

# God's Words in Clay Pots

An exploration of prophecy  
in the New Testament

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## Introduction:

The role of prophecy in the local congregation has never been a simple matter, and to understand it requires a careful study of scripture and much wisdom. There is inherent in it the possibility of great blessing or great confusion. I have seen both. My prayer is that the blessing God intends through the gift of prophecy will be released through greater understanding.

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### 1. The difference between Old and New Testament Prophets

In the Old Testament – under the old covenant – a prophet was called by God to fulfil a role as a national spokesman in his lifetime, calling people to account and pronouncing what God would do in the future. As the Spirit was only given to certain people for certain tasks, most people could not hear from God at all and were dependant on the prophets and priests to hear God for them. The words of a prophet had the power of life and death. They were God’s very words. They were often lone voices who were separate from the leadership of the day, and who were often had to challenge them and call them to a new obedience to God’s ways.

Although there are some similar elements, the picture the New Testament gives of the exercise of the gift of prophecy and the office of a prophet has marked differences.

- a. Those who prophesied in the body of Christ were part of a team of speaking gifts and not intended to be separate from it.
- b. Paul calls prophecies “revelations” (1 Cor.14:30-31) which is clearly a lesser status than ‘God’s very words.’
- c. There were many local words of prophecy being given, because all who had the Spirit could hear from him and give revelations. Paul declares, “I would that you all would prophesy.” (I Cor.14:5)

- d. These words were always to be tested by others, which indicated that they were liable to be faulty. (1 Cor.14:29)

There were some

- e. The second is found in Ephesians 4, which tells us that Christ has given gifts of people to the church such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors... “to equip God’s people for works of service.” These are ministry roles in the body of Christ which *some* will be called to. Some will have the ‘office’ of a prophet if their denomination recognises itinerant prophets, but no national prophet that spoke God’s infallible word when no-one else could hear it.

Some of the character tests, experiences and feelings of Old Covenant prophets are experienced today, but the role as it was then has not carried on into the New Covenant. It is crucial to understand this as we explore the New Testament picture.

## 2. Three Dimensions of prophecy in the New Testament

Because all who have been immersed into the Body of Christ have the same Spirit, all can have words of prophecy at some time. Jesus said that the Father wants his disciples to “know the secrets of the Kingdom.” (Matt.13:11) All of us can have a ‘manifestation’ of the Spirit, a bubbling up of this expression of the Spirit at work, and receive at certain times a revelation in the form of words, a picture, a scripture, a sense of something God is feeling, or a dream or a vision to offer others. This is one dimension, it, and will operate alongside the other leaders.

The third is found in Romans 12:3-8. These have been called ‘motivational gifts’ (see the excellent, well researched book by Don and Katie Fortune ‘Discover your God Given Gifts’). These are character gifts that are given us from birth and colour our whole view of life. The prophetic or perceiver motivation brings a strong sense of right and wrong, black and white, justice and injustice, and an attraction to the supernatural in many forms. These attitudes will pervade our lives from a young age and profoundly affect how we live. There is often a keen discernment, insight, a ruthless honesty, an intolerance of masks or evasion, and an intense need to ‘get it right.’ This motivation will be enhanced by conversion to Christ and receiving of the Spirit, who will reveal himself through prophetic words or pictures, and the desire to see justice, holiness and righteousness. There is also a strong drawing to intercession and evangelism with this gifting.

NOTE: Many believers will have occasional words of prophecy, although they may not have the ‘perceiver’ motivation. Those who do have this motivation will usually have prophecies and be active in prophetic ways within the church, but may not have the ‘office’ of a prophet in the church. One dimension does not automatically include the other two.

Other dimensions of prophecy –

It is clear that some musicians have prophetic gifting, and so do some poets and playwrights. This may come from a prophetic motivation, but will be expressed in their art form. King David wrote some prophetic Psalms. Some of the Old Testament prophets write very poetic prophecy.

“The Spirit can give gifts ‘as he wills’ for any occasion. He will use any open and willing vessel.”

Some preachers or teachers can be given a prophetic message on occasions, even though their motivational gift is not prophecy. My husband David is like this. Some ‘shepherds’ can be given prophetic prayer as they pray over their congregation. It can sound as if they are ‘given’ spontaneous prayers of deep insight that move them and others very deeply. My primary gifting is to exhort/encourage/coach – but my secondary gifts are facilitation, prophecy and giving/resourcing. We all have a unique mix in order to fulfil the purposes God has for our lives.

Some people without the role or motivation of a prophet can have a ‘season’ of being given prophecies and prophetic prayers or ‘groanings’ in their spirit, that may last for only a season, then never again. This is because the Spirit can give gifts ‘as he wills’ for any occasion. He will use any open and willing vessel.

Some people have a deep calling to intercession, healing prayer, or deliverance prayer. They may have a major motivation of mercy, or teaching, but often have prophetic words and feelings as they fulfil that calling.

Others will be drawn into politics or local government because they want ‘a righteous nation’ or to redress some imbalance. Some go into social justice work, others into the law or the police. Others are led to journalism, writing to challenge society or political leadership. Our eldest son teaches at a University in international conflict resolution. He has a prophetic motivation with a strong call to justice issues.

Some people have a deep calling to live prophetic lives, even though they may not evidence any other aspects of prophetic gifting. They feel called to live simply or sacrificially – and are often involved in justice issues or are making statements with their lifestyle. They are a living demonstration of God’s heart, and are often a rebuke or a challenge to the church and to society. When Malcolm Muggeridge, a renowned journalist in the U.K. found Christ, he and his wife decided that they would live very simply, growing their own food and mostly just eating soups. They felt the western world lived too lavishly in comparison with the vast numbers who lived in starvation, and wanted to give to the needy as much as they could. They were prophetically acting out the heart of God.

Mick Duncan, a New Zealander who has worked in the Manilla slums calls himself ‘a truth-teller’ and he has a heart to walk alongside marginalized people revealing God’s love to them until they meet him. He is a prophet in his speaking to the church, and a compassionate evangelist seeking the lost in the world (see [www.michaelduncan.org](http://www.michaelduncan.org)).

### 3. Prophecies have three levels, and these must be clarified.

a. There are **encouraging**, affirming prophecies, such as “My people I love you and hold you in the palm of my hand. Do not be afraid...” These often come in worship and prayer times. We need to drink these in as they are given. They are often very relevant and uplifting for particular people in the group. As 1 Cor. 14:3 says, prophecy is to edify (build up) exhort (stir up, encourage – give courage) and console (bring comfort, assurance and healing).

b. There are **calling** prophecies, where God is calling us to something, asking for our co-operation, such as “My people, I have great things for you if you will open your hearts today. Do not hold back...” These prophecies need to have ‘a witness in the spirit’ of the leaders present – who should affirm that God is speaking to the group and encourage a response. If they feel uneasy, because of the manner given, the content, or the person who gave it – they should suggest the people wait further on God for a confirmation, or have a song while they decide what the appropriate response should be.

c. There are **predictive** prophecies that declare that God IS going to do something, such as “I will shake my church and many will fall... but I will raise up again the faithful.” These types of ‘strong’ prophecies MUST be tested by the leaders, and confirmation from other people must be sought before they are given, or if already given, the leaders need to weigh them and test them before giving agreement and affirming them to their group. God will not send a ‘lone voice’ to speak. That is the O.T. way that is not continued in the New. He speaks through many and varied voices and often over a prolonged period so the body can be sure of his word. Pain and confusion can often be avoided if this is understood and remembered and the congregation is taught not to accept such prophecies straight off.

#### 4. Not all revelations are for giving out immediately.

There is a ‘myth’ abroad that the Holy Spirit only operates in a spontaneous, immediate, ‘now!’ way. This is partial truth. He does give ‘now’ words that galvanise us into response. But he also gives words to ponder over for a long period, or to preach from for a season, or to pray secretly until they come to fruition. The Old Testament is full of long-term prophecies, some of which are still to be fulfilled. (When I say ‘a word’ I mean revelations that can include dreams, visions, pictures, a strong sense... not just words.) So the following must be kept in mind when seeking or receiving revelation for a situation.

a. Sometimes the word or revelation given is for *speaking out immediately* and will be confirmed by a quickening in the hearts of others. It can come in the form of scripture that seems quickened (made alive) to us – a picture in our mind – a sense or feeling in our heart or body – a dream – words that seem to be spoken in the first person by the Lord. We may well have only one part, as with a jigsaw, and others will need to complete it. This often happens in prayer groups. What is emerging will need to be responded to appropriately.

b. Sometimes a word is for ‘*incubating*’ – it needs to be brooded over until it grows to its mature state so it can then be given. If it is given prematurely, it can die on the floor before us because the soil is not ready, and we may feel disappointed in people, or angry at them for not receiving our word. Or it can create confusion because it is not the mature word. It needs “the fullness of time”. It may also need some solid Bible teaching given with it so people can understand it and know how it applies to their lives. Shepherds/preachers often have these kinds of words that shape their preaching. They will teach a principle from Scripture and then declare that it is God’s *now* word also. It is wise if preachers run this by their elders or fellow leaders before preaching it to get an agreement that this is what God is saying.

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c. Sometimes a word is given to us to *pray into being*. It may be a promise of new things. We ‘establish it in the heavenlies’ through declaring it in prayer and then persist in praying for it until it is time for this to be seen on earth. It may only be for leaders and intercessors to work with, depending on the maturity of the congregation. It is as if we are giving birth to God’s purposes in prayer.

d. Sometimes a word, especially one of sadness or groaning, is simply *for intercession* and not for public sharing. Only those able to ‘carry the burden’ of God’s grief or longing can bring fruitfulness out of these words. Others who hear them can simply feel condemned or inadequate, and are not at all motivated to seek God. These ‘groanings of the Spirit’ often precede a kind the ‘birthing’ prayer as we then begin to declare what God has in mind.

e. All words must find an echo in Scripture and in the nature of God in a balanced way. The Spirit will not contradict the Word or take us away from what the Word has revealed about God’s ways and purposes. We may need to ask the Lord for Scripture to go with the word we have received to explain it more clearly.

f. The primary response to a word is more prayer... to clarify and interpret the word, to bring it to fruition, to get our hearts ready to obey and continue to be led.

g. Not everyone will respond to words given. Leaders, prophets and intercessors can often feel frustrated that ‘the people’ are not hearing or not responding when God is speaking. The parable of the sower indicates that not everyone will be ready to ‘produce a harvest’ so we must not expect the whole church to leap at our words, nor must we simply make them feel guilty because they don’t. It requires much more wisdom than that.

The Scripture gives us a strong sense that leaders carry the burden of the vision, and the pain of seeing and knowing when the rest of the people do not. Even though everyone *can* hear from God, some will not, and only a small percentage are equipped to understand what they are hearing (to interpret it correctly) and only a few hardy souls will *want* to carry the burdens that leaders do! So leaders must persist in the praying, preaching, discerning and discipling role, even when others don't, in order to help people respond appropriately to God.

#### 5. There are no 'infallible' prophets or words.

There is another myth, and that is that a word given through a prophet will naturally be 100% accurate and therefore *must* come to pass – or else these people are 'false prophets'. This is again taking an O.T. picture which is not repeated in the New. There are many sad stories of people clinging to one single prophecy, insisting it HAS to come to pass before their lives will change, and completely missing God's way for years until they are released from that word and from such false thinking. The reverse is true too, that people who have received revelations that have *not* come to pass as they were led to believe, can now despise prophecy and no longer listen for it or respond to it.

The N.T. makes clear that prophecies must be tested and weighed up by others – which clearly indicates that they could be faulty, muddled by a wrong attitude, or only part of the picture. (1 Cor.14:29)

George Mallone writes:

*"A person may hear the voice of God and be compelled to speak, but there is no assurance that it is pollutant-free. There will be a mixture of both flesh and spirit. There will be a mixing of culture, personality, intellect and maturity. This should not discourage us from desiring prophetic gifts, but caution us that all prophecy must be tested, for the benefit of the body."* (Those Controversial Gifts)

1 Thess.5:19-21 tells us, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold onto the good." This indicates that there will be some good to hold on to, and some bad that needs to be discarded.

"...prophecies must be tested and weighed up by others... they could be faulty, muddled by a wrong attitude, or only part of the picture."  
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It is clear also that God speaks through a variety of people and giftings, not just one person. If God wants us to hear a very specific word we should wait for confirmation from two or three sources, not just act on one word from one person. That is conferring on them the status the N.T. does not give. It is worth noting that the word prophet in N.T. Greek meant 'one who speaks what has been revealed to him' and not 'one who speaks God's very words'. There is a profound difference between the two – but they are often confused today (see p.1050 Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology*).

I had a hilarious example of God speaking through many voices when staying with a friend in the States. At one point in our hours of conversation, I gave her a Scripture that I felt was God's word for her situation. She just shrugged. Then we went to a nearby church (not her local one) and the preacher used the same Scripture. Later at home she turned on a Christian TV channel and the preacher used the very same verse! Being of part Latin descent, she stood up, waved her arms, and yelled at the TV, "I hear you God!" I'm sure he laughed too!

It is possible to get some of the details wrong in our 'words'. Even Agabus who foretold Paul's arrest did not get the details completely accurate because Paul was not "bound by the Jews" but by the Romans (Acts 21:10-11, 32-33). We find Paul did not follow 'a word from the Lord' in Acts 21:4-5 when "through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." He ignored them and continued on

his way! He would not have done so if he believed those words were “the very words of God” (p.1052 Wayne Grudem).

## 6. We must distinguish between ‘words’ and interpretations of words.

This is an extremely hard one to do, but can be crucial to assessment and accuracy. In the case of Agabus not getting his prophecy quite right, he probably saw a picture of Paul bound up, a prisoner of the Romans, and the mob of Jews yelling outside – which is what happened. Only, the Romans had rescued Paul from the Jews who wanted to kill him. He was not handed over by the Jews.

When a verse of Scripture is highlighted by the Spirit, the interpretations of what God is saying through it can be extremely varied; it all depends on who is interpreting it. It is actually a good exercise to ask a group to interpret a scripture and collate their responses. ALL may be what God is saying.

Again, a picture could have various interpretations, as could words or phrases. We were told once, while travelling home from overseas service, that God wanted us in New York. (Not what we wanted to hear.) It transpired that four months later we were called to work in Brooklyn, Wellington! On that occasion we had the same scripture given from three different sources in 24 hours to confirm it. So the word given earlier was probably Brooklyn, which to the hearer, who was not a New Zealander, could only mean New York.

On another occasion when we were in a difficult period, a word was given to us through a trusted friend that we should “sell up everything and go to Australia where God would heal us.” We had no confirmation, so did not respond. Months later a visiting Australian ministry was helpful in bringing healing to an area of our life. The words heard were undoubtedly ‘healing’ and ‘Australia’ but the interpretation was not accurate. Assumptions were made that were not actually given by the Spirit.

What do we do about this? How do we get a greater certainty about prophecies? There are two possibilities. One is to learn to offer simply the barest word or impression or picture, and make no comment on it, allowing others to interpret it, as happens with the gift of a word in tongues – another has to interpret it, or it should not be given (1 Cor.14:27-28). This acknowledges that we can all play a part in the hearing process, and one person is not the only channel, which is how the Body of Christ is supposed to operate. The other way is to always say “My sense of God’s word to us is...” And not “This is the Word of the Lord”. In other words, offer the word as being from you and the Lord, not definitely from God alone. *Whatever we do – we must be open to a very different interpretation coming out of what we give, and be willing to accept that.* Many of us are too biased to get it all accurate. We all have filters of our background, culture, experiences etc. that can alter what we hear. We need to operate as a body, with much grace. God can speak through other people as he needs.

## 7. The life of a prophet is as important as the words.

One of key factors for being credible and ‘received’ in ministry is that our lives should not be out of sync with our words. This is true for any gifting, be it teacher, encourager, giver, facilitator etc. – but in an even greater sense it should be true for the prophet, who often speaks on behalf of the holiness of God. One of the major reasons why people despise prophecy and have no place for supernatural giftings, is because at some time they could not see that it had made any difference in the *life* of the person giving the prophecies. There was a jarring inconsistency that caused them to turn away in disgust.

This is clearly difficult in the life of a fledgling believer who feels they are given prophecies or that they have a prophetic motivation. Of course their lives will be up and down and not at all mature. They need to be taken under the wing of a more stable and mature person who can help them exercise their

gift wisely, with oversight, and help them live out the 'high calling' that is on their lives. Clearly, if their lives are an offence to others, they should be asked not to prophesy publicly until things are better, but asked to write down anything and pass it on to the leaders.

"The best way to get greater consistency in what we say ... is to apply all words to ourselves firstly, and to wait with them..."

The best way to get greater consistency in what we say and what we are is to apply all words to ourselves firstly, and to wait with them, letting them shape *us* first before passing them on. This would mean not speaking out directly, but writing down anything that came to us in private prayer or public services, and only passing it on when we are sure we are living it also.

It is a difficult task for leaders when they need to exercise restraint on those who bring revelations whose lives are out of order or offensively ungodly. I can recall two women in a church who had prophetic gifts who became best buddies, but due to their blunt and outspoken temperaments, would have frightful, blazing rows about every six months and not speak to each other for ages. Everyone would roll their eyes and shake their heads when hearing about the latest bust up! Their prophecies were not taken seriously. Often these people cannot see for themselves the inconsistency. They will say they feel the 'anointing' is upon them so they *have* to speak! There can come a serious unreality, a blindness to the obvious that everyone else can see, because they are having intense emotional feelings that they are convinced are 'The Spirit' – but are actually an incredible mixture. Out of such unreality heresies and cults grow. If our lives are not, in the simplest way, reflecting Jesus, we must pause and think again.

It may be necessary for leaders to teach about this in order to bring maturity to a congregation. Certainly those who give strong words to others must be expected to live in such a way that others can see the reality of it in their lives. *They* are the message, as much as their words. In fact, some godly lives are such an attraction, or a rebuke, that they scarcely need to speak to bring a message to those they meet. A great golfer once played a round with Billy Graham, and admitted afterwards that although Billy said nothing to him about his life, he felt continually rebuked by just being with him!

Another reason for an inconsistent word is having a very clouded spirit – where there is a mix of voices. Some people may have a difficult life and carry annoyance or anger at people, or they may be angry at the congregation for not being or doing what they think is right, and it comes out in their 'revelations'. The flow is very impure, and it is hard to hear what is the Spirit of God and what is the person's annoyed or angry spirit. The tone is often dogmatic and judgemental and unreasonable. There is little grace because they are not themselves the recipients of grace. I remember doing that myself once, because I was weary and disappointed, and the Lord convicted me about it. I apologised to the congregation for what I had said and how I had said it the following week. It was a painful lesson!

When these things occur there is a need to 'clear the channel' through dealing with our own hurts and disappointments so we can be an effective voice for the Lord. Sometimes a prophet with a mixed or wounded spirit is very difficult to handle, as they can be convinced that everyone else is rejecting 'God's voice'. Again, they have the wrong picture. They need to see they are as prone to error as the rest of us, and that we work together as the body to hear God accurately. There are no 'lone ranger' infallible prophets today. Even national leaders have been sadly wrong in prophecy and prediction.

"Sometimes a prophet with a mixed or wounded spirit is very difficult to handle, as they can be convinced that everyone else is 'rejecting God's voice'."

## 8. Common struggles that can plague a prophet.

a. *“I must be perfect.”* The effect of being very aware of the holiness of God can result in hearing a harsh parental voice inside which insists on perfection. Prophets can become oblivious to the work of grace and demand that they themselves do and say everything perfectly. I have listened to a number of despairing prophets who felt regularly ‘disqualified’ because they did not ‘get it all right’ or have a completely pure heart. They seemed unable to live out of the grace of Jesus – or did not feel his righteousness was sufficient for them. They can also fling this demand for perfection at others, causing great distress. This is perverted truth, twisted by our enemy to bring about destruction. It must be rooted out and healed, so they are free to be ‘cracked clay pots’, marvelling at the glory the Lord entrusts to them.

I once heard a lovely thirty year old whom God was using in deep intercession say, “Why me? Doesn’t he need perfect vessels? I am so aware of my faults and failures.” I hastened to assure him that it was his wonderful open and humble heart that attracted the Lord, and that abundant grace covered his faults at such time. This false picture of our role in prayer comes from taking an old covenant picture into the new. I have also seen a very sad case of a young woman who at 18 was told that unless she lived a perfect life God could not use her. As she couldn’t give up smoking, she just gave up. She became severely depressed, having to live with her parents well into her 30s. She was in deep bondage to this graceless word that she had believed.

b. *“I have to be accepted.”* Some prophets feel very alone and very unacceptable to others. Perhaps their uncompromising view of life has brought them rejection, or their unwise dogmatism has offended others. This can deeply affect family life. I have seen marriages under great stress and some broken because of unwise pressure from a prophetic spouse on the other to live up to their extremely high standards. Some carry deep wounds of rejection going way back, and long to be ‘normal’ people who are loved by all. They can even hate their gifting, and the God who inflicted it on them! Such people need deep, cleansing experiences of the healing love of God. They also need some good ‘mates’ who can assure them they are accepted and loved, even if they are abrasive or too direct for many. They need wise counsel on how to be true to themselves without unnecessarily offending others. I usually tell prophets in my workshops for intercessors that other people think they are ‘weird’ and find them hard to handle. It is a fact of life. Learn to accept it! Then we spend time affirming them and blessing them in their vital role. But it can take time and lots of patience to bring comfort and wisdom into this area.

c. *“I have to be heard.”* Because a prophets gifting is largely about ‘speaking forth’ either to God or others, being heard is obviously a real need. But when it becomes a tyrant within, it hurts everyone. Some prophets don’t feel ‘heard’ because their words are not acted upon. This could be because they don’t have a lifestyle that accords with their words, or that their words are untimely, or lack authenticity in some way. They will need to become more self-aware and open to help. Most people welcome a perceptive and gentle word, given in love, so the reasons for not being heard would need to be explored very honestly. Sometimes this feeling is simply a legacy from a too busy or uncaring parent, and can be healed through prayer. I have noticed that women in particular often feel they are not taken seriously.

d. *“I have to know what is going on.”* Again, ‘knowing’ is part of the gifting, but it can also become a tyrant. Instead of waiting quietly on God for what *he* wants us to know, it can turn into a terrible busy-body gossiping habit, always on the phone to hear the latest! There can also be a brewing imagination that puts two and two together and makes fifteen... and insists it is a revelation from God. These assumptions can destroy lives! Awful things have been said in church groups because of this sinful distortion of the gifting.

Another aspect of this can be that if they are not told things, they always assume

“The answer to this fleshly compulsion is that *we do not have to know everything.*”

something 'bad' is being deliberately hidden! A mother I know admitted to me that she constantly wanted to know the smallest detail of her teenage daughter's life, so she read her diary! They had a very difficult relationship because of this. After realising why she did this, she was able to let it go and trust God more and apologise to her daughter! Some prophets do not respect boundaries in people's lives, and are very intrusive and invasive, particularly if they feel a burden to pray for a person. The answer to this fleshly compulsion is the quiet acknowledgement that we *do not have to know* everything. And if we are not told we should not seek it. If God wants to reveal things to us, we can hear all we need to know through a quiet and pure spirit that waits on God. Anything else is liable to cause offence and discredit our gifting.

Just the other day I was feeling a concern for a family member for whom we had been praying frequently who was not communicating, and I wanted to know more so we could pray more specifically. I kept bringing this before the Lord – asking what I should do. Then out of the blue she dropped in for a very honest and spontaneous chat (never having done this before!) This was my answer!

e. *"I have to make it happen."* Sometimes agitated and aggressive prophets are coming from the mistaken idea that they are policemen and not postmen! The problem is that the feelings God gives them of things not right, or of his longing for his people can be so strong that the prophet feels constrained to act on God's behalf and make every effort to 'make it happen'. I have heard of terribly destructive anonymous letters of warning being sent those slow to respond to 'a word' given to them. The recipient took years to recover from the crushing effect. This is a mistaken concept of the role, and leads to really ungodly behaviour and much hurt. Watchmen – an O.T. picture of prophets – see beyond the city and warn of the approach of enemies or messengers or the King himself. *They are not the palace guard or the street police!*

They must entrust the working out of these words to God and his people, and be available to pour out that feeling at the throne of God, and continue to speak with grace as the Spirit leads. Often they are ahead of the people in their 'knowing' and must wait patiently for God to work it all out. He is not usually as impatient as they feel! They sense urgency, but God is patient because he knows the end from the beginning. (How many times over the centuries have prophets proclaimed that the Lord is coming *very soon*?) He knows also that "the kindness of God leads to repentance" (Rom.2:4) as much as anything and that we live in a covenant of grace. This is a hard lesson for prophets to learn. They can also feel they are the only ones who know the truth so they are bound to 'make it happen'. Not at all the picture given in the N.T.

"He intends the body together to find his mind and heart. There are no 'lone rangers' in the Kingdom

*"I, only I, am left..."* Sometimes the self-pity of Elijah can overcome prophets, if they feel they have not been heard or accepted. Some very disgruntled prophets leave churches because they feel they are 'the only ones' who are hearing right, or doing things right. This is terribly sad. There is often a great distortion going on. God does not work like that. He intends the body together to find his mind and heart. There are no 'lone rangers' in the Kingdom of God. Such people usually take their distortion to another church and cause offence until they move on again. A terrible shame! Until they get a new view of their role they will only cause harm and experience a lot of pain.

g. *"I can never compromise..."* One of the blessings a prophet brings to a group is their uncompromising attitude to life. But this can also bring great confusion. I watched a prophetic woman in a public meeting being questioned and prayed for by the leaders of the meeting. They felt there was some clouding of spirit in her words. She was *so* convinced that she had to be all right, or all wrong, that she went into terrible confusion and severe depression for months afterwards. She felt that to admit that some of her words (or her manner) was not 'all of God' was *a compromise* – so she therefore *had* to be wrong in all of it, and so lost her reason to minister.

This rigid thinking can also badly affect relationships, where they cannot entertain the thought of making concessions, or giving away some stance for the sake of coming closer to other people. This is not about compromising God's truth (as they feel it is) but about accepting that we are not infallible people, and we just could be exaggerating or even wrong, and not just once! The sense of 'hearing God' often on things can bring a pride or arrogance – a feeling that we are always right, that leads to this uncompromising view.

h. "*God must be displeased.*" Because the gift is about seeing, and often a prophet sees what is lacking and what is not right, the assumption can be made that God must be constantly angry with us because of all the things that are not right. This is conveyed in interpreting pictures or words negatively, having a 'suspicious' untrusting even cynical attitude, and not being open to an encouraging uplifting view of God's heart for people. Such people have a tendency to discourage constantly, rather than inspire or lift up people. They can forget the compassionate heart of Jesus for this world, and his church.

i. "*I've gone beyond the Bible.*" I have twice heard women say something like this. One had long personal visions of Jesus and heaven some years previously and was living out of that 'new revelation' and felt bored with the Bible. Another was uncomfortable with what she felt was the 'constraint' of the Scriptures. She often had visions and dreams and had her own ideas of 'what God was saying' and admitted she hardly ever read Scripture now. This is a dangerous place to be. God's Spirit will not contradict Scripture – so it is to be our anchor-point and grid for all we hear and see in the supernatural realm. It is how we 'test' prophecy and vision. These two women both evidenced a measure of confusion and a restless, unsure state.

If you feel rather troubled by this long list of things that can go wrong, be assured that all the giftings can become distorted and dangerous. Servers can become obsessive and possessive. They can lose touch with the Word and to listening to God, and refuse to let others serve them. Teachers can become so 'book-orientated' that they are out of touch with real people, becoming dogmatic and argumentative, and failing to hear the voice of God. Mercy people can become so embroiled in another's pain that they become addicted to it... and so on. Every strength has a weak side which leaves us vulnerable. We all need to become more watchful, more aware of our failings, and willing to grow and mature with the help of others.

## 9. Emotion and prophecy.

This is a tricky one, because a common reason people turn away from prophecy and other spiritual gifts, and even consider them demonic or a fabrication of the unstable is *excessive emotion* – the appearance of being 'out of control'. The fact is that when the Spirit stirs us into action with prophecy or other words, there is often a high degree of emotion involved. It is very often a fearful (awesome) thing, and we tremble, and become intense or very nervous – and this is heard, sometimes more than our words. What can we do to allay the fears of others, and to adhere to the N.T. injunction that "all things be done decently and in order"?

Leaders wrestle with this one, because they do not want to quench the Spirit, but must protect the flock from polluted prophecies, or manipulative emotion and words. Here are some suggestions:

For Leaders – look at the normal life of the person.

- If they are by nature temperamental, emotional or melodramatic, they will feel this is quite 'normal' because that is how they live their everyday lives! But if it stops people hearing the word they bring then it would probably be better for the person to write it down and read it more calmly or get someone else to read it.

- If the person is in the habit of losing their cool, and regularly seem not to be in control, then it would be better for them not to prophesy until they have rooted out the problem.
- If the person has a negative attitude about ‘church’, or a group or the leaders, then their anger and pain will come through and pollute their words. Others feel this – so it will need to be addressed. They need to sort out their hearts before bringing words to the group.
- Some intercessors weep a lot. They feel the deep compassion of God. I know one who sits near the door so she can duck out if she ‘becomes a mess’ so she doesn’t draw too much attention to herself. If this happens often in your gatherings, some teaching on what the Spirit is doing would be helpful.
- Explain to the congregation why emotion is a strong part of this gifting and bring them assurance that this is OK.

“Explain to the congregation why emotion is a strong part of this gifting and bring them assurance that this is OK.”

What needs to be clear is that God can speak through anyone, so no-one is indispensable, and a polluted word brings more harm than good, so it is a waste of time anyway!

For the person – if you are aware you give very emotional words and others turn away from them because of this –

- Start writing them down and handing them to others to give instead of you.
- Ask the Lord if this excessive emotion is how God wants you to be. Is it rooted in God’s heart or a result of your own wounds or angers? Keep open for God to heal you and cleanse you.
- Recognise that God can speak through others, and he will. It is presumptuous to think you are his only means of communication. Let the role go for a while if it is always intense. Acknowledge that you don’t ‘have to make it happen’ – you are just offering what you perceive is his word.

Sometime words are given in an unnatural Elizabethan English, which was obviously not how it was heard in the early church. This can also put people off. It is purely a cultural habit, not a sign of authority. Spiritual authority comes with the purity of life that develops as we spend time with the King. It comes as we are recognised as being accurate and effective on a regular basis. It is also recognised because your words breathe life into others – you ‘author’ new things as you speak.

## 10. N.T. examples of a prophet’s motivation.

Although prophets are mentioned, and instructions are given about prophecies in the N.T. there are not actual character descriptions given about these people, such as are given for elders and deacons, which is curious. But there are two writers of N.T. book that evidence the heart and thinking of prophets. They are James and John.

**James** is the half-brother of Jesus, and leader of the church in Jerusalem. He is called by historians ‘James the Just’ because he was a righteous, upright and fearless man. It is said that his appointed executioner refused to kill him because of his reputation, and another had to do it! If you read his letter and listen to the ‘tone’ of it, you will hear a no-nonsense, ‘tell it straight’ type of person. He gives no accolades (as Paul does), he teaches little theology (unlike Paul), but he calls his readers to holy, focussed, uncompromising living under the fear of God!

The topics he is concerned about are:

- Trials are good for you so don’t doubt, but persevere.
- God never tempts us, he is perfect and unchanging.
- Be doers of the word. Faith without good deeds is lifeless.

- True religion is caring for the needy and helpless. No favouritism.
- Don't presume to teach if you can't control your tongue.
- He describes true and false wisdom and condemns 'friendship with the world'.
- Submit to God – mourn, weep, humble yourselves and he will exalt you.
- Don't judge your neighbour, or exploit others, or boast of what you will do... etc.

This is how a prophet often feels and thinks. It makes a compassionate person shudder. He sounds like he was having a hard day when he wrote it! But amongst the tough words is humility. He never lays claim to his relationship as the brother of Jesus – and he identifies with those who stumble (James 3:2).

**John** is the other writer. His tone is much warmer, and his central theme is not 'get it right', but seeks a profound revelation of Jesus, then you can 'walk in the light'. He began his walk with Jesus by being nick-named "The Son of Thunder". We hear him and his brother wanting Jesus to call down fire and destroy an unresponsive town! A very immature and impatient prophet.

But as he sees and experiences more and more of Jesus, he is changed. In later life he lives in a community, teaching and discipling. His gospel has profound insights, wonderful theology, lovely pictures of Jesus that have been doorways for millions into a true relationship with the Lord. They are born out of his own captivated heart. He is self-effacing. He tells stories of himself but won't use his name. He is tender – he reveals intimate moments between Jesus and his mother, or Jesus and individual people. This is a man who 'sees' with wonder and grace. His letters 1, 2, and 3 John are uncompromising, but also appealing in their sense of wonder at who the Lord is, and what it is to be his child. He holds out the incredible joy of knowing Jesus, walking in the truth, and finally seeing him as he is. Even in Revelation, with all the strange symbolism, Jesus speaks understanding and compassion to the seven churches as well as rebuke. All this is the heart of a prophet who has seen and heard marvellous things and can draw us to seek the Lord for ourselves.

These pictures echo the O.T. prophets, but display a very different stance. They are saying "come up higher... see life differently so you can walk in holy ways." Their lives attract us and humble us. This is what we should aim at in our prophetic roles.

<p>"They are saying 'come up higher... see life differently so you can walk in holy ways.' Their lives attract us and humble us."</p>
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## 11. The marks of a mature prophet.

Having a mature prophet in a congregation is a real blessing. They provide a depth and stability that all can draw on. They are usually greatly loved and respected, and both leaders and the people will regularly go to them for counsel and prayer, knowing they will be blessed by them. What is it about them that draws others? Why are they such useful channels for God?

- a. They no longer have any illusions about being 'somebody special'. They are aware through many life experiences that we are all 'earthen vessels', all in need of constant grace, and can therefore be gracious to the broken and needy, the sinful and wayward. Although honest and direct, their ability to *identify* with the needs of others makes them a 'sympathetic high priest' – a true reflection of Jesus.
- b. They do not need to prove anything to others. After years of mixed experiences they know when God is using them, and when it is just themselves. They don't need constant approval to feel OK about themselves. They are content with who they are, and roles God designs for them whether they are private or public.

- c. They see themselves as part of a *team* of ministers, not separate, nor superior. They are contributors to the whole picture, working alongside those who teach, counsel, lead and shepherd. They understand and honour the roles others have, and trust their sincerity and their giftedness. They love to bless others and affirm them. One such man we know was the side-kick of a nationally known teacher and he called himself ‘the delivery boy’! He ministered with words of knowledge, prophecy, healing prayer and deliverance, after the teacher had exercised his gift. It worked marvellously well. Paul talks about the teachers and prophets worshipping together and hearing God. A great combination.
- d. They have an easy humility, and do not seek prominence, because they know that it is God that lifts up and casts down. If they are to be used, God will make a way, and it will be through ‘a quiet and gentle spirit’ not an inflated or demanding one. They don’t sulk when not consulted, or gossip about others when not included, because they know that will inhibit the flow of the Spirit through them when the time is right for them to speak. They have such a big picture of God that they know he can use anyone to achieve his purposes. It doesn’t have to be them – in fact they would love it to be others. They love to train younger ones in their giftings.
- e. They have a profound and effective intercessory role. They realise that more is accomplished on their knees than anywhere else, if done in the right spirit. Their colleagues are incredibly blessed to know they are being borne up in prayer daily by them, or that they can call on them at any time when a battle is brewing. Without them the church is weak and vulnerable, and they know it. They see this as a primary role, and they expect no thanks or applause for it.
- f. They see themselves as postmen, not policemen. When given a word to deliver, they do it without feeling they have to enforce it. They offer it as a messenger and the response is up to the recipients. They can do this because they recognise that God will graciously keep on speaking, through a whole variety of channels, and it is not up to them to make it happen. They know that although they may have ‘the first word’ it is the shepherds who have ‘the last word’ in leading the people to follow God. They take their pain to the Father, when his word is not responded to appropriately and pray fervently. They do not berate the people for their slowness of heart, because they know they can’t “cast the first stone”! Instead they call us... over and over if necessary, as a patient parent, as a merciful high priest, and identify with us in our struggles to obey God fully.

May we cultivate such maturity in our congregations.

## 12. Questions to consider about your prophetic gifting.

1. From Section 3, p.3-4 – What is the shape of your gifting? In what way do you express your prophetic nature/gift/calling?
2. From Section 3 and 4 – What do you mostly experience – what do you struggle with?
3. Page 7, Section 6. – Does this surprise you? Have you experienced this inaccuracy of interpretation? What did you do with it?

4. How have you been helped to have a life that is consistent with the words you bring? P.7-8
  
5. P.9-11. Which of these common struggles have you had to deal with? Who could help you with any struggles you have now?
  
6. P.11-12 Is this an area that you, or a friend have difficulty with? What would you do if you had intense feelings and felt misunderstood?
  
7. Which N.T. prophetic writer do you feel most drawn to and why?
  
8. Which marks of a mature prophet do you still need to work on? Who can help you?
  
9. If you are a pastor/prophet - how do you use the gifts of other leaders who are teachers, encouragers or shepherds to balance out your strong gifting?

## 12. Recommended reading

- Any books by Dutch Sheets are superb e.g. *Intercessory Prayer* and *Authority in Prayer*
- Rhonda Hughey - *Desperate for his presence*. [www.fusionministry.com](http://www.fusionministry.com)
- Books and CDs by Graham Cooke on [www.brilliantbookhouse.com](http://www.brilliantbookhouse.com)