

Don't Let the Gift of Prophecy Get Weird

When I was in college, a visiting minister regularly came to preach at our on-campus Christian meetings. At the end of his sermons he would often point at someone in the room, smile and say something like, "You in the blue shirt, I believe the Lord has a word of encouragement for you." Then he would prophesy to them.

This freaked me out! How could this man know what God was saying to someone else? What if he was wrong? I love the gift of prophecy because I had benefitted from it myself. But I remember telling the Lord back in those days that I would never prophesy to an individual in front of a crowd.

Years later, during a trip to China, a church leader asked me to meet with a group of ministers in a conference room. When I arrived, the leader told my translator that she wanted me to prophesy over 14 underground pastors who were already seated around a table.

In that awkward moment I prayed a desperate prayer—*Lord, help!* Ninety minutes later I finished prophesying over all those people. The Lord used an insecure American guy to encourage those brave Chinese leaders—and I have prophesied to many people since then.

Prophecy is a powerful spiritual gift when it is used correctly. Paul told the Corinthians (who had been abusing charismatic gifts) that genuine prophecy has three important functions: (1) *edification*, (2) *exhortation* and (3) *consolation* (see 1 Cor. 14:3). When we give a word from God, it comforts the weary, encourages the fainthearted and propels people into God's purposes.

Genuine prophecy is one of the most potent weapons in God's

arsenal. But if we aren't careful, the gift can be hijacked—either by devious spiritual con artists or by gullible Christians who don't have proven character or a solid foundation in God's Word. This is why the gift of discernment should operate alongside prophecy at all times.

People often ask my opinion about the frequent abuses of prophecy we see today. My alarm bells often go off when I read some of the prophetic messages people claim are from God. These messages usually have one or more of these characteristics:

1. Preoccupation with end-time predictions. In the 1980s, Christian leaders prophesied that Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was the Antichrist. Then when he died, they said it was Yuri Andropov; later they said it was Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet none of those Soviet communists led a worldwide revolt against God. All three died, and the gospel kept spreading in Russia.

"Prophets" also predicted that the whole world was going to plunge into darkness in the year 2000 when the electrical grid was supposed to fail. But the dreaded "Y2K" disaster never happened. A few bestselling authors also said God told them the world would end on a certain day—and those predictions fell to the ground. Jesus already told us that no man knows the day or the hour of His return—so predicting that date is off limits.

2. Overemphasis on dreams. God can certainly speak through dreams. But the apostle Paul (whom we are called to imitate) received most of his guidance from the Holy Spirit while he was awake. Some ministers today spend too much time in the pulpit describing their technicolor dreams—and this could actually lead people into error if the dream has more to do with pepperoni than biblical revelation. Always make sure your spiritual experiences are in agreement with God's Word!

3. Fascination with exotic visions and manifestations. Our movement has been invaded in recent years by many questionable influences—from New Age spirits to stigmata to a bizarre fixation on gold dust, gems, “angel” feathers and “manna.” Several years ago in Illinois, a church drew crowds because giant red and blue gems were supposedly falling from the ceiling during worship. The visitors stopped coming after the guy in charge of the meetings ran off with a woman who was not his wife. (The “gems,” as it turned out, were from a craft store.)

4. Worship of elite prophets. It has become fashionable today to drop the names of certain prophets in order to establish credibility. After all, if Prophet So-and-So said it, it must be true. Some of these prophets are quoted more often than Scripture—and such glorification of people borders on blasphemy. Groups that focus their attention on hyper-spiritual personalities and their prophecies can quickly drift into cultic behavior.

5. Injecting politics into the prophetic. Some Christian leaders brought shame on the gift of prophecy because they announced during the 2020 presidential campaign that Donald Trump would be reelected. In the embarrassing aftermath, some prophets apologized and retracted their words. Others dug in their heels and announced that Trump would still be installed in office during President Biden’s term.

Still others said Trump actually won the election; they insisted that miscounted votes skewed the outcome. In the end we were left with a prophetic mess. Believers were left scratching their heads as they listened to Christians scream at each other from both sides of the political aisle.

It’s time now for a new generation of Christians to sort things out, learn from the mistakes of the past and begin using God’s gifts the way He intended.

The purpose of any genuine spiritual gift is to edify the church so that we can fulfill the Great Commission. If our main goal is to win souls, plant healthy churches, make disciples and advance the gospel around the world, then prophecy can help us do those things. But if we focus on spiritual gifts as an end in themselves, our distraction will lead us into deception of the weirdest kind. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus.

J. Lee Grady was editor of *Charisma* for 11 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs the *Mordecai Project* (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest book is *Set My Heart on Fire* (Charisma House).