

EVALUATING PROPHETS AND PROPHECIES

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Some have the misconception that when a church opens itself to the operation of the manifestation gifts that they are making way for an “anything goes” mindset. If the appropriate function of the gifts is taught, and if church leaders fulfill their mandate to lead, guide and govern, chaos is not likely to occur. Having procedures in place to evaluate prophets and prophecies helps to keep everything functioning in order. The Bible says, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.”¹

When a Prophetic Person “Misses It”

What is the responsibility of the church when a prophetic person “misses it”? Here are a few suggested guidelines:

1. Elders should correct false prophecies privately, if possible.² However, if it is a major error heard by the gathered body of believers, then open correction with kindness is in order.³

2. Floyd McClung teaches that the best way to deal with the concern about false prophecies is to “fellowship the problem.”⁴ Both Floyd McClung and Rickie Moore state that church leaders will have trouble testing prophecy if relationship is not there.⁵

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20.

² Floyd McClung, Jr., “The Prophetic Journey,” a prophetic ministry conference, Westmore Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 2005.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Floyd McClung, Jr. and Rickie Moore, “The Prophetic Journey,” a prophetic ministry conference, Westmore Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 2005.

A Word of Caution to the Cautious

In our zeal to be discerning, we must be careful in several areas:

1. We must not put out the Spirit's fire.⁶
2. We must not treat prophecies with contempt.⁷
3. We must remember that the objective is not condemning judgement; rather, the objective is to "hold on to the good."⁸

Bruce Yocum observes and states,

As soon as we speak of prophets, people are immediately worried about false prophets.... The community can judge the worth of prophecy after it happens, but let it happen first.⁹

Although false prophecies and the people who speak them need to be held accountable, the church should be careful to not hastily label a person as a false prophet, especially if they are in the early stages of functioning in the prophetic gift. Even the Old Testament makes room for the *development* of the prophetic. Jonah and Jeremiah are examples. These prophets were corrected, yet they were not labeled as false prophets.¹⁰

Three Types of Spurious Prophecies

Michael Sullivant describes three types of spurious prophecy¹¹ and suggests appropriate responses for each of them: unanointed, errors and prophecies inspired by demonic deception.

1. **Unanointed.** An unanointed word is one that is not necessarily wrong in its content, but it does not carry the sense of the Holy Spirit being upon it. Such words rise more out of the human mind than out of a regenerated spirit. Sullivant suggests that when it seems a person has a pattern of speaking unanointed messages, leadership should gently inform that person how he or she is coming across. Instruction and coaching should be offered. It is also important to not discourage the believer. Rather, affirm the person for taking the risk.¹²

2. **Errors.** A prophetic word spoken in error is one in which either the content is off track or its delivery is inappropriate. Content errors may be doctrinal in nature, or they may be informational inaccuracies. Content errors may also occur when a person adds too much of their

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:19.

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:20.

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

⁹ Yocum, 25.

¹⁰ Rickie Moore.

¹¹ Sullivant, 155ff.

¹² Ibid., 156.

own understanding or interpretation to a revelation. Delivery errors may involve issues of timing, attitude or motivation. Sullivant notes, "Sincere believers are quite capable of this kind of thing, and although they need to be corrected, they must not be labeled as 'false prophets.'" Severe offenses that negatively impact the congregation may need to be addressed publicly; however, if at all possible, most cases of error should be addressed privately and with gentleness.¹³

3. Inspired by demonic deception. In my experience, prophecies inspired by demons have been rare. In fact, to my knowledge, I have never witnessed such an occurrence. Sullivant says that if it does occur, "Firm and decisive action must be taken in these instances to bring immediate correction."¹⁴ Sometimes demons also cause the second type of spurious prophecy noted above: "Errors."¹⁵

Consideration of the First Century Context

Bruce Yocum notes that in first century Christian life, right judgments regarding prophecies rested on several important contextual elements: First, Christians lived a highly communal life and knew one another quite well.¹⁶ Second, each community of faith was governed by an elder or a group of elders who protected them from false prophets and teachers.¹⁷ Third, the greater concern in the New Testament was with discerning *prophets* rather than discerning *prophecies*.¹⁸

Why was the concern more with discerning *prophets* rather than *prophecies*? Several factors warrant consideration. First, due to the fact that most New Testament prophecies are inspirational in nature, they usually do not require a direct response.¹⁹ Second, a community rarely has to depend solely upon one prophecy to perceive God's message.²⁰ Third, Christians can usually trust the word of a prophet when they know him to be a true prophet.²¹

¹³ Ibid., 156-157.

¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹⁵ According to Roxanne Brant, a prophetic word can have three possible sources: (1) the Spirit of God (the Spirit of Truth), (2) the spirit of error (demonic spirits), or (3) the flesh. Roxanne Brant, *How to Test Prophecy, Preaching and Guidance* (O'Brien, Florida: Roxanne Brant Ministries, 1981), 26.

¹⁶ Yocum, 62.

¹⁷ Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:10-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Ibid., 63.

¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Yocum, 64.

²¹ Ibid., 64.

How can the church recognize a true prophet? Yocum notes the following three keys as evidences of a true prophet:

a. The fruit of his life and service²²

Luke 6:43-44a

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.”

b. His submission to and regard for human authority²³

c. His submission to and regard for God’s authority

Bruce Yocum states,

Any messenger must have two things before he can legitimately proclaim a message on behalf of another person: the message itself and the proper authorization to proclaim it.²⁴

Weighing Prophetic Words

Typically, individual believers should have little difficulty in recognizing the Lord’s voice. We know the Shepherd’s voice.²⁵ However, a prophetic word should also be attested to by the community of faith.²⁶ Bruce Yocum states,

It is right for a prophet who has been tested and proved reliable to have confidence in exercising his gift. But he must remember that the basis of his own confidence is the confidence which the Christian community has placed in him.²⁷

Once a prophetic word has been evaluated, it is either accepted or rejected. Harold R. Eberle states, “A preacher’s words may be evaluated, but a prophet’s words must be accepted or rejected, submitted to or resisted.”²⁸

The Bible says, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”²⁹ Here we will consider a list of tests for discerning prophecies:

²² Ibid., 65-66.

²³ Ibid., 68.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ John 10:2-5.

²⁶ Yocum, 107.

²⁷ Yocum, 109.

²⁸ Eberle, 22.

²⁹ 1 John 4:1.

1. Does it align with Scripture? ³⁰ The Bible teaches, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness....”³¹ John Bevere states, “The more skilled we become in the Scriptures, the more evident and clear the delineation becomes between true and false, right and wrong. The Word is our safeguard from deception.”³² Mike Bickle states, “The subjective side of our faith is always to be scrutinized in the light of the objective side, but both are essential.”³³

2. If it is a predictive prophecy, does it come to pass? ³⁴ This test only works, if there is time to wait for the fulfillment. Pytches notes, “The problem here may sometimes be that if we wait to see, it may be too late.”³⁵

3. What kind of fruit does the prophecy produce? ³⁶ Is the prophecy ultimately life-giving? Does it draw people to Jesus? Does it strengthen, encourage and edify those who hear?

4. Are there any confirmations regarding the prophecy? ³⁷ Some say that if a prophecy is authentic, it will confirm that which God is already speaking to you. However, there are times when the prophetic message is the first time the hearer has been introduced to the revelation. In such cases, confirmation will typically come at some point after the prophecy. In short, sometimes the confirmation comes from something received prior to the prophecy, and at other times the confirmation comes after the prophecy. David Pytches suggests,

When all is said and done, it would be most unwise to act in more than a tentative way in response to any prophecy without confirmation from some completely independent source.³⁸

³⁰ Pytches, 162. All who write on this subject stress the importance of the Scriptures in the task of evaluating prophecies. The following sources are among those making the same point: Yocum, 112. Jacobs, 74.

³¹ 2 Timothy 3:16.

³² John Bevere, *Thus Saith the Lord?* (Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1999), 20. This book is not a preferred resource for those who want to learn the positive aspects of prophetic ministry.

³³ Bickle, 74.

³⁴ Deuteronomy 18:21-22.

³⁵ Pytches, 163.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 164.

³⁸ Ibid.

5. Was the prophecy delivered in an attitude of submission to authority?³⁹ Disregard for authority is rebellion, and an attitude of rebellion toward God's appointed authorities can open the door for demonic activity. Pytches states,

While Scripture shows that prophets who had words from the Lord for those in authority often delivered them boldly (cf. Nathan in Samuel 12:1-14 and Elijah in 1 Kings 21:17-34), nevertheless Scripture is quite specific that the prophetic ministry must be exercised in a fitting and orderly way (1 Corinthians 14:40). This means that it must be exercised among God's people in submission to those in authority (Heb. 13:7).⁴⁰

6. Is the person delivering the word a person of integrity? Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them."⁴¹ Pytches observes,

This is not an absolute test. God specifically pronounced Abraham a prophet (Gen. 20:7) even though he had just blatantly lied about his wife (Gen. 21:2). Balaam had a good prophecy (Num. 24), but he fell into bad ways (Jude 11). The old prophet in 1 Kings 13:14-26 also lied to the man of God from Judah and then prophesied truly. Therefore, this test is not foolproof, and we shall need to use the other tests alongside it.⁴²

7. Are there other influences tainting the prophecy? Three questions adapted from Cindy Jacobs' checkpoints can help us concerning this matter. First, is the speaker critical or judgmental?⁴³ Second, is there any evidence of a religious agenda or bias?⁴⁴ Third, is it possible that human love for the hearers may be tainting the word?⁴⁵

8. Does the spiritual tone resonate with our own spirit?⁴⁶ There are times when the content of a prophecy can seem so true, yet something does not *feel* right about it. Some prophecies come from lying spirits.⁴⁷ Satan and demons have been known to speak things that are true for the sake of advancing their own agendas.⁴⁸ People prophesying from their own human spirit can also

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Matthew 7:16a.

⁴² Pytches, 164.

⁴³ Jacobs, 78.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁶ Yocum, 115-116. Jacobs, 78.

⁴⁷ 1 Kings 22:22.

⁴⁸ Matthew 4:6; Acts 16:17-18.

cause a sense of uneasiness. The gift of the discerning of spirits enables the church to rightly determine of what spirit a person speaks.⁴⁹

9. Does the prophecy glorify the Lord Jesus and display His character? ⁵⁰ Is it consistent with what Scripture reveals about Jesus? Does it draw you closer to the Lord or take you further from Him?⁵¹

Reasons Why a Prophecy May Not Come to Pass

Do all prophecies come to pass? No. Why not? There are several reasons why some prophecies may not be fulfilled.

1. The first possibility is that the word was not truly a message from God. Sometimes people prophesy from the flesh more than from the spirit. At other times, they may receive a true revelation from God, but they may only have a partial understanding of what it means. When there is incomplete understanding, those who speak may be inclined to modify or add to the prophecy in an effort to force it to make sense to them. Such revision can so alter the message's original intent that it no longer represents God's heart on the matter. As a result, hearers are left looking for a fulfillment that God never intended.

2. The second possibility is that the circumstances for which the prophecy was intended have changed. This scenario can happen when a prophetic warning has been issued regarding a sin issue or some other matter in which change is required. If repentance takes place or the necessary change occurs, the negative consequences originally prophesied are cancelled out. The warning has been heeded. The story of Nineveh's repentance in response to Jonah's prophetic warning serves as a good example.

3. The third possibility is that prayer has changed the outcome. Occasionally prophets may predict natural disasters, political upheavals or other disastrous events. What happens when God's people pray against such things? Often in response to prayer, God will prevent the disaster, interrupt the predicted political shift or stop the destructive chain of events. A biblical example of prayer changing the outcome is found in the story of Hezekiah. Isaiah prophesied that Hezekiah would die. Isaiah left the room, and Hezekiah prayed. In his prayer, he reminded the Lord of his devotion. Immediately Isaiah returned and prophesied that Hezekiah's life would be extended.⁵² When prayer has changed the outcome, it can appear to some that the prophecy was

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:10.

⁵⁰ Yocum, 117. Jacobs, 76.

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 13:1-3.

⁵² 2 Kings 20:1-6.

a false prophecy. On the contrary, such prophecies are of the most powerful kind, spurring believers into a ministry of intercession.

4. The fourth possibility is that the conditions of a prophetic word have *not* been met. Often prophetic words have conditions. God may say, “If you will do *this*, then I will do *that*.” Prophetic words should not be viewed as unconditional promises. As Mike Bickle is careful to point out, “Many prophetic words are not guarantees but invitations to cooperate with God.”⁵³ When a person receives a prophetic word that they discern to be a message from God, the first thing to do is to believe it. The second thing to do is to carefully steward opportunities that align with that word. Without the wise stewardship of opportunities and the fulfillment of conditions, the blessing that God had in mind can be missed. A biblical example of prophetic conditions not being met is found in the story of Saul. He was anointed as king, but he did not keep the commandments of God; consequently, the throne was promised to another.⁵⁴

5. A fifth possibility is that the fulfillment of the prophecy is intended for another time. Timing is one factor in prophetic fulfillment that is seldom clear, because God rarely reveals the precise time when something is going to happen. God occupies time, but He also exists beyond time; therefore, He has an entirely different perspective on time than we do. Some prophecies will not come to pass in the season in which we expect fulfillment. When that occurs, we may be inclined to label the prophecy as a false reading regarding the will of God in a matter. It may be best to “shelve” that word rather than “flush” it. Its fulfillment may be reserved for a time yet to come. In the Bible, many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament would fit this category. When some of those Old Testament prophecies were given, there were people who hoped for their complete fulfillment in their own time, but the eventual fulfillment was reserved for the dawn of the New Testament era.

A Checklist for Processing Revelations

Over time, the processing of prophetic revelations can become intuitive. However, when believers are in training mode concerning the prophetic, a checklist may prove helpful. A checklist for processing revelations follows.

1. Is this impression originating from God, or is it the product of my own imagination? If there is doubt, asking the Holy Spirit for a confirming word may prove helpful.

2. Could anything be tainting my perception of what God is saying? For instance, if a person is personally invested into a situation or into the life of another person, it may be difficult to filter out personal biases and preferences in times or prophesying regarding that situation or person.

⁵³ Bickle, 165.

⁵⁴ 1 Samuel 10:1; 13:13-14.

3. What is the purpose of this revelation? Is it just the result of my growing intimacy with Christ, and could it be that He has no other purpose in mind except to share with me His thoughts and His heart? If so, I should consider the possibility that the revelation I am receiving is only for me to ponder. I should remain silent.

Is it just for my training? If so, I should consider the possibility that I should remain silent. Is the Lord just teaching me how to recognize His voice? Am I being tested in my ability to keep His secrets?

Is it just for my own personal edification or guidance? If so, I should remain silent. Is it for the purpose of informing my prayers? Is it for the purpose of prompting my own personal obedience?

Is it to be spoken to others? Am I authorized by the Spirit to speak? It is important to receive the authorization of the Holy Spirit to speak. With the reception of every word of knowledge the prophetic minister should seek a word of wisdom so that he might know what to do with the revelation he has received. It is not difficult to perceive that strong sense of authorization. Ezekiel spoke of his sense of divine authorization in these words: "The spirit which had lifted me up seized me, and I went off spiritually stirred, while the hand of the Lord rested heavily upon me."⁵⁵

Have I been released by church leaders to prophesy? If so, to whom am I to speak? When a revelation is received, it should be spoken to those for whom it is intended. For instance, if the prophecy is of a directional nature for the mission of the church, then that item would be for the elders to hear; they are the ones who would have the authority to act. In such cases, a public declaration of prophetic insight might be premature or even inappropriate.⁵⁶

4. If it is to be spoken to others, how should this prophetic word be delivered? Should it be delivered privately to a particular individual? Should it be delivered publicly to the church?

5. Is now the time to deliver this revelation, or has it been given for a later time?⁵⁷ If in doubt, hold it. If it becomes like a fire within that cannot be held back, now may be the time to speak. If it remains in the realm of doubt or if its significance seems to fade for the moment, it is probably for another time.

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 3:14.

⁵⁶ Floyd McClung, Jr., "The Prophetic Journey," a prophetic ministry conference, Westmore Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 2005.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, 182-183.

6. Is it in the same flow as what God is doing with the service?⁵⁸ Michael Sullivant instructs,

Discern the purpose of any given meeting and the mood and timing within the particular meeting. Come spiritually prepared and “prayed up” rather than relying on the music to help get you into spiritual sync.⁵⁹

He continues,

“Wait for the right timing to speak. Often there comes a sense of the manifest presence of God when it is time to prophesy. Seek to flow with the current of the Spirit’s broader movement and mood in the gathering. Double-check before speaking forth something that will redirect the course of the meeting.”⁶⁰

7. Am I familiar with the local church’s protocol?⁶¹ If in doubt regarding the protocol, ask someone. Remember, that the culture of the house always prevails. Honor the house.

8. Is it a correctional word? Is it a directional word? If so, it should be submitted to the leadership for them to pray over and judge.⁶²

9. Is it a predictive word? If so, be careful about naming dates and times. Be very careful in the areas of “romance, childbirths and money matters.”⁶³ It is advisable for newcomers to the prophetic to refrain from prophesying specifics regarding dates, times, mates, child births and money.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁹ Sullivant, 191.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 192.

⁶¹ Jacobs, 182.

⁶² Ibid., 183.

⁶³ Sullivant, 143.