

Getting the Weirdness Out of the Prophetic Movement

Let's reclaim the simple, profound purpose of prophecy—and reject all sensational substitutes.

When

I was a college student, a visiting minister regularly came to preach at our campus meetings. At the end of his messages 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.

This

freaked me out! How could this man know what God was saying to someone else?

What if he was wrong? I loved 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, ever stand in front of a group and prophesy to an individual like that.

Way too scary!

“If we focus on spiritual gifts as an end in themselves, our distraction will lead us into deception of the weirdest kind. Let's get our eyes back on Jesus.”

Then,

during a trip to China in 2000, an underground church leader asked me to come to a room in the hotel to meet with a group of ministers. When I arrived, the

leader told my translator that she wanted me to prophesy over 14 ministers who were already seated around a table. I was cornered! I prayed a desperate prayer—“*Help!*”—and 90 minutes later I finished praying and prophesying over all those people. The Lord used a scared and insecure American guy to encourage those brave warriors—and I have prophesied to many people since then.

I believe 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, propels them toward God’s purpose or breaks spiritual obstacles.

Genuine prophecy is one of the most potent weapons in God’s arsenal. But if we are not 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.

Several people have recently asked my opinion about some of the “prophetic buzz” circulating in churches these days. I’m not the only one who

is becoming increasingly concerned about the weirdness that is evident in some charismatic camps. My alarm bells often go off when I read some of the prophetic messages people are claiming to be from God. These messages usually have one or more of these characteristics:

1. Preoccupation with end-time predictions. No prominent prophet in the United States issued a clear warning about the recent earthquake in Japan. But in the aftermath of that disaster, many began to release dire predictions of subsequent quakes—stirring up doom and gloom among the saints. Now some are predicting explosions on the sun that will knock out all electrical power on earth. God never intended prophecy to cripple His church with fear. His word brings comfort, not foreboding.

2. Obsession with numbers. There is certainly a place for symbolic numbers in the Bible. But many prophets today seem to think that every number they see on a clock or a billboard is a message from God. God is not cryptic with His sons and daughters—He wants to speak to us plainly. His will is not a secret code to be deciphered.

3. Overemphasis on dreams. Of course we know God can 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 are spending 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. Stay focused on the Word!

4. 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.” In most cases those who claim the substances are real won’t have them verified. In Illinois, a church drew crowds because of reports that giant red and blue gems were falling from the ceiling. The people stopped coming after the guy in charge of the supposed supernatural display ran off with a woman who was not his wife. Please remember that everything that glitters is not gold.

5. Worship of elite prophets. It has become fashionable in parts of our movement 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.

How do we avoid being deceived by false prophecy and unhealthy spiritual phenomena? The best way I know is to get

our priorities in
line with God's Word.

The purpose of any genuine spiritual gift is to edify the church so 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 get our eyes back on Jesus.

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