

Judging Prophecy

by Bill Scheidler

Prophecy is a precious gift of the Spirit that has been given to the church for the blessing of God's people. When it is functioning as God designed, it has a tremendous ability to bless, strengthen, encourage, motivate, inspire, lift, envision and challenge.

But, at the same time, prophecy that is abused or given in an unbiblical way can do serious damage, bring confusion and unrest, and misguide or mislead believing people who are sincerely looking for direction, divine counsel and a "word from God" for their life.

For this reason, Paul indicates in I Corinthians 14:29 that prophecy is to be judged. This is not real easy for us because we do understand that prophecy is a gift of the Spirit and because of the manner in which prophecy is given. When person gives a prophecy, it is usually given in the first person as if God is speaking (and indeed He is).

For this reason, it is easy for us to feel that if we judge this prophecy, we are in some way judging the Spirit of God. No one wants to put him or herself in such a position. And yet, God makes it clear that prophecy is not to be viewed as infallible. This means that it is not to be taken on the same level as the written word of God.

Prophecy comes through people who are fallible and can be effected by many different things that could have a bearing on a prophecy that might be given. For this reason godly people need to be discriminating as they listen to prophetic words and make a decision as to whether they are indeed from God in part or in full.

The Need for Judgment

Judging prophecy is very difficult for people to do, because it is difficult to judge the word without judging the person who is giving the word. No one wants to seem argumentative or to call another person into question. However, if prophecy is not judged, we do open ourselves up to being seriously misled in our walk with the Lord.

Christ was the only infallible ministry. Every person born into the world must contend with sinful tendencies that can flavor any action that they take. The Bible indicates that there will be false ministries. There will be false teachers, pastoral hirelings, false apostles and false prophets.

In addition, even valid ministries who have a good heart can "miss it" when it comes to giving counsel or uttering prophecy because it is so easy to get emotionally involved in situations and find oneself sharing ones own words or desires rather than a pure word from God.

Tests for the Prophetic

When testing prophecy there are several factors that should play into our judgment in the matter:

1. Test #1 - The Written Word of God

The written Word of God is the ultimate criterion for judging prophecy (II Timothy 3:16). If the prophetic word is not in harmony with the Scripture it is to be rejected (Isaiah 8:19-20). Failure to do this can cause people to run the risk of placing prophecy on the same level as the Word of God. This will cause instability and will open the person up to being seriously misled.

2. Test #2 - The Spirit or the Manner in which the Word is given.

The spirit in which the "word" is ministered can also be an indicator of its authenticity. While God has used the manner and mannerisms of prophet in unusual ways at times, the general rule is that prophecy will minister edification, exhortation and comfort (I Corinthians 14:3) and lead to peace (I Corinthians 14:33).

The Holy Spirit may bring a rebuke, but most often it will be done in a pastoral way. Often when a word is harsh in its delivery it is because the person doing the prophesying is personally upset about something and is letting their own feelings or emotions about the matter enter into their message.

3. Test #3 - The Conduct and Personal Life of the Prophet

God can certainly overrule the nature of the person prophesying and cause a true word to come forth from any vessel. If He can overrule the nature of a donkey, He can work through anyone. However, God's usual method of working is to speak through vessels who have set themselves aside in holiness and dedication to the Lord.

When a prophet has a lifestyle that is ungodly, it brings the words that they speak into question (Jeremiah 23:15-16; II Peter 2:2). Ministries who have learned a life of daily obedience to God have also learned to hear the "still small voice" of the Spirit. Their words can be trusted more readily. The gifts of the Spirit must be motivated and impelled by the fruit of the Spirit. This will help ensure that the fruit of the prophecy is in line with the fruit of the Spirit.

4. Test #4 - The Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit.

Since every true believer is inhabited by the Spirit of God and there is only one Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God within the believer should attest to the Spirit of God in the prophet (I Corinthians 2:11-14).

The inner peace of the Holy Spirit in this sense is a guiding force to help us discern whether or not this is a true word for us. God is not the author of confusion. If there is a lot of confusion in a person's spirit after the prophecy is given, the prophecy should be "put on the shelf" until peace returns.

The believer should be cautioned, however, not to take any prophecy lightly. They should spend specific time in prayer regarding its content and ask the Lord whether there might be any truth to it.

5. Test #5 - The Confirmation of other Witnesses

If a word is to be established, it should be confirmed "in the mouth of two or three witnesses" (II Corinthians 13:1). These "witnesses" could include several things. One witness could be other prophetic ministries. Another witness could be pastors and other church leaders. Another witness could be parents and those that God has put over our lives. Even circumstances and other events in our lives that are almost like "divine coincidences" can bear witness to the authenticity of a prophetic word.

6. Test #6 - The Edification by the Word Given

If a prophetic utterance is from the Lord, it should build up, admonish and encourage the people of God (I Corinthians 14:3). If it does not accomplish this, it must be rejected. If the word is confusing, condemning, discouraging and brings a heaviness to an otherwise peaceful, uplifting setting, it is probably not from the Lord.

This is not to say that there is never a time or place for prophecy that is correctional in nature. But prophecy of this nature should be carefully screened by the leadership of the church and should still be ministered in a pastoral way so that the listener can more easily receive it.

7. Test #7 - The Fulfillment of the Word Given

If the prophetic word that is given is predictive in nature and it does not come to pass, the prophecy is not a true prophecy. This sounds so obvious, but it is amazing how people will try to "weasel out" of an inaccurate or presumptuous prophecy by accusing God of changing His mind, by blaming others for a lack of faith or prayer or by the claim that the Lord was only testing them.

The more a person brings forth inaccurate words, the more their prophecies will be considered suspect. Prophets whose words did not come to pass were not to be feared (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). In the Old Testament the erring prophet could actually be put to death. Today, we will most likely just ask them not to prophesy in the future.

8. Test #8 - The Exaltation of Jesus

If prophecy is to be proper in all of its aspects, it must ultimately exalt the Lord and bring glory to Him and Him alone (I Peter 4:1). The result of prophecy is that people should see Jesus and be drawn to Him (I Corinthians 14:25-25). Indeed John proclaims in the Book of Revelation that the "testimony of Jesus" is the spirit of prophecy (19:10), or as one translation says, "It is the truth concerning Jesus that inspires all prophecy" (Knox).

In the Old Testament even if the prophets words were true and came to pass, but the net result was that people were turned away from the Lord by their ministry, that prophet was to be considered false (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

The caution here is that we must never let anything be the center of the prophetic experience but Jesus. We must not let our focus be on the individual through whom the prophecy comes, or on an institution, or on a method or style. All prophecy should inspire the worship of Jesus.

Who Judges the Prophetic?

There are various levels of judgment that should be operating in relation to prophecy. Each level of judgment should minimize the need for deeper levels of judgment. When everyone takes their God-given responsibility for the prophetic, we can grow in our confidence that prophecy will always edify and build up the people of God.

1. Judgment Level #1 - The One Giving the Prophecy

The Bible clearly teaches that the "spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (I Corinthians 14:32). The Spirit of God does not overrule the will of man. When someone prophesies, they cannot say, "The Spirit made me do it." They cannot blame the Spirit of God for forcing them to prophesy in either an inopportune time or in an inappropriate manner. The Bible clearly teaches that we are responsible for what we say and do. Other translations of this same passage help us to understand more fully what is being said in this passage.

"Remember that a person who has a message from God has the power to stop himself and wait his turn" (Living Bible).

"And the gift of prophecy does not take from the prophets the control of their own spirits." (Conybeare).

In other words, people have total control of themselves when they give a prophetic utterance. It was the prophets who were associated with pagan temples that claimed they were overtaken by the gods and prophesied with an ecstatic frenzy. True prophets are to exercise control of their prophetic gift.

Paul said that if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged (I Corinthians 11:31). While Paul was not speaking specifically about prophecy, self-analysis is clearly the first level of judgment that must take place in respect to any prophecy. This self-judgment should take place before the person who receives what they believe to be a word from God gives the prophecy.

The individual needs to render judgment on the content of his or her own word when measured against the word of God. Before they prophesy, they need to ask themselves some important questions.

- a. Is this word consistent with what the Bible says? Does it contradict the Scripture or violate any biblical principles?
- b. Will this word bring edification, exhortation or comfort?
- c. For whom is this word to be given? Is this a personal word for me or is it for the entire church?
- d. Am I a committed member of this church with a demonstrated love for and loyalty to the individual members of this congregation?
- e. Why do I want to give this word at this time? Is it in my heart to strengthen the church and its leadership?
- f. What is my personal attitude toward the congregation at this time? The pastor? The leadership?
- g. Is there any bitterness or lack of forgiveness in my spirit that might taint the word that is to be given?

- h. Is this word consistent with what God has been saying to the Church in this season? In this service?
- i. What seems to be the best time, place and context for this word to be given? Public setting? Private setting?
- j. What is the tone in which this word should be spoken?
- k. What is the manner in which the word is to be given? Orally to the pastor? Orally to the congregation? In writing to the pastor? Prophesied, exhorted or prayed?
- l. Is this the type of word that the pastor should be aware of before it is given to the congregation?
- m. Am I overstepping my authority in this congregation to give a word of this nature?
- n. Will this word put the pastor and leadership on the spot in front of the congregation? Am I painting myself, or anyone else, in a corner with this word?
- o. Am I using prophecy to bring a rebuke that I feel is needed, to speak my mind concerning the program or the vision of the church, or to get a major concern that I have off of my chest?
- p. Am I willing to allow this word of mine to be judged by others without feeling like everyone must agree with my personal analysis of it?
- q. Am I willing not to give this word if the leadership of the church feels that it is inappropriate?
- r. If this is a personal word for an individual, am I willing to request the presence of an appropriate person to listen to and judge this word?
- s. If my prophetic utterance proves to be inaccurate or does not come to pass, am I willing to take personal responsibility for it without blaming others for the result? Would I be willing to make a public statement acknowledging my error?

All of these questions will help the prophet minimize mistakes in the area of prophecy. But if this is to truly take place, a heartfelt desire for the serious evaluation of prophecy must be in the spirit of everyone who seeks to prophesy.

2. Judgment Level #2 - Other Prophetic Ministries

The New Testament seems to have prophets working together in tandem with either apostolic ministries or other prophetic ministries (Acts 13:1; 15:32). Paul indicates that in the context of prophetic ministry, the prophets should serve as a check and a balance to each other. "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge" (I Corinthians 14:29 NKJV).

There is no question that those who have been called by God to be prophetic voices to God's people have a special sensitivity to what God wants to say to His people. As prophetic ministries function together in the same setting, they should have a similar sensing of what God is trying to communicate to a person or to a congregation.

This is one reason why Paul undoubtedly encourages only two or three to speak, because in any given context they would all be receiving a similar message. How many times does a message have to be spoken before it is in effect delivered? The Bible answers this question also when it declares repeatedly that in the "mouth of two or three witnesses let every word be established" (II Corinthians 13:1).

3. Judgment Level #3 - The Leadership of the Church

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the local church to render a judgment concerning any given prophecy. The Senior Pastor and the elders of the church have a God given responsibility to feed, care for and protect the flock of God which is under their charge (Acts 20:28-31).

The Bible also instructs members of the congregation to submit to the elders of the church (I Peter 5:5; Hebrews 13:17). The reason for this submission to the elders is that ultimately God holds elders accountable for what takes place in the congregation under their charge. We make the task of the elders easier when we recognize their authority and receive whatever correction they may want to give us with a good spirit.

The Need for and Value of the Prophetic

With so much being said about judging prophecy, it makes one wonder whether or not we should just scrap the idea of having prophetic ministry. Maybe it would just be easier to eliminate it altogether.

God forbid that we should ever think this way! We could say the same thing about raising children, building a home, cultivating friendships and even getting married. Just because something carries with it some challenges, it is no reason to do away with it.

The fact is that the blessing of the prophetic ministry so far out weighs any negative aspects of prophecy that eliminating this great gift from the church cannot even be considered. Churches that have no prophetic vision are missing a wonderful element of the whole Christian experience. Rather than seeking to eliminate the prophetic because of a few potential problems, we must seek how to harness this ministry for ultimate purpose of strengthening the church of Jesus Christ.

Prophecy is a great gift to the Church. We are instructed to not despise prophecies (I Thessalonians 5:20). In fact we are to earnestly desire to prophesy (I Corinthians 14:1). When we prophesy within the framework provided to us by the Word of God, prophecy edifies or builds up the church (I Corinthians 14:4). If the church is going to be what God has called it to be, it will not get there without prophets and prophecy being fully released.