

GodFirst Prophecy Standards

Getting our bearings about the New Testament gift of prophecy.

What? Nature of Prophecy

The Holy Spirit manifesting his presence by communicating a 'now' message from God for the good of others (*1 Corinthians 12:10*).

Such a message will, on occasions, comprise the divine and the human too (and perhaps very occasionally the demonic), as a mixed communication, because "we prophesy in part" until Jesus returns (*1 Corinthians 13:8-9*).

It comes through believers who recognise that the written Word of God, the Bible, is primary - whilst prophecy is secondary, although vitally important (*1 Corinthians 14:36-38*).

The form prophetic messages take is quite wide-ranging: As illustrated in Acts, it includes both words (*Acts 13:2*) and actions (*Acts 21:11*) - and sometimes visions (*Acts 10:3,11-12*), dreams (*Acts 2:17*) and angelic communications (*Acts 8:26 & 10:3*). Prophecies generally appear present tense but are sometimes predictive too (*Acts 11:28 & 21:11*).

For a more rigorous understanding of New Testament prophecy see Wayne Grudem's important book "*The gift of prophecy in the New Testament and today*" (Crossway: Wheaton Illinois, USA 2000 Revised Edition)

Why? Purpose of Prophecy

- Pointing to Jesus: Simeon & Anna (*Luke 2:25-38*)
"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (*Revelation 19:10*)
- Directing his church:
 - Serving the church: *Acts 11:27 & 15:32* (= team-working)
 - Predicting the future: *Acts 11:28-30* (= relief-giving)
 - Guiding the mission: *Acts 13:1-3 & 16:6-8* (= church-planting)
 - Uniting the body: *Acts 15:1-35* (= gentile-including) - "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v.28)
 - Releasing the leaders: *1 Timothy 1:18 & 4:14* (= leadership-empowering)

- Edifying (building up) his church: “for...strengthening, encouraging and comfort...so that the church may be edified” (*1 Corinthians 14:3 & 5*). For example, the Antioch-based prophets Judas and Silas “said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers” (*Acts 15:32*).
- Equipping his church: Those recognised as prophets are gifts of the ascended Lord Jesus to resource fellow-Christians in living a prophetic lifestyle, including bringing prophetic words (*Ephesians 4:12-13*).

Who? People of Prophecy

Jesus, as the living Word of God (*John 1:1-2 & 18*), is the ultimate Prophet! (*John 6:14 & 7:40*) – see Moses’ prediction of Deuteronomy *18:15-18*.

The Old Testament prophets (*1 Peter 1:10-12 & 2 Peter 1:19-21*) and New Testament apostles and prophets (*Ephesians 2:20 & 3:5*) were divinely inspired to write the entire canon (literally “rule”) of Scripture.

The new covenant church was intended to be a prophetic community (*Acts 2:17-18*) – See Moses’ fulfilled longing, “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (*Numbers 11:29*).

Prophetic teams seemed to operate in the early church (*Acts 11:27, 13:1, 15:32*). They are probably comparable to the ‘schools of the prophets’ in the Old Testament.

Prophets were recognised as holding a recognised ‘office’ in the early church (*Acts 13:1, 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 & Ephesians 4:11*).

Individuals prophesied in the early church, as they manifested the Holy Spirit’s presence (*1 Corinthians 12:7 & 10*). This included brand-new believers (*Acts 19:6*) as well as established believers; and women as well as men (*Acts 2:17-18 & 1 Corinthians 11:4-5*).

Prophecy may be pictured as a spectrum: from those who occasionally prophesy > those regular prophesying > those recognised as prophets.

As a church we encourage every Christian who prophesies to do so out of a strong sense of the Father's love for them as His child and their secure identity in Christ.

How? Working of Prophecy

Faith (*Romans 12:3 & 6*) - God gives a measure of faith for prophecy (which can nonetheless grow further through practice!)

Openness (*1 Corinthians 12:7 & 10*) - The Spirit manifests the gift of prophecy through those open to his workings.

Love (*1 Corinthians 13:1-3*) - Love is primary and lasting; while all spiritual gifts are secondary and temporary, but nonetheless still to be exercised in love.

Eagerness (*1 Corinthians 14:1 & 14:39*) - These verses are like 'bookends' in the whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 14! – While churches and believers within them are encouraged to eagerly desire every single spiritual gift, this command relates to “especially the gift of prophecy” (v.1).

Understanding (*Acts 21:9-10*) - It seems prophecies often have 3 related parts to them, as illustrated by Agabus's prophecy for Paul: 1. Revelation (Agabus's visual aid of a belt); 2. Interpretation (Paul will be bound in Jerusalem); 3. Application (Should Paul go to Jerusalem or not? NB Why did he actually go eventually? - “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven” - *Acts 26:19*)

Weighing (*1 Corinthians 14:29*); *1 Thessalonians 5:21*; *1 John 4:1* – See the important later section, "The Importance of Weighing Prophecies".

When? Timing/Occasion of Prophecy

The overall context of a church gathering where opportunity is given for everybody to contribute in strengthening the church (*1 Corinthians 14:26*).

2-3 people should contribute prophetically in such a gathering, in an orderly 'one after the other' fashion, giving time for weighing such words too (*1 Corinthians 14:29-33*).

There is no sense in which a prophetic person can dogmatically say "I just have to prophecy right now!" – as prophecy is self-evidently under the individual person's control (*1 Corinthians 14:32*). (contrastingly, the Corinthians were spiritually 'out of control' in their pagan pasts (*1 Corinthians 12:1-3*)).

However, divine timing might mean the person prophesying sitting down quickly if someone else present has a burning revelation to contribute (*1 Corinthians 14:30*).

However, more broadly, prophecy is far more a lifestyle than simply a once-off occurrence (*Acts 2:17-18*).

Where? Location of Prophecy

Amongst believers in the gathered church (*1 Corinthians 11:45 & 14:26, 29-33*) - In the New Testament prophecy seems to work very openly and publicly most of the time. However, there is some evidence of more personal, private prophecy too (*Acts 13:1-3 & 21:9-10*).

Amongst non-believers in the gathered church (*1 Corinthians 14:24-25*) – Paul anticipates occasions where non-believers are struck by God's presence, convicted of secret sins, and subsequently become worshippers.

Amongst non-believers outside the gathered church (*John 4:1-26*) - Jesus and the Samaritan woman (particularly v.16-19). Prophecy, more broadly, was also evident in reaching non-believers in the book of Acts: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29 c.f. 26); Ananias and Saul

(9:10-12); Peter and Cornelius' family (10:3,10-16, 19-20); Paul's team and Macedonia (16:9-10).

The Importance of Weighing Prophecies

What does weighing/testing prophecies mean?

It is simply evaluating both the content of what is said, and the spirit that may lie behind what is said.

1 Corinthians 14:29 - "weigh" (Greek *diakrino*): to judge/evaluate the message, not the messenger, by separating out what is from God and what is not.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 & *1 John 4:1* - "test" (Greek *dokimazo*): to watch, with a view to approving what is reliable and valuable, whilst rejecting what is not. NB John's warning in particular is about the spiritual forces ("spirits") that lie behind the mistaken teaching about Jesus' divine-human identity.

Why do prophecies need weighing?

This is simply because there are 3 potential sources:

- God: "Spirit" - (*1 Corinthians 12: 8 & 10*).
- Human: "imagination" – Implied in *1 Corinthians 13:9* (See also *Ezekiel 13:2; Jeremiah 23:16 & 26* - *c.f. v.21-22*).
- Demonic: "demons" - (*1 Timothy 4:1-5*).

Sometimes, in practice, the divine and human sources may be somewhat mixed up together, the demonic occasionally being manifest.

Who does the weighing of prophecies?

To some extent the whole community, but especially those with prophetic gifting.

Entire church - This seems to be implied in *1 Thessalonians 5:21* and *1 John 4:1*.

Prophetic types/team - (*1 Corinthians 14:29*) – the “others” mentioned in this verse as weighing means ‘others of the same kind’ (allos), not ‘others of a different kind’ (heteros), indicating other similarly prophetic-gifted people. Some scholars believe Christians with gifts of discernment and teaching may be implied here too.

How are such prophecies to be weighed?

- What is the apparent fruit of the giver’s character? (*Matthew 7:16-20*).
- If their word is predictive, did it prove to be correct? (*Acts 11:28*).
- Does it resonate with the receiver themselves? (and with previous words they’ve received?) (*Acts 21:12-14*) – the individual believer increasingly knowing how to hear God’s voice (*John 10:2-5*), and fellow-believers recognising God’s peace umpiring in their hearts (*Colossians 3:15*).
- Does the individual/church feel loved when receiving this prophecy? (*1 Corinthians 13:2*). (The alternative is to feel manipulated or controlled! See Graham Cooke’s “*Developing Your Prophetic Gifting*” p.156ff).
- Are people encouraged, strengthened and comforted (edified & built up) as a result? (*1 Corinthians 14:3 c.f. Acts 15:32*).
- How do other (prophetically gifted?) believers in the community evaluate it? (*1 Corinthians 14:29*).
- Is it Biblical in content and drift, or does it conflict with Scripture? (*1 Corinthians 14:36-38. Isaiah 8:20*).
- Does the word produce good or evil as it’s end-product? (*1 Thessalonians 5:21-22*). Paul doesn’t seem to define precisely how good or evil are gauged! (But see, for example, *2 Thessalonians 2:15*: Is it consistent with the apostle’s previous teachings?).
- Is it consistent with the apostolic teaching about Jesus and his identity? (*1 John 4:1*) (e.g. the Holy Spirit highlights Jesus’ Lordship in *1 Corinthians 12:3*).
- Am I personally drawn to Jesus too? (*Luke 2:25-38 & Revelation 19:10*).

The Practicalities of Exercising Prophetic Gifting at GodFirst

GodFirst Culture

We believe in the following implications of our 5 culture words for being prophetic people:

Freedom: Prophesying flows out of the security of having already been freely approved by Father-God as his child, not towards subsequent approval by Him or others.

Faith: Being fearless people who step out by embracing “risk over success”, rather than being overly tentative or fearful; plus being open to others coaching us in exercising such faith.

Generosity: Receiving God’s generosity in giving us spiritual gifts; joyfully giving away what we’ve been given prophetically to others (both delivering prophecies and training others to do so); and making time and space to release others to be prophetic.

Authenticity: Having the integrity to acknowledge we sometimes get it wrong prophetically and apologise as appropriate; together with accepting a culture of truth and honesty that weighs everybody’s words graciously.

Honour: Releasing life by honouring those at various learning-stages in the prophetic journey, perhaps especially to those with clearly recognised gifting we can learn more from. In short, seeing people’s value as Father-God does!

GodFirst Community

We believe prophetic people should express community in teams, not minister independently as “lone rangers”. The two reasons for this are for their encouragement and accountability, and for the safety of others in the church. This team principle relates to the 5-fold ministries of apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers (*Ephesians 4:11*) - together with elders - who can and should help with the interpretation and application of prophetic words.

We believe too in fostering a community environment where all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including prophecy, can flourish well. There will be room for people to be encouraged to grow prophetically; and also room to humbly learn, as teachable believers who don't always 'get it right' on the journey. Space should be given for spontaneous words, but all within the orbit of gentle accountability.

GodFirst Contexts

As a church we view prophecy, in an over-arching sense, as a personal and corporate lifestyle. It's a gift that can be exercised in the coffee queue at church, at the dinner table with friends, whilst out doing a bit of shopping, or at your place of work or school/college.

However, tangibly we also encourage 1:1 prophecy ("personal prophecy"), prophecy in Connect Groups, prophecy in whole church gatherings, and finally, words given for conferences, regions or nations. Here are some practical tips for handling prophecy in these respective contexts:

Individual 1:1: At this level we think it wise to have a third person listening in to the prophecy if possible. We recommend saying "I think God is saying", rather than "Thus says the Lord". Also, we encourage those receiving such words to weigh them carefully, if necessary asking the advice of others who know you well in doing so. Such prophecies should not be received with feelings of being pressurised. Most authentic words from God need working out in humanly responsible ways, and as spiritual keys shouldn't be expected to open doors automatically.

As a church we sometimes offer the booking of "prophetic appointments", two team members ministering to an individual or couple.

Connect Group/small group: It is great to learn to prophesy in a smaller Connect Group setting, which is far easier than in a larger Sunday setting. Be open to healthy feedback from your leaders and others in the small group as appropriate. If relevant, you can discuss the content of such prophecies as a community, enjoying the learning-experience together.

Whole church (Sundays and midweek): On Sundays in particular, the meeting-leader at the front should be approached before giving a prophetic word publicly. Prophecies need to be stewarded well in meetings, for everyone's maximum benefit, and will often be followed up by further ministry during or after the meeting. According to Paul, it is usually wise to allow only 2-3 prophetic words in one gathering (perhaps because of the understandable danger of information-overload).

Wider church: At this final level, there are often some big challenges practically! However, those bringing such prophecies should have ongoing and appropriate accountability to other mature leaders in these contexts.

At all four levels, we strongly encourage a teachable, humble and submissive attitude towards leaders. Those who refuse to have their words gently weighed should not really be given a 'platform'.

GodFirst and the Wider Society and Church

We believe the 21st century internet/social media culture brings unique challenges: anyone claiming to be a prophet can release a word publicly, without any evident accountability or responsibility. In practical terms though, it is not possible to halt this flood of words (much as we would want to hear the words that are genuinely from God!). We therefore recommend givers of prophetic words submit them to local church leaders and/or peer leaders before launching unfiltered words to others; and that those receiving prophetic words use the Biblical weighing criteria outlined earlier - especially discovering if the people prophesying, whoever they are, are an accountable part of a local church body where they are in good standing.

Some particular issues about prophecy we at GodFirst also believe are important to underline are as follows:

Nature of Prophecy

Relating prophecy to Scripture: We do not believe a contemporary prophetic word should ever be treated as 'on a par' with God's Word the Bible, or that prophets today speak wholly without error. Prophecy is partially inspired (*1 Corinthians 13:9*), while Scripture is 100% inspired. The former should always be tested by the latter.

Prophecy and the future: We believe prophetic gifting should not be used by people acting like spiritual fortune-tellers, or by people trying to satisfy people's curiosity about the future. Neither should we view those with prophetic gifting as cosmic slot-machines or people releasing genies from bottles! In particular, we counsel caution in giving or receiving prophecies about big issues like future marriage-partners or having babies.

Different types of prophecy: We believe some prophetic promises (like many in the Old Testament) are conditional in nature, depending on the subsequent response of hearers; thus, some words will take time to come to pass, and should be given time in being evaluated. Others may be mysterious or appear symbolic, calling for further thought and prayer in interpreting them. We believe that prophecies that are not contrary to Scripture or apparent facts should not be too quickly rejected for the above reasons.

Character and Prophecy

We believe all Christians are called to develop Christ-like character, and to use their gifts with love for God, his people and the lost. However, the New Testament indicates this should be more evident in the case of leaders (e.g. *James 3:1-2* regarding teachers; *1 Timothy 3:1-10* and *Titus 1:5-9* regarding elders and deacons). Prophetic leaders whose lives clearly violate the moral/ethical standards of Scripture - after careful and gracious investigation (see the principle underlying *1 Timothy 5:19*) - disqualify themselves from ministry, regardless of their public influence or apparent anointing.

Misuse of prophecy

Prophecy can sometimes be misused through the manipulation of:

Scripture: We believe people can use Biblical texts to wrongly justify some things an ‘anointed leader’ says, involving a mistaken understanding or a faulty application of Scripture. Examples are inhibiting prophets being held accountable by means of the following misunderstood verses: "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm" (*Psalm 105:15*) and, relatedly, "Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?" (*1 Samuel 26:16 c.f. 24:6*). Prophetic people today, regardless of anointing, should be subject to other Christian leaders/peers. Wrongly citing the above Scriptures can easily give room for manipulation and abuse through prophetic ministries.

More broadly, some assume the blanket approval of the 100% divinely-inspired messages of the Old Testament prophets can be directly paralleled to those exercising prophetic gifting in a New Testament sense – the former's words (interpreted properly of course) need merely to be obeyed as from God; the latter's words need to be weighed or tested beforehand.

People: We reject the use of the prophetic gift for manipulating other people, as its godly motivation is to serve others in love. Some prophets can threaten their hearers with judgment for not heeding their words. Other prophets can abusively demand money, recognition or favour through their gifting. To us, spiritual manipulation has no place whatsoever in Christian ministry!

Handling of Failure

Levels of failure - We believe there are four basic distinctions in handling mistakes in those exercising prophetic gifts:

1. **A believer who is learning and fails on occasions** (which we all do!) – should be graciously trained by a more mature prophetic person.
2. **A believer who gives a clearly inaccurate prophecy** – should humbly acknowledge that and apologise appropriately, being coached further.

3. **A believer who consistently prophesies inaccurately** – should not be recognised as prophetic, and be asked by leaders to refrain from prophesying (temporarily or permanently according to the pastoral context).
4. **A believer who is found to be a false prophet** (after extremely careful investigation) – should be recognised to be a false believer, not given a further platform, and called to repentance and faith for salvation.

*See further APPENDIX 1 regarding false prophets.

Pastoring Through Failure

We believe that wherever a word proves incorrect there needs to be both contrition before God and apology to the person/people concerned at an appropriate level: where given more privately, a private apology (with another person present); or, if more publicly, a public apology. Such a genuine apology may include explanation or clarification of the word given, without trying to justify such a mistaken word. The aim is not to punish such people, but rather help them in the learning-process – especially to protect the Lord's honour, the integrity of prophetic ministry, and the faith of those receiving the word.

Calling and Failure

We believe that God's gifts and callings are irrevocable (*Romans 11:29*). In practice this means believers can potentially continue to operate in an area of gifting long after they've ceased to walk in right relationship with God himself. This is one reason for Jesus' words about testing a prophet (despite accompanying supernatural evidence) on the basis of their character and the impact of their ministries on others. Sadly, some who start serving well prophetically may end up rejected at the end.

Book Recommendations:

Bickle, Mike, *"Growing in the prophetic"* Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications 1995

Cooke, Graham, *"Developing Your prophetic Gifting"* Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World 1994

Cooke, Graham, *"The Exercise of Prophecy"* & *"The Process of Prophecy"* Vancouver, Washington, USA: 2019 & 2020

Deere, Jack, *"Surprised by the voice of God"* Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications 1996

Deere, Jack, *"The Beginner's Guide to The Gift of Prophecy"* Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA: Servant Publications 2001

Greig, Pete, *"How to Hear God: A Simple Guide for Normal People"* London: Hodder & Stoughton 2022

Grudem, Wayne, *"The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today"* (Revised Edition) Wheaton, Illinois, USA: Crossway Books 2000

Haslam, Greg, *"Moving in the prophetic: A Biblical Guide to Effective Prophetic Ministry Today"* Oxford: Monarch Books 2009

Pytches, David, *"Prophecy in the local church"* London: Hodder & Stoughton 1993

Scott, Martin, *"Prophecy in the Church"* Orlando, Florida, USA: Christian Life Books 1993

Vallotton, Kris, *"Basic Training for the Prophetic Ministry"* Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, USA: Destiny Image 2005

Vallotton, Kris, *"School of the prophets"* Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: Chosen/Baker 2015

Wilthew, Phil, *"Developing Prophetic Culture"* Milton Keynes: Malcolm Down Publishing 2016

APPENDIX 1: FALSE PROPHECY/PROPHETS

The New Testament is unashamedly positive about prophecy being used in a godly way, but also warns against the real danger of false prophets and their messages.

Gospels:

In the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 7:15-23*), Jesus speaks of watching out for false prophets, who look good on the outside, but are actually bad on the inside. Despite miracle-working ministries they are really evil-doers, the acid-test in recognising them being the fruit of ungodly character. Later, in his Mount of Olives discourse on his second coming (*Matthew 24:11 & 24*), Jesus warns of miracle-working false prophets deceiving people, even genuine believers if that were possible.

Acts:

Luke records Paul and Barnabas encountering a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet named Bar-Jesus (*Acts 13:4-12*) He was an attendant of the proconsul in Cyprus, attempting to turn his employer away from the gospel, who ultimately received God's judgment of blindness through Paul. Ironically though, this incident comes hot on the heels of Luke affirming true prophecy in Paul and Barnabas's turning-point call to mission a few verses earlier in 13:1-3!

Epistles:

Paul himself warns the Thessalonian believers not to become unsettled by false prophecies that say Jesus has already returned to planet earth previously (*2 Thessalonians 2:1-2*) – that is, claiming his return is past-tense, not future-tense!

Peter highlights the existence of false prophets in the Old Testament, paralleled identically by false teachers in his readers' day (*2 Peter 2:1*). The latter's wrong teaching focusses mainly on denying the true person and work of Christ.

John, too, faces the threat of the Greek philosophy called Docetism in the congregation in Ephesus – teaching that Jesus only appeared to be human, but wasn't genuinely human (*1 John 4:1-3*). Some believers were in danger of being taken in. The acid-test for John is to test

the spirits working through these prophets with a simple question: Did the divine Jesus really become flesh-and-blood at the incarnation or not?

Revelation:

John's readers in Asia Minor, under the cosh of the Roman Empire, were warned on three occasions about "the false prophet" (*Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10*). He too was renowned for performing miracles, but was nonetheless hostile to Jesus, his ultimate end being the lake of burning sulphur.

Drawing these various threads above together:

Prophets should be evaluated not merely by their demonstrations of the supernatural, but by their sound apostolic teaching about Jesus and their obvious Christ-like character. However, as hinted at earlier regarding Acts, the surrounding Biblical contexts occasionally highlight the fact there are authentic prophetic voices too!

"Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

(1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)