
PROPHETS, PROPHECY AND PROPHECYING...

In the Local Church

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good...” ~1 Thessalonians 5:19-21

When the “Blue Light Prophetess” announced in my friend’s Midwest church, “*Surely, surely, ’thus saith the Lord-d, ‘Now is an excellent time to buy small appliances,*” he knew it was time for some serious teaching on prophecy and the role of prophets in the church. Similarly, at another church in the Northwest, a woman “fell under the anointing” (and the piano) in a prophetic stupor. My pastor-friend in that town decided, enough was enough; even he didn’t like attending such a weird church!

My own experience with self-proclaimed prophets has been almost as bizarre. In my years pastoring, I met *three* of the *two* witnesses in *Revelation*; countless strangers approached me before or after services with “*a word to the church.*” I had regular encounters with those pseudo-spiritual types who told me God wanted to “*pour out His Spirit*” on my congregation—a not-so-subtle declaration that He hadn’t (yet) been able to. The common theme among all such strange strangers was their supposed link to deeper spiritual knowledge and understandings that had yet to be revealed to *little-me*.

I’m grateful that God’s word alerted me to the wrongness of their attitude that grated against my spirit. Even a spiritual-someone who knows “*all mysteries and all knowledge*” is nothing of note without love (1 Corinthians 13:1-2). Someone who exercises a spiritual gift without love is just “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Unfortunately, those noisemakers can be really loud—and difficult to ignore.

Wrong-spirited messengers who claim special revelation from God are, frankly, hard to handle. Their mystical mind-set elevates them above correction or challenge that

anyone might offer. They know better—and more! Arrogant, lawless and loveless, they introduce disorder and confusion in congregations, and many unsuspecting pastors have watched in dismay as their flock was rent asunder by so-called prophetic voices that promised “great things” but delivered nothing lasting or life-giving.

How many times was I handed a hastily scrawled “message from God” by spiritual assailants who had been worked into a prophetic frenzy by their own neediness? Too many to recount. And that number doesn’t include the dazed-souls whose evil-spirited “handlers,” like drug-smugglers used them as “mules” to carry confusion, condemnation and fear into our church.

False words and false prophets sometimes seem to be the only ones out there...

These sorts of corporate experiences only add to our personal uncertainties about prophetic promptings (“*How do I know it is the Lord?*” “*Must I speak in King James English?*” “*What if no one responds to the word?*”). Honest and sane pastors must admit to at least some misgivings about what’s going to happen if they allow the prophetic in their church services. After all, church is like live TV; bloopers and fiascos can’t be edited out from what the congregation experiences.

Consequently, the scene is set for confusion about prophecy or denial of its validity in the church. In an effort to avoid the messiness that can result from people who are learning to cooperate with God’s Spirit, some segments of Christ’s Church attempt to redefine prophecy in non-miraculous terms. They speak of rightly applying scripture verses to people and their situations. Anyone who knows Bible verses can share them—without much risk of acting bizarre. But prophecy is more than well-appointed verse sharing. Certainly, prophecies ought to include clear biblical references, but prophecy is a miraculous sign, a “gift of the Spirit” Paul tells us to covet for the sake of others (1 Corinthians 14:1-4).

Even among those whose simple theology embraces the miraculous and espouses the functioning of the “gifts of the Spirit” in believers’ lives, there seems to be a vacuum void of prophetic exercise. The number of Pentecostal pastors who do not prophesy during the course of an entire year is larger than one might think. So, too, is the number who earnestly desire that *no one* will prophesy in their churches. A Pentecostal church without a vital ministry of prophetic words and spiritual gifts strikes me as a misnomer. It is one thing to be Pentecostal in doctrine, quite another to be Pentecostal in practice.

WORTHWHILE RISKS

In a church that contends for the place of prophecy, sheltering the flock from wolves and weirdos is only half of the problem. Because prophesying has become such a big

deal these days (even though it was a common practice for believers in the early Church) few people recognize when God gives them a word to share. That's why I had to coax and coach so many people as they learned to prophesy.

I'll never forget how uncertain and reluctant I was to prophesy for the first time. Thankfully, the pastoral leader who was discipling me during my grad school days patiently explained the gift and continued to encourage me past my fears. Just as speaking in tongues seemed so strange when I first began to exercise my spiritual language, so too, did prophesying seem awkward and halting the first several times God gave me a word to share with others. I almost hyperventilated the first time—not because of the stirring of the Spirit, but simply because I was nervous!

Remember, learning to prophesy is a learning experience; and just as our senses improve their ability to discern “because of practice” (*Hebrews 5:14*), so too can we improve at prophesying. As a pastor working with trusted, sincere leaders in my church, I had to be versed in the full gamut of training: I saw people freeze while trying to deliver a word, and I had to interrupt and stop others when they didn't realize God had finished speaking long before they had.

But through the years, a great many learned to exercise “*the tongue of a disciples*” and sustain weary saints with a timely prophetic word (*Isaiah 50:4*). Frequently at leadership conferences and other events, I arranged for several members of my church to lay hands on and pray prophetically over pastors. I didn't always tell the pastors that these were lay-leaders in my church. I didn't want the pastors to despise the words before they were given. Through the years, more pastors have commented on and thanked me for those prayers than for my teaching! Invariably, the pastors and leaders were flabbergasted when they discovered the lay-identities of those who prayed for them.

Yes, it takes time to create an atmosphere of balanced spirituality where normal people learn to prophesy. But it's worth it. If pastors refuse to encourage and instruct people in their spiritual gifts, we will end up surrendering what it means to be spiritual. The kooks and crazies will be the only models of ear-catching, heart-gripping ministry, and the rest of the church will limit itself to “safe” sharing that requires little or no revelation from God.

There are so many questions that assail our mind: What is from God—and what isn't? When and how should we speak a prophetic word? How do we know we have a prophecy to give? Whew! It's much easier and less taxing to simply avoid prophecy as a front burner issue in our lives and in our churches. I think many leaders conclude they don't want all the mental, spiritual and congregational trouble prophecy might introduce. But that doesn't strike me as the path of faith or of contending for what has been “*handed down to the saints*” (*Jude 1:3*).

A measure of uncertainty is inevitable because God uses flawed humans as His tools of choice. The Early Church was no different. Some people will claim to be giving a word from God that actually originates from their own spirits or from their own tortured confusion. The Old Testament gives ample precedent for that! It will be necessary to curb excesses and to correct messages that are not from the Lord.

Even though prophecies will sometimes contain unrefined, natural elements, as opposed to pure, Spirit-directed utterance, Paul suggests that we remain open and responsive to prophecy. He acknowledges that prophetic words shared by imperfect people might need to be filtered and sifted. Just as background noise can be distracting on a sound-recording, so can human elements be somewhat off-putting in a prophecy. So, differentiate between God's word—and the background noise:

“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good...” ~1 Thessalonians 5:19-

21

True words from the Lord provide direction, encouragement, comfort and insight. As a pastor, I did not want to sacrifice the profit my congregation and I received from prophetic ministry just because some prophets and prophecies were difficult to handle. The less exceptional it is in churches to “hear” a word from the Lord, the easier it becomes to help people sort between what truly is from God and what has been flavored by sincere, but natural impulses.

For example, several years ago our church went through an extremely difficult season that left everyone feeling flat and empty. At one of our lowest points, I received a simple prophetic word that alerted me, and the church, to God's intent for us: He was making us new wineskins in order to fill us with new wine. “Flat and empty” is exactly what a new wineskin is before it is filled! As a result of that word, our church was able to begin correctly interpreting our flatness and emptiness as a prelude to more blessing, rather than the passing away of previous blessing.

That's huge. Prophecies can make all the difference in how we face obstacles and learn to fight. Remember that Paul encouraged Timothy: “...in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight...” (1 Timothy 1:18). While “the prophets of God were with them supporting them” (Ezra 5:2), Zerubbabel and Joshua rose up with new resolve and faith to rebuild the temple. They were—and we could be—greatly supported through the prophesying of prophets in our churches (Ezra 6:14).

WHAT'S A PASTOR TO DO?

So, what's a pastor to do? We don't want to despise prophetic utterances or disregard warnings about impending famines (Acts 11:28). But neither do we want to accept zany "words" and predictions about the outcome of national elections or the sex of a child before it is conceived. How can we develop an appreciation for revelation among our people without sending them in pursuit of the latest tangent tempting the church away from its mission?

Is there a way to pursue a sane, sensible and spiritual pathway to the prophetic? As ministry leaders, we want to lead our people further into their spiritual inheritance. We want to better familiarize them with their God-given toolbox. That means we must "*extract the precious from the worthless*" (Jeremiah 15:19) because not everything that claims to be prophetic truly is.

How can we disciple saints so that they are open to exercising the prophetic gift without being "*tossed here and there*" (Ephesians 4:14) by every wind-filled word offered to them by well-meaning but misguided strangers? Perhaps an even trickier question is how do we correct the often-condemning tone of supposed words from God? How do we handle people who announce their prophetic office or who stand after worship and pronounce with a loud voice, "'Thy worship is an abomination unto Me,' saith the Lord?"

We don't want our congregations ignorant of spiritual gifts like prophecy, but neither do we want them to have a word for everyone all the time—or worse yet, wanting always to receive a word.

THE CHERISHED GIFT

The cherished gift of prophecy—the one that is to be sought above all others because of its profound helpfulness to other people—comes under continuous assault from an enemy who wants to remove it from the church. "*For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*" (Revelation 19:10), and all true words from the Lord will point people to the Logos of God, Jesus Christ.

No wonder the enemy employs all sorts of tactics to tempt the Church to draw back from prophetic ministry into the seeming safety of reasonable rationality. It is much safer to *teach* the word than to *deliver* a word. We can think through a teaching before we offer it to people. It can be organized and polished. But a prophecy is, by nature, a "suddenly"—a word that is difficult for us to discern and deliver with exactness. That makes ministry leaders nervous. It is safer to teach the Bible. A bad or flat teaching seems less dangerous than an ill-timed or uncertain prophecy.

I'm not suggesting that we ought to prophesy as often as we teach from the Bible. The already-revealed *word of the Lord* is the foundation upon which our faith must rest, and it is the one reliable touchstone with which to judge every other whisper to our hearts. Prophecy quickens eternal truth; it does not substitute for or supplant eternal truth. But we should not forget that in the Early Church, the *apostles* and the *prophets* provided the groundwork upon which the churches were built (Ephesians 2:20). Biblically speaking, teaching and prophecy go hand-in-hand. Our churches need both.

The *timeless* words of Scripture are the words of eternal life, but *timely* prophetic words help believers appropriate those eternal words. Prophecy communicates the foundational truths of the Kingdom—not as doctrines that can be canonized, but as understandings that shape how the church lives and worships. For instance, many of us learned to appreciate the dynamics of worship more fully by hearing prophetic words in which the Lord reminded us that *He is enthroned on our praises*. It was not through exegesis of Psalm 22:3 that the truth was so powerfully registered in my soul; it was through prophecy.

My point is that we should not allow a false choice to present itself to us. We are not asked to choose between teaching and prophesying; timeless doctrine and timely prophecy. The Church gets both/and not either/or. For the first few years I attended UCLA, I got caught up in another erroneous dichotomy—I was taught it was “better” to have the “fruit of the Spirit” in my life rather than the “gifts of the Spirit.” It took me almost four years before I realized, “Why not have both?”

THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

Because we get little practical teaching on prophecy and prophesying, and because the models many believers have seen of people who move “in the prophetic” are so pathetic, the subject of prophecy is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. So let's look at the nature of and the purpose for the prophetic element in the Church. What is off about “Blue Light” prophecies? What is wrong—aside from being rude—with a word from the Lord that berates people for their worship performance? By understanding why God gives prophecies and seeing how they are exercised in the Scriptures, we will know better how to faithfully encourage prophetic ministry in our lives and our churches.

What does the Bible say about prophetic words? What are prophecies? Should we expect to receive them in our daily lives? Why does God give them? How can we better hold onto them?

The essence of New Testament prophetic ministry—whether manifested by a prophet or contained in a prophecy—can be found in the Greek word “pro-pheti”—

which means to “*speak before*.” As in English, the meaning of the Greek word is ambiguous: does it imply *before in time* (i.e., a prediction before an event takes place), or does it suggest *before in location* (i.e., a speech in front of a crowd)? Probably both.

Prophetic ministry puts messages right out there in front of everyone—for the record. It claims that the words are from God. Simple proof of that fact comes when the prophecy spoken comes true. This is why the classic test of a prophet is so straightforward: if the words come true, the Lord has spoken through the person; if not, stone him (Deuteronomy 13:10). Prophets and prophecies let us in on God’s intentions before those intentions are obvious to the natural observer. In effect, God tells people by His Spirit, “*This is what I am up to. When you see it happen, remember that I told you before it was known.*”

By hearing that God is purposefully in control of their lives and situations, people receive great comfort. They are consoled despite the difficult press of their current circumstances by the fact that God’s plans supersede the natural consequences and outcomes of life. And, of course, by learning what God is doing, people are built up and further instructed in His ways.

It is difficult to distinguish between “fore-telling” and “forth-telling”, and to determine how much of either is usually contained in prophecy. For my purposes, I try to stay focused on God’s intent for doing either. Whether predictive or instructive, His words keep pointing back to Him; He is the One who knows what’s what. Ultimately, He wants us to know that He knows about things before we do.

When He asks Job, “*Where is the way to the dwelling of the light? And the darkness, where is its place that you may take it to its territory...*” (Job 38:19-20), God is asking the same basic question as when He asks worshipers of false gods, “What have you heard from your gods that has come to pass?” Knowing what is going on inside a person’s heart (see 1 Corinthians 14:24-25) is the same kind of understanding as knowing what is going to happen in the future: God is on His throne.

EDIFICATION, EXHORTATION AND CONSOLATION

If you count the number of New Testament prophecies that predict the future—except in Revelation—you will see that they are rare. Our lack of scriptural precision has led to sloppy presumptions that prophecy is usually about the future of the world, or the future of a people. Paul gives us the clearest statement about the purpose and nature of prophetic words in church when he says,

“But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” ~1 Corinthians 14:3

In my opinion and experience, prophetic words help people understand the plans of God. They proclaim the will and counsel of God for various situations. Especially when delivered to a congregation, prophecies should leave people believing that God knows about their unique situations. And that He cares: *“I see where you are. Now look at Me, and listen to what I’m going to do about your situation.”*

Prophecy sometimes reveals the secrets of the heart—not to shame us, but to convince us that God is the One who *“reveals the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness...”* (Daniel 2:22). Prophetic insight is deep and penetrating. It goes beyond what we know with our natural reason, and it surfaces unsearchable truths, applying them to our future days, our present experience or even our past doings. Prophecy helps make sense out of our lives.

When handled correctly—by the person giving a prophecy and by the person leading a meeting—prophetic words build and comfort people as almost no other gift can do. Prophecies convince believers that God knows exactly where they are. He sees them and speaks to them in such a profoundly personal way (i.e., with intimate knowledge about “unknown” details) that they know He is among them (1 Corinthians 14:5; 24-25).

HURRAH AND DOOMSDAY PROPHETS

The events themselves that may be predicted by a prophecy are not really the point. The point is that God—who knows all things and who decrees matters of life—is “in the know.” He is in control of all things, seen and unseen, known and unknown. I personally believe that only events that figure prominently in the redemptive timeline of history are specifically prophesied. Having warned us that earthquakes and wars are signs of the end, God doesn’t need to predict particular earthquakes or wars.

There is danger in being carried away with spontaneous excitement and in prophesying vague declarations about “all that God is going to do...” Human excitement and desire for breakthrough in ministry have begotten many supposed prophecies that declare God is about to do a new thing—meaning He is going to make small churches large, hard times easy, sad times happy, etc.

Cheerleading-type, at-convention prophecies rarely move me. Too many times we have heard prophecies about youth revivals, a new awakening, or a “mighty move of the Spirit” in which God will use our particular denomination (as opposed to others?). No wonder some young ministers are jaded against prophetic words. Who can blame their skepticism in the face of such pseudo-nonsense? Vague and uplifting hopes are not necessarily prophetic words. Neither is self-congratulation.

Everyone wants revival and a flourishing church ministry, but we must take care not to prophesy the imminence of such things without very clear prompting from the Lord. I wish I had a dollar for every such “word” I’ve heard. The proof is always in the fulfillment of the prophecy. We’re so gullible and desperate for easier, happier, more fruitful ministry (often without obedience to “make disciples”). We fall into the trap of expecting prophecies to predict either better or worse times ahead.

Prophetic words are not glib tidbits; they are not spiritual fortune cookies. Neither are genuine prophetic words filled with vague pronouncements and convoluted sentences with religious language, clichés and constant repetition.

I am not usually impressed either by *cheerleader* or by *doomsday* “prophecies”.

The end of the world has already been amply prophesied in the Scriptures, and no manner of doom and gloom about the world economy, national lawlessness or moral upheaval is going to make me any more eager for the rapture than I already am. Other than eschatological events already outlined in the Bible, the New Testament puts more emphasis on the Spirit’s present, inner workings in our lives than it does on future, external happenings that may affect our lives.

THE PROPHETS ALL POINTING

Although prophecy will warn people of consequences of their current life-choices, it will also encourage them with His plans for rescue. It is easy to have misperceptions about prophets because we imagine that the Old Testament record depicts them as nail-tough, flint-faced zealots who say, on behalf of God, “*All right, you guys, no more Mr. Nice God...*”

Actually, a closer examination of the Old Testament reveals prophetic messengers sent by God, time and time again, to turn people from their ways to God’s way for their lives (Jeremiah 35:15). Prophecies could be responded to. They were instructive and directive—they offered opportunity to change so God could halt His decision to punish. Forecasts of doom and judgment only occurred after a protracted season of prophetic warnings.

Old Testament prophets have received a bum rap. We mostly remember their declarations of doom because they are so dramatic. We forget that the prophets were also burdened and weighed down with compassion for lost people. Re-read the Old Testament and you’ll see how much the prophets prophesied deliverance and assurance, as opposed to condemnation and judgment, for God’s people

For sincere believers who honestly want to do what God wants them to do, I believe it is highly unlikely that God wants to give prophecies of condemnation that bring up their past failure. God woos us; His words do the same. On what scant scriptural

basis do people offer supposed prophecies of judgment against the very children of God who have passed out of judgment by believing in God's Son (John 3:17-18)?

According to Acts 10, all prophets bear witness to forgiveness through Jesus Christ:

"And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." ~Acts 10:42-43

The prophet's primary calling is to introduce salvation, not judgment. How odd and backwards for supposed prophets to reverse the assignment God gave the prophets of old. I believe it is the *spirit of legalism* that motivates most judgmental, condemning words toward Christians.

TRUSTED MESSENGERS IN THE CHURCH

Through the years, I have been able to identify several people in our church who exercise prophetic ministry and who receive words far more frequently than the average believer. I consider such people prophets to our congregation. Years ago, I "added" a man to that group by telling him I considered him a gift to our congregation (Ephesians 4:11), and that I was completely open to any words he would have for us. He had proven himself over time.

As a trusted messenger, he would be given complete access during the services—even when I was away. Sure enough, three weeks later he shared a word when I was out of town, and that prophecy profoundly affected my eldest daughter by answering a question that she had asked of no one but the Lord. Somehow prophecy answers questions differently than teaching or exhortation.

Another of the men whom I considered a prophet (he did not call himself that) has had such timely words for my youngest son. The point is NOT that they blessed my family and thus received the title prophet. But since I knew the unknown parts of my son's and daughter's stories in those episodes, I know how amazing the men's words actually were.

One of the ladies, whom I think of as a prophetess and not just a woman who prophesies, was a constant reference point for me. Since I know prophets called by God often "live out" His message to His people, I was always interested in what this woman was experiencing or thinking. Of course, she dismissed her "thoughts" as just hers, but many, many times those "thoughts" and impressions profoundly aided us in caring for our congregation.

GIFT-MIX AND SPIRITUAL GIFT

The Bible tells us, “*all are not prophets...*” (1 Corinthians 12:29), yet all can prophesy “*one by one*” (1 Corinthians 14:31). Is this a contradiction in Scripture? Not at all. First of all, we must distinguish between the *Gift-Mix* of a *prophet*, which is an appointed office or role in the church, and the *spiritual gift of prophecy*. People who do not have the *Gift-Mix* of a *Prophet* can still have the *spiritual gift of prophecy*.

Teachers, Exhorters, and every other *Gift-Mix* can have any number of *spiritual gifts*. That’s why Paul encourages us to “*desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that [we] may prophesy*” (1 Corinthians 14:1). Spiritual gifts like *faith, discerning of spirits, word of wisdom*, etc. are distributed among believers differently than *Gift-Mixes*. *Gift-Mixes* are woven into our being before birth; *spiritual gifts* are given to believers after they are saved. So, for instance, both a *Teacher* and an *Exhorter* could have the *spiritual gifts of prophecy and word of knowledge*. Our *Gift-Mix* neither determines or limits the *spiritual gifts* we have.

Not everyone has the *Gift-Mix* of a *Giver*, yet everyone can (and should) give. Likewise, not everyone has the *Gift-Mix* of a *Prophet*, but everyone can prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:31). People with the *Gift-Mix* of a *Prophet* have greater prophetic propensity and facility, but every child of God can learn to engage in the activity.

GUIDELINES

Because I wanted to teach my congregation about how to prophesy, I tried to rehearse several things with them whenever we received a prophetic word in a public service. In one form or another, I communicated to the congregation several of the following points:

1. Prophetic words require no special tone of voice, added syllables or King James vernacular.
2. We only receive prophetic words from people who have been attending our church for more than six months, and who know that I know their first names.
3. Many times, what inspires people is just for them, not for the whole church. To help people learn to distinguish between the two, we ask them to share the gist of it with one of the pastors during or after the service.
4. Prophecy usually comes as one of the following: a picture with very clear meaning, a scripture verse that begs to be spoken, or a “sudden insight.” I encourage people that if they have all three, they can be fairly confident it really is from the Lord.

5. All prophecy should remind the one who delivers it of at least two scriptures. A picture alone is too open to multiple interpretations. What God wants to say in the 21st Century should be an echo of what He has already said and recorded for us in the Bible.
6. Prophecy can always wait to be delivered. The spirit of a prophet is subject to the prophet (1 Corinthians 14:32). Unless I have indicated to someone previously that they may speak a word at their discretion, people should signal me BEFORE they presume to blurt out a prophecy in church.

I also encouraged people to lay hands on and pray for one another in home groups, group-counseling sessions, after services, etc. When they thanked the Lord for the person for whom they were praying and just prayed what came to their hearts, they spoke many prophetic things. The whole point was to make prophesying less sensational and more functional and frequent an occurrence in the congregation. Churches that do not promote prophetic ministry in the informal, smaller settings of church life will probably have little prophetic ministry happening in the larger, corporate sessions.

JUDGING PROPHECIES

That leads us to the question, “How do we judge a prophetic message or the ministry of a prophet?” The simple answer: scripture. Prophets and the prophecies must be evaluated on the basis of their alignment with God’s word. Unfortunately, some people’s enthusiasm to embrace revelation and supernatural utterances leads them into one of the Early Church’s great foes: *mysticism*. The fact that someone “gave a prophecy” impresses some people so much that they neglect to measure what was said against biblical revelation.

Biblical prophets were not mystics—neither are saints who prophesy today. Mystics claim to have special insight that cannot be independently verified. They are above evaluation and correction. Their words should be accepted without question. Have you ever encountered such attitudes by people claiming to be prophets? Have you seen it happen as many times as I have—when you choose not to accept someone’s supposed prophetic word, they lay claim to a higher (or deeper) understanding than simple pastors possess?

What nonsense! The Bible tells us that prophetic words are not private, exclusive insights; they are, instead, an ongoing expression of God’s communication with people (2 Peter 1:20-21). As such, they must line up with all the other things He has said—especially with the whole message of Jesus. If Jesus personified all God was trying to say through the prophets of old, He does not need newer prophets to tack on additional revelations today. (Read Hebrews 1:1-3.) Deceivers will try to steal away

our full reward by bringing messages that go “too far” and do not “*abide in the teaching of Christ*” (2 John 1:9).

Church leaders’ great fear is that false prophets will lead people astray by distorting biblical truths. This is the reason some pastors give for not encouraging prophecy among their congregation. Interestingly, the New Testament warns more against false teachers than false prophets; demonic doctrines are mentioned more often than demonically inspired prophecies. No one would suggest that the best way to guard against humanly-inspired (false) teaching is to discouraging people from teaching! When our caution about what might go wrong becomes a reason for not exercising any of the tools God gave us, it might be time to consider the source of that fear.

THE BASIS FOR JUDGING WORDS

Let’s acknowledge up front that judging prophecies is not an exact science. Several times I have been in a service when someone delivered a word that I thought was going to be rejected by the pastor—only to have it embraced. I hope my discernment has grown better through the years.

Sometimes a prophecy is *mostly* on target, but a few parts come from a *natural heart*. It is possible to sift out the inaccuracies in a prophecy without tossing out the whole word. Several times I have turned such an occurrence into a teaching time about how to prophesy: “*When the quickening ends, so should you.*” I might ask the person who delivered the word, “*Did you feel yourself getting lost or working too hard at that point in the prophecy?*”

Personally, I see the judgment of prophecy mostly in terms of how I will respond to what is said. That’s more important than how it was delivered. Let me put it another way: I want to evaluate how applicable the prophecy is to my life situation. *Should I embrace it and appropriate the promises and insights for myself? Does it apply to me? Does it “fit” my circumstances?*

Of course, if the word is unscriptural or heretical, I reject it outright—and tell any who heard the “word” that it rings false. But in all the years I’ve been in ministry leadership, I have not heard even a half-dozen “false prophecies” that were blatantly unscriptural. As I said earlier, I’ve heard far too many “words” filled with catch-phrases and clichés. They aren’t unscriptural per se, but they aren’t very valuable, either. Believe me, you will know a false word when you hear it because it won’t be the voice of the “Good Shepherd” you’re accustomed to following; you won’t follow a stranger (John 10:2-5).

Let me offer you a rough set of guidelines for “evaluating prophecy” that I developed in my church experience. This became an intuitive checklist that I processed through

whenever someone prophesied, and I used it to frame my personal and public response:

1. **Scripture** — Make sure the prophecy does not contradict what the Bible says, and that it reminds me [you] of two or three scriptures. The prophecy does not necessarily have to quote Scripture, but it should allude to something God has already said in His word or to some principle from Scripture that He has already revealed.
2. **Delivery** — Poor communication skills or halting delivery do not mean the word is in error. If people normally speak poorly, using improper sentence structure, etc., they will prophesy the same way. The Holy Spirit does not take over a person's psyche, using only the person's voice. The Spirit prompts a person's understanding and invites him or her to express what He has shown them. Prophecies should sound like the Lord, but they will also sound like the person who delivers them.
3. **Tone** — Consider whether or not the word *feels* familiar: "*Is this how the Lord speaks to me?*" Angry, accusing, or condemning messages are out of sync with God's heart. Prophecies will often be convicting, but words that rivet the soul are not the same as angry words. The tone ought to be full of hope (and opportunity to become different) not condemnation.
4. **Context** — If the prophecy is for a group, it ought to have the same heart-penetrating impact as prophecy for an individual (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). Ask yourself; does the prophecy fit into the larger scheme of God's work in the congregation or the cell group? The heart of the leader ought to resonate with the word. Prophecies to your congregation should act like missing puzzle pieces, answering more questions than they raise.
5. **Aftermath** — Evaluate the effect of the word. How do sincere believers feel as a consequence of hearing the word? If they (you) do not feel edified, encouraged or built up, then the word probably isn't from the Lord. Again, this does not mean that prophecies cannot be strongly delivered and corrective. God's discipline of His children is shaping, but not shaming—pointed, but not overwhelming.

Every pastor who wants authentic prophetic ministry in the church will have a few episodes like when a woman started delivering a shrill word of rebuke to my friend's congregation concerning their worship: "Thou art a stench in My nostrils..." My friend acted quickly. He jumped to the microphone and exclaimed, "Sit down; that word is for you, not us!"

COMMON TRAPS

No discussion of prophetic ministry would be complete without references to the kinds of temptations to which prophet-type people are most susceptible. It is likely that if the “Blue Light Prophetess” had been willing to be disciplined by someone who knew these pitfalls, she could have been an asset to a local church, instead of a distraction.

1. Prophets must be careful not to become judgmental. The words of a prophet are the means by which people will later be judged. Prophetic people are easily tempted to become critical.
2. Prophets must be careful not to take people’s responses too personally. It is easy to feel rejected yourself when people do not receive the words you share with them.
3. Prophetic messages are not necessarily the final word. When Paul was saying goodbye to the elders at Ephesus, he did not turn from his purposes, even though the prophets tried to dissuade him.
4. Prophetic people are so inspirational that they sometimes get too worked up over what they sense. This is why they must live under an authority other than their own.
5. Prophets can too easily get stuck on a single message or truth. They can lose sight of the whole message of truth, or the whole church situation, and just keep hammering on one aspect.
6. Many prophetic people have had extensive experience, contact or relationship with the occult—especially divination and witchcraft. In order to rid themselves of those false inspirations, prophetic people need help distinguishing between what really is from the Lord, and what isn’t.

HOW CAN WE RECEIVE AND HOLD ONTO PROPHECIES?

1. Read your Bible regularly and expectantly—looking for verses, words or phrases that “catch your attention.”
2. Choose to believe that the word is from the Lord—who knows how to get your attention.
3. Do not try to make the word happen; He performs His word, not you.
4. Thank God for sending His word to you. Write it down, and date it.

5. Meditate on the verse(s)—reading the context and following cross-references.
6. Be on the lookout for similarities of the word in your daily life experience—things that you hear, stuff that happens, correlating understandings you come to, etc.