

What is the Gift of Prophecy? Is it for Today?

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Without a doubt, the greatest gift God has given us—apart from himself—is the Bible, for that book is the place we can always go to hear God’s voice. As Paul reminded Timothy, “*All Scripture is God-breathed,*” making us “*wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ*” and “*thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim 3:15-17, TNIV). In other words, the Bible is our primary source of guidance and means of growth, as well as the doorway to a deep and satisfying relationship with the God who made us. This means that whenever we read and study Scripture, we should expect a divine encounter!

But are there perhaps other ways that God communicates with his people? According to the Bible, yes there are, and one such way is through the gift of prophecy.

A Key Passage: 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

The earliest reference to prophecy in Paul’s writings is found toward the end of his first letter to the Thessalonian church. With a string of related commands (and I’ve laid them out so you can see how they are related), the apostle encourages this young church to make the most of those times they gather together for worship:

¹⁹ *Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.*
²⁰ *Do not treat prophecies with contempt*
²¹ *but test them all;*
hold on to what is good,
²² *reject whatever is harmful.*

What do we learn from this passage?

1. The Holy Spirit is to be experienced in our church gatherings (verse 19) – Paul clarifies that the flame of God’s Spirit is to burn brightly in our midst—and this is supposed to be normal! “*Do not put out the Spirit’s fire,*” he commands, meaning, Don’t stifle the presence and power of God in your gatherings! There are many ways to do this, but Paul has one particular way in mind: “*Do not treat prophecies with contempt.*”

2. Prophecy is an important expression of the Spirit’s activity among us (verse 20) – Of course, prophecy isn’t the *only* expression of the Spirit’s activity (see 1 Cor 14:7-11; 27-31; 14:26). Nor is it the *most* important (that would belong to the reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture; see 1 Tim 4:13; 5:17; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2, 15; 3:15-17; 4:1-5). And yet, Paul places a very high value on this gift, and so should we: “*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy*” (1 Cor 14:1).

But what exactly *is* the gift of prophecy? Wayne Grudem, in his enormously helpful study (referenced at the end of this paper), concludes that “A fresh examination of the New Testament teaching on the gift of prophecy will show that it should not be defined as ‘predicting the future’ nor

as ‘proclaiming a word from the Lord’ nor as ‘powerful preaching,’ but rather as ‘telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.’”

This might be a prediction (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11), specific guidance (Acts 13:1-3), or the disclosure of sins (1 Cor 14:25). But prophecy essentially includes any Spirit-inspired revelation that builds up the church (1 Cor 14:3-4, 26, 30-31; Acts 15:32), or that is directed at an individual, but serves as an encouragement to all (1 Tim 4:14). Therefore, it could include a passage of Scripture, a specific prayer burden, something a teacher hadn’t planned on sharing, or even a song. Each of these would qualify as “prophecy,” provided that God had spontaneously brought it to mind, and it was shared with others “*for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort*” (1 Cor 14:3).

3. Prophecies are not to be accepted without first being tested (verses 21-22) – The fact that Paul calls the church to sift or evaluate prophecies (“*test them all; hold on to what is good, reject whatever is harmful*”), indicates that this gift does not possess independent authority. In other words, a prophecy is not on the same level of authority as Scripture (see 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Cor 14:36-37).

This means that we are not supposed to write down prophecies and add them to the back of our Bibles (besides, prophecies usually speak to the specific needs of the moment anyway). Rather, we are to “*weigh carefully what is said*” (1 Cor 14:29), knowing that communicating a Spirit-inspired revelation usually involves interpretation and application in the process—either or both of which can be done incorrectly by the one giving the prophecy (see Acts 21:4-5, where Paul disobeys a misguided prophecy, and Acts 21:10-11, where a prophecy is not entirely accurate in its details).

Who is to do this testing? The implication from our passage is that it is the responsibility of the congregation as a whole, whether evaluating prophecies in their minds (similar to how we should be testing Bible teaching), or perhaps discussing the matter together. Leaders (1 Thess 5:12-13) and those with the gift of discernment (1 Cor 12:10) should probably guide such discussions.

What criteria are we to use in testing prophecies? Here are some questions to ask when examining the trustworthiness of a prophecy:

- Is it consistent with what the Bible teaches? (2 Thess 2:2, 15). True prophecy won’t contradict Scripture.
- Is it consistent with the purpose of prophecy? (1 Cor 14:3-4). It should build up others, not tear them down.
- Is it coming from a person we can trust? (Matt 7:15-23; 1 John 4:1-3). Prophets are usually known.
- Is it verifiable by those of whom it speaks? (Acts 20:22; 21:4). Check out those details that you can.

Another Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 14

In a later letter, this time to the Corinthian church, Paul fills in some of the practical blanks for us concerning where and how we are to practice the gift of prophecy. Here's what he says in the latter half of 1 Corinthians 14:

1. Prophecy should be practiced when the church comes together (verse 26)

– However, this doesn't mean that there *must* be prophecies shared at every gathering. Plus, perhaps certain gatherings are better suited for the sharing of this gift, such as smaller groups (after all, the Corinthian believers met in house churches, which would have included no more than 30-50 people total).

2. The only reason to prophesy—or to do anything in a church gathering—is to build up others (verse 26)

– Don't assume that just because you have received a revelation that you should share it at that time. You need to ask, "Will this edify others right now?" In the case of intensely personal revelations, it may be that God is just calling you to pray for that person, or perhaps to share with that person in private. Ask God for discernment. In the case of a revelation that you believe will edify the church, it might be wise to share it with a leader first, who can then confirm that it will build up those gathered.

3. There should be a limited number of prophecies shared in a gathering (verse 29)

– This gift is not to dominate the meeting—Paul says to have only 2 or 3 prophets speak (however, he clearly expected that at least 2 or 3 would be prompted to speak!). This may imply that a specific time should be set aside for prophecies to be shared, so as to not disrupt other encouraging ministry that is going on. After all, even though a revelation from God is spontaneous, it does not result in uncontrollable speech (note verses 30-31, and especially verse 33: "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace").

4. All prophecies must be carefully evaluated (verse 29)

– We have covered this already from one perspective, but let me offer another: This means that you should share a prophecy with humility. Rather than saying, "God says" or "Thus says the Lord," which implies absolute authority that is not to be questioned, you should say something like, "I think the Lord might be indicating" or "I feel impressed to share." Further, once you speak, you must be content to submit to the evaluation of those gathered. Nowhere does Paul indicate that those with this gift should argue for their prophecies, nor condemn those who discern a prophecy to be less than good.

5. The sharing is to be orderly (one at a time), and should defer to new revelations (verses 30-31)

– This reminds us of the spontaneous nature of this gift, but also reveals that it's okay not to hear an entire prophecy (one more indication that we aren't talking about the very words of God here, for who would allow that to be cut short?!). And, above all, the sharing must be orderly, "For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged."

6. The bottom line: "Be eager to prophesy" (verse 39)

– Even in a church as immature and problem-filled as the one in Corinth, Paul still encourages them to be properly open

to and sensitive to the Holy Spirit's promptings in their gatherings—and he especially urges them to embrace the gift of prophecy. We need this encouragement as well.

But is Prophecy a Gift for Today?

Why wouldn't it be? Consider the following (and check out the Bible references listed):

- Prophecy characterizes the life of God's people in these "last days" (Acts 2:17-18).
- It is one of the gifts needed for the body of Christ to be healthy and strong (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:4-8).
- Paul commands us to eagerly desire this gift (1 Cor 14:1, 39).
- He also commands us to not treat prophecies with contempt, as this quenches the Spirit (1 Th 5:19-20).
- This gift leads to believers being edified, and unbelievers being saved (1 Cor 14:3-4, 24-25).
- It creates a sense of awe, reminding us that God is really among us!
- Paul indicates that this gift will eventually cease, but only "when perfection comes," which almost all Bible scholars believe refers to the return of Christ (1 Cor 13:8-12; see also 1:7). So, yes, this gift is for today!

How Do You Know if You Have This Gift?

Great question! First of all, realize that the New Testament seems to indicate that all believers can prophesy—at least at times (Acts 2:17-18). And perhaps this gift can be sought after as well (1 Cor 14:1, 5, 31, 39). But if you regularly sense God spontaneously bringing something to mind that would benefit others if you shared it, here are some suggestions for developing the gift of prophecy:

- Learn more about it (see the books listed below).
- Grow in your knowledge of Scripture. As one writer puts it, "Grounding in the Word of God is the best soil for bearing prophetic fruit."
- Grow in faith, for your ability to use this gift effectively grows as your faith increases (see Rom 12:6).
- Grow in love, for this is the key to the proper use of any spiritual gift (see 1 Cor 13:1-7).
- Start small, perhaps in a small group, where your giftedness can be affirmed in an informal and non-threatening environment.
- Don't be discouraged by mistakes early on. No one is consistently good at using their gifts when they first start out (I know I wasn't a particularly good teacher!).
- Most importantly, pursue a passion for the Giver of your gift more than the gift itself.

Read More About It:

Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Revised (Crossway, 2000).
Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Zondervan, 1996).

