

There's a Big Difference Between Prophecy and Manipulation

I love the gift of prophecy, and the Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:1 that we should desire to use it. I love to see people strengthened and encouraged by a personal word from God. But spiritual gifts, much like guns, can be misused—and when prophecy is misfired it always hurts people. That's why we need more training on the healthy use of the gift of prophecy.

Over the years I've seen a lot of spiritual abuse perpetrated by so-called prophets who said things in the name of the Lord to manipulate people or to push their own opinions or agendas. A few years ago, I had to pray for a married couple who had been told by a "prophet" in their church that God was going to kill them because they should never have married.

This sweet couple struggled for years under a dark cloud of condemnation because this person used super-spiritual words to plant seeds of doubt about their relationship. Thankfully, after prayer, they rejected the false prophecy (which was really a curse), and they experienced freedom from the misguided words.

Witchcraft isn't something we typically associate with Christians. Yet the word "witchcraft" or "sorcery" appears in a list of sins in Galatians 5 that the apostle Paul identified as "deeds of the flesh" (v. 20, NASB). While we normally associate witchcraft with demonic spiritual forces, Paul said it is a natural byproduct of the corrupt human nature.

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Witchcraft can be defined as any effort on the part of an individual to employ ungodly spiritual means to dominate, control or manipulate others. Witchcraft invades a church when people use deception or false spirituality to accomplish their own goals—whether to remove a pastor, push a personal or group agenda or to elevate a person in the eyes of people. We recently learned from the scandal involving the International House of Prayer that prophecy can even be used to lure an unsuspecting victim into sexual abuse.

If you want to protect yourself and your church from spiritual manipulation and control, keep these guidelines in mind:

1. True prophets are humble and teachable. People who walk in the Holy Spirit don't elevate themselves or claim "special access" to God. They also have healthy relationships. Meanwhile, those who operate in the spirit of witchcraft often pull away from others in an effort to appear superior. They are typically lone rangers, and they don't submit their "words" to others for accountability. If you dare to challenge their "revelations," they will reject all correction and claim they are being persecuted.

2. True prophets encourage and edify the church. The apostle Paul said true prophecy is given for the purpose of "edification, exhortation, and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3b). The New Living Translation says: "But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them." This is not what happens when witchcraft is involved. False prophecy brings confusion, speculation, mysticism and condemnation, and it often draws attention to the prophet.

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3. True prophets are grounded in God's Word. A person operating in the genuine gift of prophecy will always refer to

the Bible, and nothing they prophesy will ever contradict Scripture. Beware of prophets who only quote other famous prophets or make constant reference to visions, angelic encounters or other mystical experiences that seem to legitimize messages that aren't solid biblically. God gives you discernment for a reason. Learn to use it! Any prophet who gives off a weird or cultish vibe should be scrutinized.

In the early church, the philosophy of Gnosticism was a serious threat. Gnostics believed that salvation could be obtained by tapping into a secret source of divine knowledge reserved for an elite few. This concept is often promoted in our churches today. Some leaders boast of receiving "new" revelations that other Christians have not recognized.

If witchcraft is not checked, whole churches will sometimes adopt attitudes of superiority because they embraced new doctrines regarding baptism, spiritual warfare, prayer methods or views of the end times. They assume their remarkable knowledge sets them on a higher plane than ordinary Christians—and the result is pride, division and eventual spiritual collapse.

4. True prophets pursue the fruit of the Spirit. We should all want the power of God. But power without character is dangerous. God calls us to seek both the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit so the church can be protected from ungodly spiritual agendas. When we walk in humility and love, only Jesus receives the glory—and no prophet is placed on a pedestal. Let's put away spiritual immaturity and learn to walk in the fullness of the Spirit's anointing.

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