

How to Weigh Personal Prophecy

How to discern if someone's "word from the Lord" to you is truly from God

My church was birthed during the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s. At the time, we were comprised mostly of college and high school students. Appointed as an elder at 20 years old, I was one of the older members of our group! We were passionate about Jesus and saw many wonderful miracles of salvation and healing. Worship, baptism of the Holy Spirit and sharing the Good News of Jesus were our primary areas of emphasis.

Although we had great zeal, we didn't have much wisdom. There were few Bible scholars among us, if any—which means we had a steep learning curve to negotiate as we aggressively served God and loved people. But God was good and poured out His grace and mercy on us in abundance.

One of my first challenges as an elder and pastor over this group was to figure out what to do with a personal prophecy given in one of our meetings. In that meeting, a beautiful young girl decided to prophesy over herself. She stood up, put her hand on her head and said something like this: "Be encouraged, daughter of the Lord! For the one I have chosen to be your husband is near you ... even now! He is wearing a red-checkered shirt and has long sideburns. He has not listened to Me, as you have, My daughter. But soon, he will receive My word and ask for your hand in marriage."

She sat back down, wearing a particularly blissful expression on her face. I noticed a young man sitting next to her, wearing a red-checkered shirt and sporting long sideburns. He was sweating bullets with a fearful look on his face.

I didn't know a lot about prophecy at the time, other than it

was something they did in the book of Acts, which we had just been reading. But in my “knower,” I knew this was, most likely, more “knowingin part” than “prophesyingin part”!

I waited until the meeting was over and asked if I could talk to the two of them privately. I remember saying, “Now, this couldbe the word of God, but I suspect it was the word of Julie [not her real name].” I told the young man I didn’t feel he necessarily had to obey the word she’d spoken, since it might not be completely pure. I suggested he seek the Lord and counsel from others he trusted and to make sure he examined it carefully.

The young girl looked a little disappointed. The young man looked very relieved!

What I learned that day is that mistakes can be made in the name of prophecy, especially when we let our desires or emotions become the motivating factor.

Wanted: Discernment

In those days, we heard several budding young prophets trying to spread their wings with words like, “Thus saith the Lord: ‘Yea, Yea, Yea!’” One guy actually said, “Thus saith the Lord ... I forgetteth thy name!”

It was easy to discern that while that particular word may have been coming from a sincere servant, it wasn’t from God, as I was pretty sure an all-knowing God wouldn’t forget a name!

However, we also heard some prophecies and words of knowledge I knew were absolutely accurate from people I knew didn’t have any insider information. Therefore, I felt I needed to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

But how was I to handle judging prophecy? What was I to do with prophetic words that weren’t as clearly discernible?

As the leader of this church, I had to judge something I didn't know much about. I quickly learned there's a potential danger in personal prophecy gone goofy if it goes unchecked by wise and discerning leaders.

But through the years, I've also learned there's an equal danger when the church reacts to poorly led and mismanaged extremes by rejecting or discouraging personal prophecy altogether.

Due to false teachings they've received or the potential confusion that can sometimes accompany prophecy, many church leaders choose to avoid dealing with the prophetic altogether by banning its practice in their churches.

I've discovered over the years, however, that people are hungry for genuine prophetic gifts. One word from God regarding situations in our lives changes everything. In fact, there have been times when I've seen unbelievers who were totally unaware of prophecy come to the Lord in salvation directly due to a prophetic word.

Four Guidelines to Light the Way

In his book *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity*, Eddie Hyatt writes, "For prophecy to be used for its greatest benefit, we must avoid the extremes of a too-controlled or an uncontrolled prophetic ministry. A too-controlled approach will quench the gift altogether, while the uncontrolled approach will inevitably lead to misuse, abuse and disaster." As a pastor and worship leader, I can tell you this balance isn't always easy to achieve.

Having discovered early on the need for God's wisdom in this matter, I decided to read any passage of Scripture I could find about judging or weighing prophecy. What I discovered is that Paul said, in sum, "Prophecy should be judged."

In other words, we *are* to check prophetic words. But how are

we to do that?

A few principles in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 helped me develop guidelines for examining prophecies: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (NIV). Here Paul is saying that if we are to judge prophecy in a way that embraces the good and brings redemptive correction wherever the mark has been missed, we need to be open without being naïve, and we need to discern without being judgmental.

I don’t want to be overly simplistic about what can sometimes be complicated situations, but I’ve since incorporated four guidelines into my ministry that I pray will help you bring forth the precious while identifying and letting the worthless go when it comes to weighing personal prophecy.

Guideline 1: It conforms to the will of the Holy Spirit. God’s Word encourages us to desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy (see 1 Cor. 14:1), but we don’t get to choose which gift we’re given. In fact, 1 Corinthians 12:11 tells us that prophecy is given as the Spirit determines—as He wills. The gifts of the Spirit don’t come from a human spirit; they come from the Holy Spirit. So a person can’t carry or operate them in his or her own will.

For example, I once prophesied over a young man who was dating one of my daughters. It wasn’t my plan to give a prophetic word to this guy. As a dad, I saw it as my job to instill fear in him, not encouragement! I can honestly say it wasn’t something I had willed myself to do—quite the opposite, in fact. However, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to give the word, and so I did. And despite my lack of desire to give this young man a word from the Lord, I was extremely encouraged when he later told me he felt the Lord’s presence in it all. (Full disclosure: This young man is now my son-in-law.)

Guideline 2: It glorifies Jesus above all else. Revelation

19:10 says, “For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus” (NLT). This also coincides with Jesus’ statement that the Holy Spirit would arrive and “glorify [Him]” (John 16:14, NKJV).

Prophecy should never become too human-centered. By that I mean prophecy shouldn’t ever glorify or benefit an individual more than it does Jesus. An example of this would be using prophecy to enhance someone’s status or to manipulate people to give money or accept certain teachings. The Holy Spirit comes to lift up Jesus, and true prophecy will always bring Him glory.

Guideline 3: It is confirmed in the wisdom of counsel.

Proverbs 13:10 tells us wisdom and safety are found in wise counsel. Ask someone you trust who has spiritual discernment to help you weigh what has been prophesied. Talk about it, pray about it and think about it in a way that allows you to process an open application of the prophetic word. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:29, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.” The wisdom of many can help steer us in the right direction when it comes to weighing personal prophecy.

Guideline 4: It is confirmed by the Holy Spirit inside you. I know this may seem too subjective to some, but the final guideline I use is to listen to my “knower”—the Holy Spirit resident in me. I often tell people, “You’ll know in your knower.” I believe the Holy Spirit bears witness within us to help us discern when something is right or wrong, even before we have foolproof evidence.

Paul wrote about this in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit.” And David was speaking along those same lines when he said, “Deep calls unto deep” (Ps. 42:7). There have probably been times in your life when something said or done intuitively felt right in your spirit or somehow felt off. If you’ll listen to the Holy Spirit

within your spirit, you'll grow more spiritually attuned to this kind of discernment.

Identifying the Genuine

Of course, the real test of the accuracy of a prophecy is to see if the prophecy comes to pass. There are some if/then words that come from God: "If you'll do this, then I'll do that." But when a word comes with specifics, such as dates, names and certain concrete things that are to happen, either it happens or it doesn't. Although there is grace for mistakes, public mistakes need to be publicly acknowledged. When we do this, it gives credibility to all genuine prophecy.

It's true that there are people who are gifted to read other people and that some of them exploit that gift to get into others' pocketbooks through manipulation. Their gift is a counterfeit of the genuine gift given by the Holy Spirit. And just like those who are trained to spot counterfeit money by studying the real thing, we must likewise train ourselves to spot genuine prophecy by studying the real thing. Here are some earmarks of genuine prophecy:

- Genuine prophecy is given for confirming and encouraging (see 1 Cor. 14:31).
- Genuine prophecy will build up, stir up and cheer up (see 1 Cor. 14:3).
- Genuine prophecy will never contradict the principles of Scripture (see 2 Tim. 3:16).

On this last point, let me share with you a story. Several years ago, a man came and thanked me for teaching him how to hear the voice of the Lord for himself. He went on to say he had disobeyed the Lord but that now he heard Him clearly and was making some changes in order to obey what he had heard. He said he felt the Lord tell him he had married the wrong woman and that the one whom the Lord had really intended him to marry was his secretary. The man told me he was about to start

divorce proceedings!

When he finished his story and began to thank me again, I interrupted him. I told him there was no doubt he'd heard a voice, but it wasn't the voice of the Lord. When he asked me why, I said, "Because a prophetic word will never contradict the principles of Scripture." I told him that though there may be biblical reasons for divorcing, his reason definitely didn't fit in that category. I encouraged him to go home to his wife, ask for her forgiveness and then seek counseling. Unfortunately, he decided I was the one who wasn't hearing from God, and their marriage fell apart.

Let me say this as clearly as I can: *We must not allow personal prophecy to usurp the place of Scripture, prayer, godly counsel or the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives.*

Use the guidelines laid out here to protect God's expression in your life and surrounding community. When you bear witness or agree with a word, you can affirm and encourage the one who gave it. But if a word is given that you're unsure of, the most loving thing you can do is to examine, weigh and judge that word carefully while kindly and openly communicating with those giving and receiving the word. This is required if you are a pastor, elder or leader, but it's also true if you're a friend or a mentor to those involved.

If you feel you must disagree or question a prophecy, do this as redemptively as possible, with humility. You always want to handle yourself in a way that protects the dignity of others. If you're a pastor or church leader, remember personal mistakes you've made in the past as you lead in this area of ministry, because it will give you a gentle compassion as you guide and correct those ministering in the prophetic.

John Wimber once said, "Sometimes God offends our mind to reveal our heart." At times, we can immediately see what a prophetic word means in our lives, and it's easy to trust God

because we understand. But sometimes, when it's hard to understand a prophetic word's meaning, it's good to follow the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, when Gabriel announced God's word to her: to hold the word in our hearts and choose to trust God to either confirm the word or let it be revealed as inaccurate.

In all these things, it's clear we must be careful and discerning. Above all else, let us thank God for His amazing grace and for choosing to speak to us through His Holy Spirit still today.

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