

Contemporary Prophecy

Just type "prophecy" into Google and you will come up with hundreds of thousands of sites. Most of it completely crazy. Is there new prophecy today? What is it? When is it authentic?

A few initial thoughts on prophecy:

1. What exactly do you mean by 'prophecy?' Sometimes our confusions and debates over this issue come down to **different vocabulary** and church cultures. What you call prophecy I might call a word of knowledge or a word of wisdom or a feeling or a burden or a hunch or an impression. Some people might say 'God said to me' while others might describe the same experience as 'I feel that the things I've been reading in the Bible recently and certain circumstances and conversations are all pushing me in this certain direction'. In some ways it doesn't matter too much but it can lead to confusion or danger if I am giving a bit of wise advice the same level of unquestionable authority as the Word of God.
2. Contemporary prophecy is **very popular**. To have God speak to you directly is an exciting prospect. It seems like a much more powerful, living, active thing than a 'dusty old Bible.' In a modern culture that values the new over the old and the individual above all, I want a new 'rhema' word to me now. And for the unscrupulous 'Man of God' prophecy is a very attractive and useful weapon to have in the armoury – in generating excitement, in putting his words above question, in focussing attention on himself as the mediator of the knowledge of God.
3. While we don't want to despise prophecy and exclude the possibility of genuine prophetic activity, we might want to be cautious, particularly when we compare the functions performed by many modern day prophets and the functions performed by diviners in **African Traditional Religions**. Diagnosing the sin or curse behind an accident or illness, telling you who you should marry, healing or deliverance for a fee, covering your house/baby/transportation with a protective liquid – are these the things we see the biblical prophets doing? Moses and Isaiah warned of syncretism with the fortune tellers and diviners and mediums (Deut. 18:14; Isaiah 8:19-20). The ATR idea of words having power in themselves also meshes very well with the 'Word of Faith' movement and the idea of 'speaking words over/into...'
4. In Bible history, prophetic activity seems to be **clustered** around the great moments in salvation history – a) Moses and the Exodus, b) Joshua and the Conquest of the land, c) Elijah & Elisha, d) Jesus and the Apostles. There are periods of hundreds of years where the Word of God is rare. Even by the end of the book of Acts miracles and prophecies are reducing. So it would not be surprising if genuine prophecy is very rare today.
5. New Testament prophecy was probably largely **apocalyptic** in style and nature – a vision report functioning as a kind of unveiling of reality, a 'naming' of contemporary situations with Old Testament images and metaphors. You see this particularly in the book of Revelation (e.g. Rev. 2:14; 11:8) – a spiritual

diagnosis of the deep reality of the church and world so as to move the heart of the hearers to flee idolatry and run to Christ.¹

What does the Bible say?

Probably the most information and wisdom on prophecy in the church comes in the later chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

- 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – Notice who it is who prophesies here – men *and women* (v5). This a valid and important ministry for women in the church. In light of what Paul says here and elsewhere about authority, headship and submission (1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12) this suggests that prophecy is not about power or authority and does not disrupt the husband-wife pattern of headship and submission (in the same way that authoritative preaching/teaching to a mixed congregation would do).²
- 1 Corinthians 12 – Speaking in the Spirit and exalting Jesus are tied closely together (v3). It is made clear that prophecy (as all the gifts) is for the common good (v7). Prophecy is not the same as a word of wisdom or knowledge (v8-10) - though one suspects that they are often confused today. Prophecy is no cause for pride (v21). And not everyone is a prophet (v29).
- 1 Corinthians 13 – The Corinthian church prided themselves on all their spectacular spiritual gifts but here Paul says that actually *love* is more excellent than prophecy and without love prophecy is nothing (v2). Prophecy will continue until we see the Lord face to face but it is a sign not of power but of weakness, childishness, imperfection (v8-12).
- 1 Corinthians 14 – The purpose of prophecy is repeatedly given as building up the body of Christ (v4-5, 12, 19, 26, 30). Prophecy is preferable to tongues because it can be understood by all (v6-25). Prophecy can be prepared or spontaneous (v26, 30). Prophecy needs to be weighed and tested (v29). In the Spirit there is still self-control (v32-33). There must be no conflict between the new prophecy and the apostolic writings (v37-38).

It doesn't take much reflection to see how much this contrasts with much modern prophecy which is commonly presented as an exercise of power and authority, is often untested, unrestrained, a source of pride to the prophet and of distraction of the church from Christ.

Not proofs of prophecy

A number of things are *not* safe tests of genuine prophecy:

1. A prediction that comes to pass (Deut. 13:1-5).
2. Great signs and wonders (Mat. 24:24; Rev. 13:12-15; 16:14).
3. Something that looks Christian and is very popular (Rev. 13:12-15).

So there will be dramatically fulfilled prophecies and genuinely spectacular miracles accompanying false prophets in these last days. We'll need to BE VERY CAREFUL.

¹ As argued in research summarised [here](https://iserveafrica.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/preaching-from-apocalyptic.pdf). On Apocalyptic more generally see <https://iserveafrica.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/preaching-from-apocalyptic.pdf>.

² Compare with the Puritan practice of identifying prophecy and preaching. While there may be some overlap they are probably different things in their Bible usage.

Tests of prophecy

1. Character - Matthew 7:15-23 – this is not a perfect test as a true prophet can be disobedient (e.g. Jonah) but it is an important indicator.
2. Failure to use the biblical names of the true covenant God and failure of fulfilment - Deut.18:20-22 – false prophets may use the name of Yahweh (e.g. 2 Chron. 18:10) and their prophecies may be fulfilled (Dt. 13:1-5) so these *are not a proof* but they are a negative test in that *failure* to speak of the true God and failure of fulfilment is proof of a false prophet.
3. Content – this is KEY:
 - a) Rev. 13:1 – The prophet can look right but it is his/her *speech* that you need to examine.
 - b) Deut. 13:1-5 – Does the prophecy lead people toward or away from the true covenant God of the Bible? Does it agree with or conflict with the written Word?
 - c) Is the balance of prophecy similar to the balance of biblical prophecy – mainly warning with rays of future hope? Does it just preach ‘Peace, peace’? (Jer. 6:14; 23:16-17). It is interesting that in the NT the few prophecies that we have recorded are more often warnings of suffering than promises of blessing. Agabus prophesied famine (Acts 11:28) and persecution (Acts 21:11). The prophecies to the churches (Rev. 2-3) contain more rebuke than affirmation.
 - d) 1 John 4:1-3 – Does the prophecy affirm or deny that the eternal Son has come in the flesh?
 - e) John 16:7-14 - **Does it glorify Jesus?** This is absolutely crucial. The Spirit’s desire, in prophecy as in every other utterance He inspires, is not to exalt man but to humble man and exalt Jesus. Is the prophecy I’m hearing giving me a vision of the Jesus of the Bible, the risen crucified Lord, the Lamb who was slain?

Is the Bible enough for you?

Often our seeking after ‘new words from God’ comes from a spiritual restlessness and lack of faith in the Bible as the completely sufficient Word of God. When we are not enjoying the amazing feast of soul-satisfying, life-giving words in these 1200 pages, when we fail to see new and wonderful pictures of Jesus in this Word each day, when we are not resting in the wonderful promises there that He will be with us and sustain us and carry us through all the pains and uncertainties of life to an unspeakably wonderful eternity, when we are not content with Jesus’ words written for us then inevitably we will start seeking after other food, other pictures and other promises. There may well be authentic prophecy in our time and in our churches – we pray that it would be Jesus-exalting and true to the reality of the Christian life - the way of the cross – but we do not *need* it. We have The Faith *once for all* delivered to the saints (Jude 3). While not despising prophecy, let us be content and rejoice in the Holy Scriptures in which we find the doors to heaven opened and the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Resources:

Some of the key people and solid accessible works in the field would include:

- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, Kingsway.
- Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, Paternoster.
- Robert Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, P&R.
- J I Packer, *Keep in Step with The Spirit*, IVP.
- Don Carson, *Showing the Spirit*.
- B B Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*.
- Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*.

See also:

- [Prophecy and Tongues: A Compilation of the Best Cessationist Arguments \(Lee Irons\)](#)
- [Max Turner, "Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," Vox Evangelica 15 \(1985\): 7-63.](#)
- [John Piper, "The New Testament Gift of Prophecy"](#)