

How to Discern Truth Amid a Sea of False Prophecies

Four years ago, my friend Fred Wright, the founding coordinator of Partners in Harvest church network, was discussing prophetic ministry with me when he lamented, “If something isn’t done soon, the prophetic movement is dead in five years.”

I knew what he meant.

How many of us have struggled with the failed prophecies of recent years? How about the prophetic frenzy that swirled around the Y2K computer crisis that never materialized? How many remember the Lakeland Revival and the leading prophetic voices declaring it to be “the big one” that would sweep the country and transform the culture? Significant moral failure brought that revival to an ignominious end.

Lately, prominent voices have prophesied words concerning national and world events that would seem to be at odds with one another. For instance, some prophesy an imminent and catastrophic economic crash, while others have prophesied a season of economic prosperity, especially for Christians.

What is a believer to do when well-known prophetic people speak conflicting words? How can we sort the true word from the spirit of error?

Nothing New Under the Sun

The early church had a similar problem. For this reason, the apostle Paul instituted a structure for testing prophetic words spoken in the public assembly. First Corinthians 14:29 says, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment” (NASB).

The word for “pass judgment” in the original Greek means “to separate or discriminate,” implying that New Testament prophetic people didn’t always deliver 100 percent accurate words and that their words therefore needed evaluation to separate the good from the bad.

A false prophet is one who teaches Israel to go after false gods, as established in Deuteronomy 13:1-5. In the absence of that kind of violation, and in light of 1 Corinthians 14:29, then, an inaccurate prophecy doesn’t render the prophet himself false, it just makes him wrong in that instance.

It follows that prophetic words, whether spoken in the public assembly, promoted through electronic media or published in print, must be tested and that we believers therefore carry a responsibility to sort out what we hear. Obviously, we don’t always have access to a 1 Corinthians 14 prophetic presbytery. Ideally, every one of us should be involved in a fellowship of discerning brothers and sisters with whom we can weigh such things, but circumstances too often leave us on our own to figure it out for ourselves. How, then, can the individual believer test what he hears with or without a group of friends to help do it?

While I know of no foolproof method for discerning the accuracy of any given prophetic word—aside from obvious violations of Scripture—I can certainly offer some helpful guidelines. Even when testing by the Scriptures, however, we often come up with differing interpretations and applications of the passages we use. As I heard John Wimber once say at the height of the controversy over the prophetic movement of the 1980s, “The only word God is obligated to fulfill is this Book!”

With so many changing variables, then, we need an unchangeable answer. We must build our lives on the person of Jesus and His Word rather than on prophecy delivered by any human agency.

At the same time, prophecy isn't a human idea, it is God's. He is the one who gifted the church at large with this instrumental operation of the Spirit. Because of that, if we are to include it as a healthy part of both the corporate church and individual believer's lives, then we also need to broaden our understanding of the primary functions of prophecy.

For starters, we must recognize that prophecy is far more than just predicting future events. In contrast to our tendency to give prediction the greatest emphasis, prediction is actually a minor function. The Greek word actually means "to speak forth," not necessarily to predict.

True prophetic ministry calls us to pure and undefiled devotion to God, sealing our hearts to Jesus while sorting the precious from the vile. It brings a revelation of His nature, tearing down what is not of God and then releasing, establishing and building up that which is from God (Jer. 1:10). Even in words of judgment, the predictive element should prepare God's people for things to come, release power for destiny, inject hope and strengthen the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:3).

Helpful Word Tests

Just as currency can be held to the light to determine its validity, so can prophetic words be held up to biblical scrutiny in the light of Jesus. That doesn't mean every word will be clear, precise and definitively understood, but it does mean we can apply tests to see if it is God-breathed. Here are six tests I've learned to apply that have helped me and countless others navigate the waters of prophecy.

Test #1: Does this prophecy stand the test of Scripture?

Never will a true prophetic word contradict any portion of Scripture. This means that we must become biblically literate as believers lest we render ourselves vulnerable to deception

packaged and presented as anointed revelation.

Unfortunately, Bible study has come on hard times these days when much of the body of Christ has become either lazy or focused on supernatural experiences at the expense of grounding in the Word. This must be remedied.

Test #2: Does this word reflect the revealed nature and character of God?

Once again we must turn to the Bible, especially 1 John 4:8: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (NKJV).

For example, in sorting out words predicting God's wrathful judgment in catastrophic economic or natural disasters, we must begin with God's essential nature. Is He really a wrathful judge sitting in the heavens eagerly awaiting His chance to punish us for breaking the rules? Or does He actually reveal Himself as a loving Father who sends ample warnings over extended periods of time, again and again calling His children to turn from destructive ways?

The biblical record shows Him to have sent prophetic voices to plead with Israel over hundreds of years. As Israel failed to listen, God sent judgments—minor disasters in the wider scheme of things—intended as pressure to turn Israel from their destructive and wicked ways and to separate the precious from the vile. Actual wrath came only after long centuries of such pleading. And even then, wrath flowed from the Father's heart of love as a last resort intended to purify Israel when nothing else had worked.

Long before Israel became a people, God in His mercy would have spared Sodom, had there been even 10 righteous in it. Don't you think there are yet the equivalent of 10 righteous in America and the western nations? Judgment has come to separate the precious from the vile, but is not yet wrath. Whether judgment or wrath, a loving Father seeks to restore

His children to Himself. Prophecies devoid of love and hope are at best exaggerated and, at worst, blatantly wrong.

Test #3: Does the prophetic word pass the reality check?

This one calls us to think rationally rather than be carried along by something that stirs our passions. Some of us learned long ago that becoming spiritual doesn't mean we must throw our brains on the table.

For instance, will a coming revival sweep America and restore the nation to its Christian foundations? Forget for a moment who is prophesying such a revival and do the reality check. Where is the surrounding culture headed? What elements need to be present in the culture for there to be that kind of revival, and are those elements present? Are those conditions in place today? Would it therefore be a culture-sweeping revival or something that would manifest in certain islands of glory amid a continuing sea of darkness?

At this point I'm not judging the accuracy of these prophecies of culture-changing revival. I'm saying that as we evaluate the accuracy of any prophetic word, we need to realistically assess the culture in which we live in order to wisely adjust our focus and strategy.

In another example, when prophetic voices declare the imminence of a one-world government, you might want to look at actual trends. Objectively speaking, the world currently trends toward fragmentation, with each ethnic group demanding—and often getting—its own independence and sovereignty. Whether or not in fulfillment of biblical prophecy, if the one-world government actually materializes, it probably won't be soon. Such a prophecy of imminence should be questioned.

In more personal terms, imagine for a moment that you are a musician who receives a prophetic word that you will stand before thousands to play your music. Do you have the skill?

Does the quality of your voice merit star status? How do people actually respond to the songs you write? Or did the so-called prophetic person simply read the ambition in your heart and reflect it back to you as if it were a word from God?

Romans 12:3 says, "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith" (NASB).

Does a reality check validate the word given?

Test #4: Do any concrete realities accompany the prophetic word?

Obviously this flows from the previous test. There will often be some sort of tangible confirming reality embedded in or accompanying the prophecy itself. When God called Moses to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go, the built-in confirmation was a physical burning bush. When Saul, who became Paul, received his call to ministry, he saw a bright light, heard an audible voice and suffered blindness for a few days. These were concrete manifestations accompanying the revelations.

In 1992 I received a flood of prophetic words indicating that God wanted me to plant a church in Denver. I had just resigned from a difficult position as executive pastor of a large church, and I very much wanted to leave town. I told the Lord that if He were truly speaking through those words, He would have to provide three months' worth of income upfront.

The confirming reality came when people attending a conference in Vermont, where I was a speaker, began to give to us. No announcement had been made, but before it was over, those wonderful people had provided one-and-a-half times the amount I had asked of the Lord. A concrete reality accompanied the prophecy.

Obviously, not all true words contain an immediate confirming reality. In such cases, the prophetic word should be prayed over, not lived for, until reality does or does not validate the word.

Test #5: Have you filtered out your emotions?

Human emotions form a kind of lens that distorts the prophetic word, magnifying and adding to it, as it passes through the heart of the prophetic person. Emotions affect the hearer in the same way, shaping what and how we hear. Extreme negative words excite our fears, ignite anticipation and even inflate our sense of pride in knowing something esoterically spiritual.

On the other side, positive words can have the same impact, effectively shielding out the peace flowing from the Father's heart and distorting the word as we allow ourselves to be carried away. We must seek and live in intimacy with the Lord, not the excitement generated by any positive or negative prophetic pronouncement.

I will never forget the months leading up to the 2008 presidential election. I was actually with a group of well-known prophetic people who declared that Sam Brownback, then a senator from Kansas, would be the next president.

First, this reflected an emotional desire to see a conservative candidate in the office and it clouded their hearing. Second, their emotional state prevented a reasoned assessment—a reality check—of the condition and direction of the culture around us. Barack Obama won the election.

Test #6: Have you measured the speaker's fulfillment record?

Before receiving any prophetic word as truth, take time to examine the track record and character of the speaker. While I don't believe the New Testament requires 100 percent accuracy, it does require *substantial* accuracy.

In Acts 11:28, Agabus accurately prophesied a famine so that the body of Christ could prepare in advance. Later, in Acts 21:11, he told Paul that the Jews would arrest him if he went to Jerusalem.

One hundred percent accurate? Not quite. The Romans, not the Jews, arrested him, although they did it in response to Jewish pressure. Agabus' track record for accuracy fell just short of 100 percent, but he was certainly accurate in substance.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22 addresses this kind of scenario: "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

Examine, therefore, the track record of the speaker.

In my opinion, we as a Christian body have done this poorly. When a prophetic speaker's words have failed to be at least substantially accurate over time, we ought to stop listening. The problem is that some prophetic ministers very skillfully stir up excitement, which leads those of us conditioned by our emotionally driven culture to keep listening, even after a demonstrable history of inaccuracy.

In any case, Jesus remains our rock, the One—the *only* one—in whose eternal words we can rest. In Him we place our faith, not in the prophetic pronouncements of fallible men and women. Scripture cannot be broken, but words passing through the hearts of broken men and women certainly can be.

This must not lead us to deny the prophetic gift, but rather to grow in maturity and perhaps to dismantle the pedestals on which we have so perilously placed these precious saints who move in the prophetic gift.

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