in such matters.

Directional Prophecy

As already mentioned, prophecies which give specific times, dates, or directions regarding life partners, relationships or major life decisions are to be scrutinised to a much greater degree than a prophecy which is more generally intended to bless and encourage people.

Even the most 'gifted' people get things wrong at times. The 'word' given may be accurate, but dates or places specified may be wrong. I know of someone who received a call to the mission field by prophecy. The only problem was that the person delivering what was in all other respects an accurate prophecy was wrong about the actual **country**! Needless to say some pain and confusion resulted until all was sorted out. The prophetic word in this case was more confirmation than direction. Even so, having incorrect details prophetically given can be very disconcerting for those involved.

So be careful of directive prophecy. This is not to say that God does not use directive prophecy. The Bible features many examples. However, we must show due caution, and check everything out carefully.

1 Cor 14:32 declares, ***"The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets"***, meaning we can all hold on to what God gives us until we are reasonably sure it is the right message to the right person at the right time. Even then it may be wise to submit it to the pastor or leadership team of your church first.

Consider for a moment the person who is newly baptised in the Holy Spirit. The first words they utter in tongues are usually very simple, much like a newborn babe, and it often takes some time and practise (though not always) to develop the language God has for them. Prophecy is the same. Why prophesy the end of the age first up? Why not be an exhorter and encourager first, and then see what else God gives you?

JUDGING PROPHECY

*“And let two or three prophets speak,
and let the others pass judgment” (1 Cor 14:29)*

Many Christians believe they should not judge, and they are correct if it concerns the judging of the world, because it already stands under judgment and has been condemned by God Himself (1 Cor 5:12-13). Paul declares, however, that we are to judge the church. In the passage above it is clear he intended that both prophets, and their prophecies, should be judged.

The standard by which these gifts are judged depends on their stated purpose, and whether this stated purpose has been achieved or not.

The prophetic gift has been placed in the church primarily to fulfil three basic functions (1 Cor 14:3):

- **Edification (Building Up)**
- **Exhortation (Encouragement)**
- **Consolation (Comfort)**

Every true exercise of vocal gifts of the Spirit will contain one or more of these attributes. These gifts are given for the benefit of the **Church**. When properly used they will not cause strife or dissension among the brethren.

Prophecy, tongues and interpretation of tongues come under the general description of **vocal gifts**. If Prophecy brings harm rather than healing, causing confusion rather than bringing revelation, then it has not come from a disciplined human spirit under the control of a sanctified will, accountable to spiritual authority and directed by the Holy Spirit. This is why chapters 12 & 14 are in 1 Corinthians, so that all things might be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:33,40).

The power, beauty and effectiveness of the prophetic gift come from the fact that it is being used to **accomplish its** divine purpose. It is therefore worth noting the following practical outworkings that can be derived from this supposition:

- ◆ The exercise of one gift should never counteract, or contradict, another.
- ◆ A genuine gift will never be vindictive, harsh, rude or unkind.
- ◆ A gift truly anointed by the Holy Spirit will serve to glorify Jesus Christ and heighten the worship and praise of the people. In other words, it will be in harmony with the whole service if given at such a time.
- ◆ People who walk humbly before the Lord subject themselves and exercise their gift according to the usual custom of the church they worshipping in.
- ◆ If a gift cannot be clearly heard by the whole congregation, then it has failed in its purpose to edify the church, and is consequently out of order (1 Cor 14:9).
- ◆ A poorly delivered prophecy, or one expressed in a way that leaves its meaning doubtful, has failed to edify, and is therefore out of order.
- ◆ ‘Judging’ the exercise of spiritual gifts neither calls for nor justifies a harsh or critical attitude, nor an eagerness to react to every fault of delivery or content. Correct scriptural judgment calls for humility on the part of the one who has spoken, and for love, wisdom, knowledge, patience and understanding to be displayed on the part of those who are called upon to judge the prophetic word. Judging is mandatory whereas correction, if needed, should be done firmly, but graciously.

Who does the Judging?

There are different views on who should judge what.

Some churches are so severe they judge all prophecy (as well as tongues, interpretation of tongues and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit) to be out of order because they hold to a belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased to operate after the death of the last apostle. This contention is not supported by Scripture, and rejected by Pentecostal churches and even some of the more traditional ones.

Of those churches which encourage the free flow of the gifts, some require that all utterances be filtered through the pastor, or an elder, before being delivered to the church. Others have no apparent control or checking system in place, and all sorts of strange and wonderful things can happen in meetings. It would be better to encourage a more balanced approach to judging prophecy.

A Balanced Approach

As is often the case, a more balanced approach would be somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. There are two issues we must address here:

- The first is where a prophetic message comes during a meeting and is delivered to the whole church.
- The second is where a prophetic message is given to an individual or couple, either in church or at some other, smaller gathering of believers.

It is important that we understand what is expected of us as believers and local church members. During a meeting we are expected to listen to, and submit to, the view of the leadership. However, there are times when we are expected to use our own initiative and take responsibility for a prophetic matter ourselves.

1. Prophetic messages delivered during a meeting

When a prophetic message is delivered in a meeting it is up to the pastor, or leader on the day, to determine whether it is genuine and/or appropriate.

If the prophecy is in order then a word of encouragement or confirmation is optional. If a prophecy is delivered by the pastor or someone with a recognised prophetic mantle upon them, additional comment is usually not required.

If the message is inappropriate, out of order or plainly wrong, then:

- a) if the rambling or does not have any clear meaning or direction it should probably be passed over and the person in question spoken to privately, or
- b) if it is clearly out of order, or contrary to God's Word, it may be necessary to address it publicly, though we would hope this would be a rare occurrence.

2. Prophetic messages delivered individually or privately

In this case it is up to the person or persons receiving the prophecy to judge it, then receive, reject, or shelve it for future reference. If pressure is applied, such as warnings should the prophecy not be followed, it should be treated with caution or rejected outright. If doubt remains submit it to the church leadership for judgment. However, do not reject a message God may have for you because of inadequate consideration and scrutiny.

Remember, sober judgment, a sound understanding of Biblical principles, a mature inner witness and qualified and trustworthy counsel, will always assist you to make a wise decision regarding prophecy and its application to your life.