

Foreword by Matt Chandler

PRACTICING THE POWER



WELCOMING THE GIFTS
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN YOUR LIFE

SAM STORMS

CHAPTER 8

PRINCIPLES FOR PROPHECY TODAY

Here at Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City, we highly value the spiritual gift of prophecy. That doesn't mean we elevate it to the exclusion or even the subordination of other spiritual gifts, but we take seriously the apostle Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 14:1 and the reason given for it. As you will recall, the apostle exhorts us to "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1b).

It is that word "especially" that justifies the focus in this book on prophecy and in our churches as well. The point Paul goes on to make is that prophecy is "especially" beneficial to the church because, unlike uninterpreted tongues, prophecy is intelligible and thus serves to build up, encourage, and console other believers (1 Corinthians 14:3). Simply put, "the one who prophecies builds up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:4b).

But prophecy also warrants our extended attention because of the controversial nature of the gift. I've often said that whereas in the 1960s and into the 1970s speaking in tongues

was the most controversial among the miraculous charismata, today it is prophecy. More questions are raised regarding prophecy than all the other gifts combined. One of the more pressing and practical issues is how prophecy ought to function in the local church. How, if at all, should it be exercised in the larger corporate gathering of the church, especially on Sunday morning when several hundred (and in some cases, several thousand) people are present? And if Sunday morning is not the ideal context for this gift, how should it be encouraged and utilized in our small group gatherings?

Because the exercise of prophecy in small group settings is a bit simpler than its practice in corporate worship, I'll begin with a few words regarding the best way, in general, to facilitate and watch over the prophetic when few people are present and follow up with several guidelines that will make its use in the corporate gathering of the church more effective and less subject to abuse and criticism.

Facilitating the Prophetic in our Small Groups

When people ask me how we facilitate the exercise of prophecy in our church, I begin by encouraging them to focus on its presence in small groups rather than in the larger corporate gatherings. We should remember the first-century context in which Paul wrote his instructions to the church at Corinth. Though we can't be 100% certain, most scholars agree that no more than 150 people could have been accommodated in the homes of the first century. Most homes would max out at far less than

that. So when we read Paul's writings about prophecy, we need to keep in mind that he likely did not have in mind the modern day megachurch or even one that exceeded 200 believers. His instruction most closely relates to smaller gatherings where virtually everyone knew everyone else.

Let me share an example of what I'm talking about. Many people have been puzzled by Paul's counsel regarding the use of tongues in a gathered assembly. In 1 Corinthians 14:27–28 we read: "If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God."

The question I'm often asked is this: "How could one even know if there was another present who had the gift of interpretation? Without this advance knowledge, it would appear to make Paul's instruction in this text difficult to obey."

That's true. But that's where the context in which he wrote matters. We need to keep in mind the likelihood that, given the comparatively small size of house churches in Corinth, virtually everyone who attended a church would be personally acquainted with everyone else there. Each person would likely know what spiritual gift was regularly exercised by every other individual. If one believed that she had a tongue that should be exercised publicly, she could easily determine if those who regularly exercised the gift of interpretation were present. In any case, in a substantially smaller crowd the opportunity for the exercise of all spiritual gifts would be significantly greater.

So what does this suggest for how we should proceed with the exercise of prophecy in our small group meetings? The first thing I recommend is that the leader of the gathering explicitly and frequently inform those gathered that this is a “safe” environment in which everyone should feel free to take risks. As odd as that may sound, it will go a long way toward putting at ease the hearts of people who live in fear that if they make even the smallest of mistakes they will be rebuked or mocked or in some manner marginalized from the group.

Remember that there will always be varying degrees of confidence in people regarding the question of whether or not they have truly heard from God. Paul wrote this in Romans 12:6 concerning the exercise of prophecy: “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, *in proportion to our faith*” (emphasis mine). In my contribution to the book *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, I write this about the relationship between our faith and the exercise of prophecy:

Paul seems to be saying that “some who had the gift of prophecy had a greater measure of faith (that is, trust or confidence that the Holy Spirit would work or was working in them to bring a revelation which would be the basis of a prophecy).” In other words, there will always be greater and lesser degrees of prophetic ability and consequently greater and lesser degrees of prophetic accuracy (which, it seems reasonable to assume, may increase or decrease, depending on the circumstances of that person’s life). Thus,

the prophet is to speak in proportion to the confidence and assurance he or she has that what is spoken is truly from God. Prophets are not to speak beyond what God has revealed; they must be careful never to speak on their own authority or from their own resources.¹

If this is what Paul has in mind, we should take it as an incentive to deal tenderly and patiently with those who are somewhat uncertain if they have a genuine prophetic word from God intended for another person or for the group as a whole. We should tell our people on a regular basis, “Don’t be afraid to step out in faith and give expression to what you believe God has revealed to you. If you don’t get things perfectly, you need not fear that anyone will judge you or disregard you. You won’t be put in a special class of subspiritual Christians who are not permitted ever again to exercise their gifts lest we be damaged by the errors you espouse.”

People need to know that they are loved and valued and that their contributions are appreciated. In the absence of this relational atmosphere, many will simply keep their mouths shut and decline ever to participate in a meaningful way. They need to know that their courage in stepping out in faith will be honored and that they need not fear being exposed to public humiliation.

In addition to encouraging people to take risks and contribute, you may want to think about the structure of your small group setting. If the entire gathering is dominated by a single person, or if the time is entirely devoted to the teaching of the

Scriptures, there will be fewer opportunities for the Spirit to speak through revelatory gifts and to build up those present. We should not try to excuse this by saying: “But if the Holy Spirit wants to minister through a prophetic gift, he will do it in some manner with or without our assistance. He can interrupt our proceedings any time he pleases.”

While in one sense, that’s true, I don’t believe that is the Spirit’s preferred manner of ministering in, to, and through us. The Spirit does not overwhelm or intrude or treat us as puppets. There may well have been people in first-century Corinth who appealed to an argument like this. Paul was attempting to put in place certain restrictions on the number of those who might prophesy in any one gathering, lest they dominate the meeting and make difficult, if not impossible, the exercise of a wide range of gifts by multiple individuals. To those who might respond to him by saying, “But I just couldn’t help myself. The Spirit overwhelmed me and I couldn’t refrain from speaking, notwithstanding your instruction that only two or three prophesy before the others pass judgment,” Paul replied, “No, you aren’t out of control; you can exercise restraint; after all, ‘the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace’ ” (1 Corinthians 14:32–33).

In our church we regularly encourage our small group leaders to “make space” or provide ample time and opportunity for the prophetic gift to be exercised. For those who do not have a leadership position and want to speak a word to someone, it’s a great idea to ask permission. This will help the hearers, if it really is a word from God, receive what you’re saying. It also

respects the leader whom you may be able to influence in a good way, whereas you otherwise might not if you do not work within the leadership structure established by your church.

If your group regularly spends time in singing or prayer at any one gathering, it may be helpful to pause in the middle or even wait until the end, and then say: "Let's stop for a moment and remain silent. Each person should pray quietly and ask the Spirit if he wishes to make known something that would be of benefit and for the building up of others present tonight."

After a few minutes you can then ask: "Does anyone have a sense from the Lord about the direction of our meeting tonight?" "Is anyone hearing from the Lord for ministry?" "Did anyone have a dream recently or feel burdened or impressed in some way?" Don't be afraid of or offended by the awkwardness of silence. Maybe God isn't speaking at this time. And if he isn't, don't feel as if you have failed if no prophetic ministry is forthcoming. But if someone shares a revelation from God, give time for the others to ponder its content, to pray, perhaps even to search the Scriptures to see if what was said is true.

If someone did hear from God and the word bore special importance for a particular individual, take time to pray this truth into their life. Either gather around that person or, better still, have them sit in a chair in the middle of the room while others lay hands on them and ask the Spirit to bring insight into the full meaning of the prophetic word and how the person in view might properly respond to what was said. When this is done, we have seen instances where the Spirit continues to

reveal something of value and practical application for that person's life.

How to Introduce and Deliver a Prophetic Word

A great deal of damage has been done to believers in many different churches by the careless, controlling, and overly authoritative delivery of prophetic words. Most Christians have a deep and sincere desire to respond with humility and complete obedience to whatever God may be saying to them. Recall that Paul told the Thessalonian believers to “hold fast [to] what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). This means that once a prophetic utterance has been tested and weighed and it has been determined that it is good, we are to embrace it and obey it. Most Christians readily agree with this and want to be seen as responsive to what God may have revealed. That's why it is very important that when we are communicating what we believe is a word from God we do it in a gentle and caring manner, without manipulation and authoritarianism.

Dramatic pronouncements aren't helpful. Avoid saying things like “Thus saith the Lord,” or “This is the word of the Lord for your life,” or “God specifically told me to tell you that you should . . .” Just don't say them. They aren't helpful. This doesn't mean that the person who heard from God should waver or question the accuracy of what they believe God has revealed. It is simply a question of pastoral etiquette and a way of avoiding manipulation or coercion in sharing what you've heard or seen.

We have found that it is better to introduce prophetic utterances with statements such as:

“I have a strong inner impression that I believe is from the Lord.”

“I have a picture in my mind that I think may be for someone here.”

“I had a sense from the Holy Spirit about what he wants to accomplish tonight.”

“I had a dream which involved several of you, and I would like to share it.”

Speaking in this way puts people at ease and reassures them that they are not disobedient if they choose to wait or to consult others regarding the truth of what was spoken. Prophetic words may be highly symbolic and require extensive prayer and investigation. People should not be made to feel guilty if they respond with less than immediate and wholehearted affirmation.

How to Respond to Questionable “Words”

On occasion you will experience an immediate check or hesitation in your heart regarding the authenticity of an utterance that purports to be from God. This doesn't mean you are by nature a cynic or that you doubt the validity of the gift of prophecy. It more likely indicates that your knowledge of Scripture, together with common sense, has detected some-

thing amiss in what was said. If this should occur, I suggest you take the following steps.

Some alleged prophetic words will need immediate correction, especially if they are biblically misguided. Suppose your small group is praying for a woman whose marriage is in deep trouble, although it is clear that neither she nor her husband have committed adultery. If someone says, “I have a strong sense from the Lord that you should divorce your husband,” you can rest assured that this sense was *not* from the Lord. You can respond to occasions such as this by saying: “I appreciate your zeal and your desire to help our sister, but we know from God’s Word that she does not have biblical grounds for divorce, and thus your ‘sense’, though undoubtedly intended to be of help, is *not* of the Holy Spirit.”

Even in these situations be gentle, kindhearted, and encouraging. Don’t crush the spirit of the person or respond in a way that would make them fearful and hesitant to ever prophesy again. Of course, if their word is unequivocally unbiblical and contrary to what is clearly taught in Scripture, you will need to bring correction clearly, and it will inevitably cause some measure of relational discomfort or internal pain. Such occurrences are unavoidable. But you can still bring truth to bear in a way that everyone involved feels loved and supported.

If the “word” is general or vague or merely a repetition of some biblical text or principle already well known, don’t dismiss it, but encourage the group to commit to pray about it and re-visit it at a later time. I’ve seen people mock prophetic ministry because the word spoken did not feel sufficiently

supernatural. But nowhere in Scripture are we told that the exercise of a spiritual gift will always appear or feel supernatural in the sense that it could not have been exercised by virtue of a person's own natural talents. Sometimes the most helpful and encouraging revelatory words are those that pertain to some issue or need that could conceivably have been spoken by a person without the gift of prophecy.

If the prophetic word shared is weird or unintelligible or embarrassing, you can simply say: "Thanks for sharing. Let's discuss this in private at a later time. I'm not sure this is the direction the Spirit is leading us at this time." But don't be surprised if you later discover that the weird or slightly embarrassing word was genuinely of God and proves to be beneficial to those for whom it was intended.

Guidelines for Prophecy in the Corporate Assembly

Although the small group setting is the context best suited to the exercise of prophecy (and most other spiritual gifts as well), there will be times when the gift may also be exercised in a corporate gathering of all God's people. Obviously, there will be some limitations on how it is practiced due to time constraints and the size of the crowd. All of these will make it more difficult to steward this gift on a Sunday morning, but not impossible.

Many churches place an open microphone somewhere near the platform to which people in the congregation have

access. At any time during the service (with the exception of the sermon), people can approach the mic and deliver what they believe is a prophetic word. I was blessed to preach at one such church that practiced the prophetic in this way. On two or three occasions during the time of singing, the worship leader's attention was drawn to the presence of a man or woman at the mic. He would quickly conclude whatever song was being sung to accommodate the prophetic utterance.

While there is nothing inherently unbiblical about this practice, I do not recommend it for at least three reasons. First, it is too tempting to impetuous and immature visitors or church members who would abuse an opportunity to speak authoritatively into the life of the church. Some people with an inflated sense of their own importance are convinced that they have a calling from God to speak into the life of other churches. Of course, most churches that provide an open mic monitor its use closely. They will do everything in their power to restrict access to those in the church with whom they are already quite familiar who might misuse it. But the potential still exists for an arrogant, pushy, or unbalanced individual to seize the opportunity and disrupt the service.

One last comment on this practice. We've found that more times than not, the individual who bypasses our guidelines for the delivery of a prophetic word is either a first-time visitor or someone who has only rarely attended our corporate gatherings. They often envision themselves as uniquely gifted and called by God to set other Christians straight. They feel

compelled to share and regard it as disobedience if they do not seize the opportunity to speak what is on their heart.

We recently had a young man visit our church for the first time, and he immediately made his way to the front of the platform where he knelt during our time of worship. I felt no need to stop him, as he never disrupted the proceedings or spoke out loudly. However, both I and our security team were prepared to step in and restrain him if he chose to address the congregation without our approval. Our sound engineers have standing orders that if anyone not approved by me or the elders takes hold of a microphone, they are to cut the power immediately. On this occasion I'm happy to report that the young man kept himself in check and as of this writing has not returned to our church (although he is certainly welcome to do so).

In addition to allowing anyone access, an open mic does not give the leadership of the church any opportunity to assess the prophetic word before it is delivered. I'll say more about this later and give suggestions for how this assessment can be done in a healthy and productive way.

Finally, on a personal note, I must admit that I do not find it helpful to the spiritual atmosphere of the service to repeatedly interrupt the flow of worship with prophetic words. At Bridgeway Church here in Oklahoma City, our singing is not haphazard or random. Those who lead our worship are strategic in the songs they select. Songs are intentionally chosen and are thematically designed to construct a gospel narrative that leads our people to see and savor Jesus Christ. The sequence of the songs is designed to tell a story. There is narrative develop-

ment as the time of singing progresses in which certain biblical truths are unpacked, illustrated, and reach their climax. Interrupting this liturgical flow undermines the communication of the message. Indeed, our worship pastor always selects songs and adapts his contribution to the topic and biblical text of my sermon. To allow prophetic voices to insert themselves into this pattern, without first being vetted to determine if their word is relevant to the moment and the ministry goals to which we are moving, most often proves counterproductive.

An Appropriate Practice of Prophecy in the Public Assembly

So, if an open mic is not the best way to facilitate the prophetic gift in a corporate gathering, how can we do this in a way that is fruitful and respectful? Here are several suggestions that guide how we practice and facilitate prophetic words in our church.

We start by having *a designated point person* at each worship celebration, someone who has the responsibility and authority to make the final decision on how prophetic ministry is to be facilitated. This will usually be either myself, one of our senior leaders, one of the elders, or a member of the prophetic team. Whoever is selected for this role needs to be biblically informed, spiritually mature, and of such a temperament that they can deal kindly but firmly with those who may insist that if they are not permitted to speak they are disobeying God.

We also prepare our people by instructing them that if they believe the Lord has revealed something to them, they should share this word with the appointed individual. We prefer that they put what they want to share in writing, but if that is not possible, we encourage them simply to go to the leader and communicate what they believe the Lord is saying. I have grown accustomed to feel a tap on the shoulder or a tug on my arm as someone whispers in my ear, “Sam, I think the Lord has laid something on my heart that ought to be shared with the congregation as a whole.” When this happens, I or the designated point person will make an immediate judgment as to whether the individual has indeed heard from God. I encourage everyone to remember that neither I nor any other pastor or elder is infallible in making such judgments and that errors can and have been made in this regard. We simply ask that people not be offended or take it as a personal rejection if we determine that they have not heard from the Lord.

If we determine that the Lord has truly spoken to a person, our first task will be to decide whether or not the revelation is for that individual *personally* or if it is designed for the church *corporately*. Often times what a person hears from God is intended for personal edification or should become a focus in their own personal prayer life. If it is determined that a word is suitable for the whole body, several other decisions have to be made.

First, a judgment will be made as to *when* the word should be shared with the entire body. That is to say, should it be shared now or perhaps next week (or sometime thereafter),

once additional time is given to prayer and discussion among the staff, elders, and prophetic team? Then, assuming that the word is appropriate for the entire church at the time the person received it, a judgment will be made as to the most fitting time *during the service* when it should be communicated. Should it be shared immediately, or should we wait until after our time of singing, or perhaps after the sermon, or at some other time during the course of the morning service? Once it is decided when the word is to be shared, the final decision concerns *who* should speak it forth. On occasion we will permit the individual who received the word to share it publicly. This will often depend on how well we know the person and if they have a demonstrated history of accuracy and maturity in the exercise of their spiritual gift. At other times, the point person will assume responsibility for communicating the word to the body as a whole.

If a word is shared publicly, we believe that every believer in the congregation has a personal responsibility to pay close attention to the prophetic word and to judge or evaluate the biblical validity of its content (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). However, only men are permitted to articulate publicly this evaluation or judgment in the corporate gathering (1 Timothy 2:11–15; 1 Corinthians 14:33–35). In our church, if there is a word spoken that I or the other elders find inaccurate or unacceptable, we would typically respond in this way:

“Folks, please know that we highly value prophetic ministry. We want to do everything we can to encourage it and to learn from one another. But we also have a responsibility as your spiritual leaders to guard you from error. Our brother (or sister) obviously acted and spoke in a way they thought was what God desired, and I want to honor them for their sincerity. However, I don’t believe that what was said is altogether accurate. Let me take just a moment and explain what I believe is more consistent with God’s Word.”

Of course, if we were doing what we should do, it would never come to this, as we would have evaluated the prophetic word before it was ever spoken to determine if it was truly of God.

Finally, I’ll often mention that the Scriptures are clear that, at most, “two or three prophets” should speak during the course of any one corporate gathering (1 Corinthians 14:29). I ask that everyone abide by this rule and that they not be offended or take it personally if we choose to limit the number of those who prophesy.

Don’t Criticize, Coerce, or Publicly Confront

While the guidelines I just shared are useful for corporate gatherings, there are also several additional suggestions that apply more generally to the exercise of the prophetic. These could be considered matters of etiquette that help the person

sharing a word to do so in a way that achieves its biblically stated purpose of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:3).

When I teach on how to share a prophecy or a word, I tell people to avoid publicly criticizing or correcting church leadership by name. It is better to take such issues privately to the elders. Paul is quite clear how we should rebuke and correct those in authority: “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” (1 Timothy 5:19). Remember that the New Testament doesn’t say, “be subject to the prophets” but rather “be subject to the elders” (1 Peter 5:5).

I would also suggest that you avoid publicly exposing someone’s sin by name. Speak of the sin in general or anonymous terms and ask the Spirit to bring conviction to the person(s) in mind (1 Corinthians 14:24–25). If you are persuaded that someone is in serious moral or theological error, go to them privately, share the word, and seek to resolve the matter in a way that does not unnecessarily expose the individual to unwarranted public shame. If they do not repent, and there is objective evidence to support your sense that they are in sin, take it to the elders of the church for them to process and respond (Matthew 18:15–20).

Similar to the point just made about sharing sin publicly, avoid prophesying about marriages, babies, moves, or job changes. The only people who should speak authoritatively into whether a particular man and a particular woman should get married are that man and that woman! This isn’t to say that

God would never provide *confirmation* of the propriety of an engagement to someone other than the couple getting engaged, but the principle that must be observed when it comes to marriage is that if you are not the man or woman in question, it's none of your business!

Several years ago there was a young man in our church who was well educated, mature, zealous for the Lord, and, from what the women have told me, extremely handsome. I can't begin to tell you the number of single young ladies who told others (one even told the man himself!) that they had experienced a dream in which they saw themselves married to him. I don't doubt that such dreams took place. They likely were very real and quite vivid. But there is no reason to believe they were revelatory or were designed to be prophetic in nature. As things turned out, the young man married a precious lady whom no one would have guessed would turn out to be his bride.

Notice that I also included a prohibition against prophesying about pregnancies as well. I want to be clear that I include this warning because such prophecies can be dangerous and detrimental. There is a natural tendency born of Christian compassion and love to speak a word of encouragement to the barren and infertile in our midst. We have grieved with them and prayed with them and suffered heartbreak when they became pregnant and subsequently miscarried. But be extraordinarily careful that you do not mistakenly identify your understandable desire that someone conceive with a revelation from God that such will in fact come to pass. Our love for

others and our confidence in God's power are not a legitimate basis on which to speak prophetically into their lives. By all means let these realities energize your prayers on their behalf, but refrain from turning your own well-meaning confidence or hope into a prophetic promise. I have often seen how a failure to observe this rule has resulted in emotional devastation for many couples that long to have children.

This is true when it comes to changing occupations or career trajectories as well. I am convinced that God loves his children sufficiently well that if he is leading them to resign one position in the hope that he/she will be offered another, better, higher paying occupation, God will make it clear to them. Certainly we should all seek the counsel and wisdom of other believers and solicit their prayers on our behalf. But aside from what admittedly may be an exceptional case, I am confident that you can trust God to lead you in such a decision without the input of others who would remain largely unaffected if the choice you make turns out to be a disaster.

Interpretation and Application Are Not Always Needed

There may be times when God reveals that a friend or someone you know has a sickness or physical illness. Several times I've witnessed situations where God has revealed a person's affliction or disease to someone who had no prior knowledge of it. When this occurs, the recipient of the revelation will sometimes jump to the immediate conclusion that it is God's will

to heal this person. Why else would he make known the existence of a physical or emotional affliction if he didn't intend to deliver that person, for their good and God's glory? While this might seem to be a reasonable conclusion, it isn't always the case. God may be sharing this knowledge with you so that you can better encourage your friend or volunteer to provide meals or do yard work or other tasks that they otherwise are unable to accomplish. It may be God's intent for you to pray regularly for that individual, not only that he be healed of the affliction but also, in the absence of healing, that he be enabled to persevere through the pain and serve as a platform for the display of God's grace and the sufficiency of his love (see 2 Corinthians 12:8–10).

I point this out because it is an example of a common mistake that prophetically gifted people make when they respond to a revelation from God. Earlier, I mentioned the three elements of a prophecy. First is the revelation itself: what God said or showed you or the content of what was impressed on your heart or that you saw in a dream. Second is the interpretation of that revelation: What is its meaning? Third is the application of the interpretation: How does this truth impact one's life? What should one do in response to it? How should the individual proceed in life in light of the content of the revelation?

Remember the principle we established: It is extremely difficult for a prophetically gifted person to communicate the revelation and stop. Typically, a person will feel a responsibility to share the word, interpret its meaning, and then tell the

individual how they should live or act in the light of it. They will often feel as if they have fallen short in their commitment to the church or that they have disobeyed God himself if they do not follow up the revelation with practical, life-changing instruction. But while there may be some situations where interpretation and application are needed, in most cases a person should simply share what God has shown to them and leave it there. Leave the task of interpretation and application to others.

This means that unless you have explicit biblical warrant, do not tell a person what God's will is for their life. For example, I do not need a prophetic revelation to know that it is God's will for Christians to abstain from fornication. All of us have already been told this in biblical texts such as 1 Thessalonians 4:3. Prophetic revelation isn't needed for us to know that God's will is that we never pay back evil for evil. Paul has declared God's will on this matter in Romans 12:17.

This is not meant to rule out the giving of advice or making recommendations to other believers based on one's own past experience or common sense. It is always a good rule of thumb to seek out the wisdom and insights of more mature and seasoned believers when we are making momentous decisions in our lives. But do not go to them expecting God to reveal his will for your life through a prophetic word they deliver to you. By all means they should pray for you. By all means they should carefully assess your situation and speak truth and caution and encouragement into your decision-making process. By all means they should draw on their knowledge of God's Word

and its principles and seek, together with you and others, to find the most Christ-honoring application to your situation.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you are a high-school senior and you are weighing multiple options about where to attend college. You should start out by talking with trusted friends and counselors who have your best interests at heart. Seek as much information as you can. Pray relentlessly. I don't believe that God's *typical manner* of providing guidance is to give someone other than you a revelatory dream about which school is the right school. If God should choose to lead you in such a manner, he will likely give that dream to you, an experience for which you can then seek confirmation or refutation from people of wisdom and knowledge.

Avoid Making Public Predictions

Be careful about prophesying public, political, or natural disasters. Notice that I said, "Be careful." I would not go so far as to say that this form of prophetic utterance is altogether illegitimate or out of bounds. Predictive prophecy does exist, and sometimes God will use it for the benefit of his people (see Acts 11:27–30 and the predictive prophecy by Agabus of an impending famine). Could God conceivably use you or someone in your church to make known in advance some event of great impact and social significance? Yes. But in my experience this type of prophecy is rare and is not the typical expression of the prophetic gift that we find in the New Testament church.

Why do I suggest caution about these types of predictive prophecies? Because you need to be prepared to be proven wrong. All it takes is for your prediction to fail to come to pass to demonstrate that you did not hear from God. So how should we respond when someone prophesies some public, political, or natural disaster? Simply wait and see if it happens! That being said, I should point out that it doesn't take a spiritual gift to predict that California (and now my own home state of Oklahoma) will soon experience a substantially severe earthquake. Anyone who pays attention to current events can prophesy that a terrorist attack in the Middle East (or even in America) is soon to happen.

Don't Use Prophecy to Establish Doctrines or Rules

Avoid using prophecy to establish doctrines, practices, or ethical principles that lack explicit biblical support. I'm extremely reluctant to pay much, if any attention, to someone who tells me that God told them that playing pool is a sin. I'm not inclined to put much credence in an alleged "prophetic" utterance to the effect that attending all movies is inherently wicked. For someone to claim they heard God tell them that buying insurance is indicative of a failure to trust in divine sovereignty is beyond what we should expect of the prophetic as it is portrayed in the NT.

Again, this does not mean that playing pool or attending movies or buying insurance is God's will for all Christians. The

Bible simply doesn't address such matters. What the Bible does indicate is that each believer must make the best use they can of what is explicitly commanded in God's Word as well as whatever prompting or practical guidance they receive while in prayer. But even if one is confident of God's direction for their life, that doesn't mean it is God's direction for another's life.

Related to this is the danger of setting behavioral standards on secondary issues such as whether one should drink alcohol in moderation or listen to secular music. I'm simplistic enough to believe that if God thought it essential to our sanctification that we either indulge in such activities or refrain from them, he would have made it clear in Scripture or would have provided us with principles on the basis of which we could make definitive application. God will never reveal new ethical rules for what is right and wrong and binding on the conscience of all Christians in every age. What is good and what is evil has been finally and forever settled in the written Word of God.

The Regular Practice of the Prophetic

Let me close with some final, commonsense suggestions when you begin exercising the gift of prophecy on a regular basis. First, be cautious about excessive dependence on prophetic words for making routine, daily decisions in life. There are, of course, certain exceptions to this rule. This is what I said in *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*:

Typically . . . Paul emphasizes the importance of “reckoning” with the circumstances of whatever situation one is facing. Consider the needs of people, the principles of Scripture, and seek the counsel of those who have a track record of wisdom (see Phil. 2:25; 1 Cor. 6:5). Concerning his travel plans, Paul writes, “And if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me” (1 Cor. 16:4). Here Paul will make his decision based on a sober evaluation of what is fitting or advisable in view of the circumstances and what he feels would please God. Of course, nothing he says rules out the possibility that prophetic insight could play a role. In other texts Paul appeals to “knowledge,” “discernment,” and “spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Phil. 1:9–10a; Col. 1:9) as essential in the decision-making process. Certainly, revelatory insight from the Lord can be crucial in such deliberation, but God does not want us to be paralyzed in its absence.²

Be careful that you don’t let your identity be dependent on your gifting. Most of us can readily embrace this principle without a struggle. But it is often (not always) different when it comes to people who are gifted prophetically. I want to be careful not to stereotype prophetic people, but I’ve observed over the years that they can often be far more sensitive than others when it comes to how the exercise of their gifting is received and how they are personally assessed.

Of course, I’m not at all surprised by this once we think deeply about the nature of the prophetic. To be the recipient

of prophetic revelation from God, whether in dreams, impressions, trances, visions, or words of knowledge and words of wisdom, can be nothing short of euphoric. The experience brings feelings of nearness to God and a heightened sense of spiritual intimacy that isn't often the case with other of the charismata. Most everyone who has received revelatory insights in these ways will testify to this. The result is that men and women with this gifting, especially if it occurs on a regular basis, can be more self-defensive than others. I am not suggesting that all who are prophetically gifted are of the same temperament or personality, but I do observe a general pattern in their demeanor and behavior. To question whether or not they truly heard from God feels like personal rejection. If someone exercises mercy toward me or perhaps blesses me with a generous financial gift, I don't pause to test or assess whether or not they did this in the power of the Holy Spirit. But when a claim is made that God has spoken, it is our collective responsibility to closely examine and biblically assess the truthfulness of what is communicated.

On a couple of occasions when I've been the recipient of prophetic revelation and in turn observed how blessed were those to whom I ministered, I confess that it was exhilarating and felt profoundly supernatural (of course, as noted earlier, one can truly prophesy and feel nothing out of the ordinary). When something so deeply and inwardly personal happens to you, it is easy to become overly sensitive to any criticism or doubts that may come your way. The result is often that prophetically gifted folk struggle to separate themselves from

the work of the Holy Spirit through them. Apart from the latter, they feel a sense of loss and lack of direction. Their personal value as individuals and their place in the body of Christ are too closely wrapped up in the spiritual gift with which they've been blessed. So we must lovingly, gently, and consistently remind them that *they are not their gift*. Their identity is fundamentally wrapped up in Jesus Christ and their relationship to him and not in any ministry or service that he might choose to accomplish through their efforts.

Don't despise prophetic utterances when things go badly, when people are offended, or when someone gets it wrong (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). Needless to say, this is easier said than done! We who embrace and build our lives and ministries on the inerrant Word of God and thus highly prize theological accuracy are disinclined to be tolerant of those who go astray. I'm not suggesting that we compromise our convictions or ignore serious theological error. Rather, I have in mind those minor mistakes people make with regard to what we might call secondary issues. If someone prophesies that Jesus is not returning a second time, or that he is returning and they know the "day and the hour" of the event, immediate correction and discipline are called for. But when mistaken words are spoken on matters of admittedly less importance, it is crucial that we not let our reaction lead us to despise the prophetic gift altogether or to enact rules or changes to our bylaws that would inhibit the proper exercise of the gift in the future.

Along with this, we need to be patient and remember that much of this will seem strange and unusual to people who have

never experienced it before. Make sure that you are devoting sufficient time to helping visitors, unbelievers, or cessationists understand prophetic ministry. They will often feel confused or find it weird. Make sure there is time to dialogue and debrief about what has (or has not) happened. I've often found it helpful when such folk are present to preface the meeting with a statement such as this:

We are so happy that all of you are with us tonight. We hope and pray that this will be a time of practical benefit and spiritual encouragement to you. But we are also aware that you may not understand or agree with what may happen. We believe that the Holy Spirit can speak to us through revelatory spiritual gifts such as prophecy, word of knowledge, and word of wisdom. It may be that someone will share a dream they recently had that has relevant application to our lives. We want you to understand that we will not allow anything to go unaddressed that conflicts with Scripture. The Bible is our highest and final authority for determining truth. So put your hearts at rest, and know that nothing contrary to God's written and inspired Word will be tolerated.

That being said, some things might occur that simply make you feel uncomfortable. That often happens when we experience or witness something that we've never encountered before. We hope you will be patient with us. We are by no means perfect in what we do or believe. But if you will allow us to minister as we believe God is lead-

ing, we'll be certain to provide ample time for you to ask whatever questions you might have or to voice whatever concerns are on your heart.

Finally, don't let prophetic ministry dominate any meeting of the local church. There *are* other spiritual gifts! This is undoubtedly the rationale for Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said." Limiting prophetic ministry to "two or three" will ensure that there is plenty of time and opportunity for other believers to exercise their spiritual gifts as well.

Conclusion

The passion and love the apostle Paul had for the churches he established and in which he ministered is unquestioned. He worked with his own hands so that the people would not find it necessary to support him financially. He cared little for his personal reputation and was even willing to sacrifice his life to bring them the gospel of God's grace (see Acts 20:24). One passage in particular comes to mind. In spite of their mistreatment of him and their suspicions regarding his apostolic credentials, he wrote this to the church in Corinth: "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Corinthians 12:15a).

I mention this in order that we might more fully appreciate the force of Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 14:1. We are all familiar with his exhortation to "earnestly desire the spiritual

gifts,” but we dare not ignore the phrase that follows: “*especially* that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1, emphasis mine). Why “especially”? Why such an emphasis on this one spiritual gift? I could even ask the question, “Why did I write this chapter? Why the focus in this book on practical guidelines for exercising this gift in the local church? Why devote such meticulous concern to how prophecy is communicated and sustained in the lives of God’s people?” The simple answer is because Paul himself believed that it was uniquely beneficial to the spiritual growth and maturity of God’s people (see 1 Corinthians 14:3). As much as Paul loved his brothers and sisters in local churches everywhere, we can rest assured that he would not have made this a focal point of his exhortation were it not for the fact that he believed in its powerful capacity to bring encouragement, instruction, and consolation to Christian lives.

So I urge you to resist any temptation to minimize or, worse still, to dismiss entirely the spiritual gift of prophecy as if you and your church can get along well enough without it. Paul thought otherwise. So perhaps the appropriate response would be to read this chapter again, to make it a point of conversation in your small group, to make room for it in your corporate gatherings as a church, and then to step out in faith and take those risks, apart from which people may well go without the blessings that prophecy can bring.

¹ *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 210.

2 *Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*, 130.