

After the 2020 Election, Can We Salvage the Gift of Prophecy?

It's been more than two months since Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. Some people rejoiced that day because their candidate won. Supporters of Donald Trump mourned the loss, and some of them claimed that voter fraud occurred in several states. It was one of the most contentious elections in my lifetime—and the anger exploded on Jan. 6 when activists stormed the U.S. Capitol.

In the midst of the hateful name-calling, some Christian leaders were thrust into the national spotlight because they prophesied—in the name of Jesus—that Trump would be reelected. In the embarrassing aftermath, some prophets apologized; others dug in their heels and announced that Trump would still be installed in office during Biden's term. Still others said Trump actually did win the election, but they insisted that miscounted votes skewed the outcome.

In the end, we were left with a mess. Some voters lost faith in the integrity of elections. Democrats impeached Trump even when he was out of office because of the Capitol insurrection. And Congress is more bitterly divided than at any time in our history.

Meanwhile, Christians are left wondering about the gift of prophecy. Is it real? Can we trust any leader again to say, "Thus says the Lord," about anything? Believers were left scratching their heads as they listened to Christians scream at each other from both sides of the political aisle.

I kept my mouth shut during the early days of this disaster. The Bible says we are to pray for those in authority "so that

we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim. 2:2b, NASB1995). I've seen very little tranquility, godliness or dignity during the past year, so I'll keep praying. My prayers, and yours, are certainly more powerful than any article I could write.

But after taking time to pray, and to calm my own nerves, I'm ready to share three things I've learned from this unfortunate fiasco:

1. **New Testament prophecy has a specific redemptive purpose.** When I teach about prophecy to ministry school students, I always start with 1 Corinthians 14:3: "But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation [comfort]." Prophecy conveys God's heart to His people; it encourages us and propels us into His purpose. Prophecy is like God's wind in our sails. It is not for fortunetelling or prediction as much as it is to impart God's strength into His people. It gives us the hope of God's promises.

In recent years we've created a cottage industry of charismatic prophets who sell books, do podcasts and make predictions about elections, global disasters and even Super Bowl winners. People chase these prophets to get the latest scoop on world events—while the genuine gift of prophecy is neglected. While biblical prophecy can be predictive, it is not focused on foretelling tomorrow's headlines. We should stop looking for the sensational and get back to encouraging people!

2. **Prophesying about politics is divisive.** The last time I checked, my Bible says those who divide God's people into camps are actually quenching the Holy Spirit. Paul rebuked the Corinthians because they separated themselves into ethnic and theological camps, "of Paul," "of Apollos," "of Cephas" and even "of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 1:12). We've done the same thing today, only we are

“of Trump,” “of Biden,” “of conservatives” or “of progressives.” We should be ashamed of ourselves for splintering the body of Christ.

This doesn't mean we can't stand for what we believe, campaign for candidates or work to further civic goals. We need Christians in the public arena; we are the salt of the earth. But the pulpit of a church is not the place for a campaign rally. A minister carries a special responsibility to call a congregation to focus on the kingdom of God.

In the last election, some preachers denounced Trump and said Biden was the only candidate for people of faith; other preachers denounced Biden and made Trump into a Messiah figure. It would be better for every leader to challenge God's people to vote their consciences and leave the political dogfight alone.

That doesn't mean we don't stand for righteousness or denounce ungodly laws. But ungodliness exists on both sides of our political system, and if we refuse to admit that, we align ourselves with darkness. Unless our message transcends politics, we can no longer be a prophetic people.

3. This isn't the first time prophecy has been misused. In the 1980s, Christian leaders told us Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was the Antichrist. Then when he died, they said it was Yuri Andropov. Then they said it was Mikhail Gorbachev. Guess what? None of those Soviet communists led a worldwide revolt against God. All those leaders died, and the gospel kept spreading in Russia.

Since then, “prophets” predicted a Y2K disaster in 2000 that never happened; one famous prophet predicted a California earthquake disaster; and a few bestselling authors said the world would end on a certain day. Their failed prophecies discredited them, but that doesn't mean we throw out the authentic gift of prophecy.

I'm not saying God can't give someone a prophecy about an election. But the apostle Paul said, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part" (1 Cor. 13:9). Nobody has the whole story. In cases like this we have to be very careful that we aren't promoting our own wishes or biases in the name of the Lord. And we must never use a spiritual gift to manipulate people.

When the real gift of prophecy is in operation, it brings encouragement, comfort and strength to the church—and it never distracts us from Jesus. Let's ponder the mistakes of 2020, learn from them and ask God to help us use prophecy in a healthy way. {eo}

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