

Why We Must Recover Healthy Prophetic Ministry

What do you think about all those recent prophetic words that turned out to be so far off? Do you still believe God speaks through people?"

It was an uncomfortable question I'd encountered in the past. Let's face it—the prophetic movement has not been without its controversies. But this question came from an unbeliever. Despite his doubts and my discomfort, it was not blasphemous. And we in the church must consider this question so we can recover and champion healthy prophetic ministry.

Years ago a prophetic minister visited our church and held some meetings. One of our eager young leaders was a newlywed, and his wife was a few months pregnant. The visiting prophetic minister called out this couple and gave them a prophetic word that included a prediction that the child she was carrying would be a boy, and he would be named Christopher.

My heart sank because I knew this type of prophecy was risky and unwise. When the child was born, it was a girl. Not only did this shock and confuse the couple (and all who remembered the prophetic word), but it also seriously undermined the young father's affection for his newborn daughter. He was so eager to be in God's will that he struggled with a result that was different than "what God said."

If you look at what's going on in the prophetic movement today, you may see similar problems. There is an overwhelming array of prophetic ministries, books, seminars and YouTube channels pumping out volumes of prophetic content in various forms on a continual basis. And while there are many examples of healthy prophetic ministry out there, much of it is unhealthy and even dangerous.

How can we tell the good from the bad when it comes to prophetic ministry? Here are five ways we can recover and safely enjoy the many blessings of prophetic ministry in the church:

Understand the purpose of prophecy. Prophecy is one of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit described in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10. A prophecy is simply a message inspired by the Holy Spirit and communicated by a believer. Paul makes it clear some in the body of Christ carry a gift of prophecy, but what's interesting is that he also encourages every believer to desire to both receive and exercise prophetic ministry (see 1 Cor. 14:1, 26-30, 39).

The purpose of prophecy is to strengthen us spiritually and make us more like Jesus. Paul explained it this way: "When someone prophesies, he speaks to encourage people, to build them up, and to bring them comfort ... the one who prophesies builds up the church" (1 Cor. 14:3-4, TPT). Ultimately, a healthy prophetic word brings the right message to the right people at the right time in the right way.

God is a communicator—He speaks and reveals His mind to us in many ways. This means prophecy is a huge blessing because we all need the assurance and comfort of God's voice. Healthy prophetic ministry can even convince the lost: "But if all prophesy and there comes in one who does not believe or one unlearned, he is convinced by all and judged by all. Thus the secrets of his heart are revealed. And so falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you" (1 Cor. 14:24-25, MEV).

It must be said that prophecy is never equivalent to Scripture. Prophecy is a partial revelation of a limited aspect of the mind of God. It comes as a human perception of a divine thought clothed with human words. As such, it is fallible. Only the Bible provides a complete revelation of the essential aspects of God's mind for our lives (2 Tim. 3:16).

Still, it is important to remember that Scripture itself validates and directs prophetic ministry.

Champion healthy prophetic ministry. It always amazes me when people attack all prophetic ministry. While they drone on about how some prophetic ministers have made mistakes and how “prophecies shall cease” according to 1 Corinthians 13:8, they forget something important: Prophets and prophetic ministry are championed in Scripture.

Consider just a few of the many verses that do so. Ephesians 2:20 says the church rests on a foundation of apostolic and prophetic ministry. Among other ministries, prophets function “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of service, and for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, into a complete man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13). How can we reject what has been created by God to mature us and make us like Christ?

When people point to examples of failed prophetic ministry, I remind them there are also examples of abuse and neglect in preaching, health care, banking, parenting and every other sphere of human life. Shall we throw all of that away as well? Should our immaturity or imperfection be grounds for shutting down prophetic ministry altogether? Remember, when Paul said, “I desire that you all speak in tongues, but even more that you prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:5a), his audience was the church at Corinth—hardly an elite group of mature believers.

We should never overlook the value of healthy prophetic ministry. Many of us have greatly benefited by welcoming seasoned prophetic voices into our lives. An example of this occurred when a friend and prophetic minister prophesied in our annual leadership conference several years ago. As she spoke into the future of our movement of churches, she encouraged us all. One key phrase in her prophetic word caught my wife’s attention, and she recalled it months later when our

local government began closing churches during the coronavirus pandemic. That small but precise phrase became like a divine green light in our decision to fight in court for the right to reopen our church. We battled for the right to gather all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States—and won! By remembering and responding to a sound prophetic word, we were able to see hundreds of other churches reopen as well.

Healthy prophetic ministry will remain central to God's plan for the church until we are complete in Christ. Rather than steering us away from prophecy, Scripture is filled with evidence that God loves prophets and prophecy, and He wants plenty of it in our lives. Our focus needs to be on celebrating healthy prophetic ministry, not requiring that it be perfect.

Respect boundaries in prophetic ministry. To stay healthy, we need to establish limits and boundaries in every area of life. Too often, we assume that anything goes in prophetic ministry, and that's a problem. God authorizes prophetic ministry within specific boundaries, and when we ignore them, we're asking for trouble. Three dimensions of authority that will help to keep us "in bounds" with prophetic ministry:

The Gift of Prophecy (Rev. 19:10): When an atmosphere is charged with God's Spirit, almost anyone can prophesy, regardless of their maturity. The spirit of prophecy refers to an atmosphere where the voice of God is easily heard by anyone who is listening (see Num. 11:24-30; Rom. 12:6;

1 Cor. 14:31). For example, the spirit of prophecy was released when Paul laid hands on the new believers at Ephesus who received the Holy Spirit and prophesied (Acts 19:5).

The Gift of Prophecy (1 Cor 12:10): As mentioned, this is a gift the Holy Spirit gives some believers. Still, every gift needs to be guided by Scripture and developed under the supervision of mature mentors. Even though we may have a gift,

proper restraints must be in place so we don't go too far in directing others or foretelling coming events—a function reserved for those authorized at a higher level (see Acts 2:17; Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10, 14:1-5).

The Office of a Prophet (Eph. 4:11): This is an extension of Christ's earthly ministry as opposed to a gift coming from the Holy Spirit. This highest dimension of prophetic ministry carries much more authority than the other two. All prophets have the gift of prophecy, but not all who prophesy are prophets—that's important. Only established prophets should venture beyond the gift of prophecy into prophetic prediction, correction or direction (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28-29, Eph. 2:20, 4:11; 1 Tim. 4:14).

Keeping these three levels clear is important because it reinforces healthy boundaries. No one should ever assume a level of prophetic authority that has not been given to them by God. Even though I am born again, I don't drive 18-wheel trucks, practice medicine or create laws. I'm not qualified or authorized to do those things. In the same way, if each of us respects boundaries in prophetic ministry, we'll be safe and healthy.

Test the source of every prophetic message. Hearing God's voice brings a challenge with it: Inevitably, when we release even well-meaning people to prophesy, we run into mistakes and messes. Prophecy has limitations and must be evaluated to help determine our response to it (1 Cor. 14:29). In fact, the Bible mentions another gift of the Spirit, the discerning of spirits, right next to the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 12:10). If prophecy were intended to be perfect, why would it need to be evaluated and discerned? I tell our people, "Prophecy is like milk. It can go bad, so smell it carefully before you swallow it."

Some cases of imperfect prophecy require no action in response. Years ago, I heard about a young man who was

prophesying about “Shadrach, Meshach and Labingo.” He made an innocent mistake, as humans often do. Maybe that’s why Scripture says, “Do not despise prophecies. Examine all things. Firmly hold onto what is good” (1 Thess. 5:20-21).

In other cases, prophecies can become unhealthy or even dangerous in their impact, and they need to be corrected. In my mind, what happened with many recent controversial prophecies in the United States could have been born of foolish sensationalism or an immature desire for fame. Thankfully, several of the prophets involved corrected themselves and apologized. I deeply respect them for that. In any case, discerning the quality and origin of every prophetic word should be standard procedure for every believer.

In retrospect, I was uncomfortable with my unsaved friend’s question about failed prophecies because I felt embarrassed and conflicted. I love the church, and I value prophetic ministry, but it’s clear that we have drifted into some dangerous waters.

Is it costing us our credibility? I believe we can do better. Healthy prophetic ministry is within our reach if we can honestly face the questions people are rightly asking, dig out the answers in God’s Word and recover the purity of this important ministry. It is vital that we do for both those inside the church and outside it.

In the end, I swallowed hard and offered my doubting friend this response: “I understand where you’re coming from, but God does speak through people, and we need to hear what He says. Those prophecies were wrong, but the Bible lays out a framework for sorting out the healthy prophetic words from the unhealthy ones. When it comes to faith in supernatural things, we really only have three options: We can be cynical, gullible or reasonable. To me, listening for what God might be saying and sorting things out is reasonable. When My Creator is speaking, I want to hear what He’s saying.”

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