

Prophecy

What is prophecy?

The Greek word for prophecy is *propheteia*, which is the amalgamation of two other words, *pro*, meaning forth and *phemi*, meaning to speak. The Illustrated Oxford Dictionary says that a prophet is:

- A teacher or interpreter of the supposed will of God;
- A person who foretells events; and
- A person who advocates and speaks innovatively for a cause.

In the New Testament a person who prophesies is one who recognises the heart of God in a situation and expresses that to others. The apostle Paul wrote the following:

Everyone who prophecies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophecies edifies the church.

1 Corinthians 14:3-4

John Wimber - Prophecy is declaring the message of God to his church for the purpose of edification. It is not a skill, aptitude, or talent. It is the actual speaking forth of words given by the Spirit in a particular situation and ceases when the words (given by the Spirit) cease. This may be in poetic form or even a song.

Derek Prince - The gift of prophecy is the supernaturally imparted ability to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and speak God's mind or counsel. Prophecy ministers not only to the assembled group of believers, but also to individuals.

David Pytches - The gift of prophecy is the special ability that God gives to members of the body of Christ to receive and to communicate an immediate message of God to his gathered people, a group among them or any one of His people individually, through a divinely anointed utterance.

Old and New Testament prophecy

Old Testament prophets might be considered to start at Moses and finish at John the Baptist. New Testament prophecy starts at Pentecost and continues to this day (**Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17**). Note the shift of prophecy from individuals in the Old Testament to a more corporate expression in the New Testament.

According to Hebrews 1 there was a specific mission for the Old Testament prophets. They spoke the very oracles (scripture) of God. There was little room for error (**Numbers 18:20**). In the Old Testament kings, judges and prophets were recipients of the Holy Spirit and through them the scripture came forth.

Yet even in the Old Testament the Spirit prophesied through Moses the very heart cry of God.

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would place his Spirit on them.
Numbers 11:29

From New Testament times the church itself is called to be a prophetic people from its very birth. Indeed Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (**Revelation 19:10**)

These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy'.

Acts 2:15-18

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. **Matthew 11:11-15**

New Testament examples of prophecy

- Agabus and the disciples warning Paul about the Jews seizing him if he went down to Jerusalem. This is a foretelling of an event to prepare or warn God's people (**Acts 20:23, 21:10-11**);
- The daughters of Philip the evangelist who are distinguished by their prophesying (**Acts 20:9**);
- Through prophetic utterance among the prophetic people in Antioch, Saul and Barnabas were called out and commissioned by the Holy Spirit to be sent out to do apostolic work (**Acts 13:11-4**);
- Judas and Silas are called prophets and are mentioned as encouraging and strengthening the church in Antioch (**Acts 15:32**);
- Paul laying hands on the disciples asking for them to receive the Holy Spirit (they only knew John's baptism), the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy (**Acts 19:1-9**); and
- Timothy receiving a prophetic message (**1 Timothy 4:14**).

Prophecy in the New Testament

Although in the Old Testament prophets had the role of uttering what was to be Holy Scripture, that role has distinctly changed in the New Testament. Those who the Holy Spirit used to produce the scriptures in the New Testament were the Lord Jesus Himself (Hebrews 1) and the apostles.

Prophecy distinctly changes in the New Testament from a lonely outside the camp figure, which is quite 'other-worldy', to an equipper of the Body of Christ.

- To prepare God's people for works of service;
- To train God's people;
- To build up God's people;
- To mature God's people; and
- To train the revelatory eyes and ears of the God's people.

The purpose of prophecy

- Edification - The building up of the church (**1 Corinthians 14:3**);
- Encouragement and instruction - That revelation and truth can come forth as God's word is opened up to us (**1 Corinthians 14:31**);
- Exhortation - We are admonished, stirred, and at times warned (**1 Corinthians 14:3, Acts 21:10-11**);

- Comfort - God as the Chief Shepherd comforting His lambs through His manifest presence in prophecy (**1 Corinthians 14:3**);
- Conviction and faith - Believers and unbelievers alike can be brought to a greater understanding and level of faith (**1 Corinthians 14:24-25**); and
- Impartation - Releasing Timothy through a prophetic message (**1 Timothy 4:14**).

The purpose of prophecy is to:

- Strengthen (gird up);
- Encourage (lift up);
- Comfort (cheer up); and
- Edify (build up).

Our desire should always be to communicate God's heart, to do the best we can to express what he means to us and then to stand aside in wonder as when his presence comes and all prophecy is fulfilled and all creation submits to the Creator himself.

The apostle Peter put it this way:

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. **1 Peter 11:9-21**

It is our privilege and joy to be trusted by the Holy Spirit to bring the "now" word of God to each other. The desire of each of our hearts must be to be a truly prophetic community of people, expressing the love of God to one another and to the general community around us.

Prophetic revelation

The main point to bear in mind about prophecy is that it is revealed and not arrived at in some other way under our own efforts or merit. Revelation is given. It is by the grace and mercy of God. The good news is that God wants to reveal himself and his purposes to the world, even when they do not seek him.

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **Matthew 11:27**

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, "Here am I, here am I." **Isaiah 65:1**

God wants to reveal himself to us much more than we are prepared to listen. If there is a communications problem, it is on our side and not because of some reluctance on the part of God.

The Father's ultimate revelation is Jesus and it is true that all other revelation either looks forward or backwards to Jesus to be put into context (**Colossians 2:9**). There is no revelation that is contradictory to the

person of Jesus or the word of God in the Bible. Much of the revelation that we receive is to do with the day to day things of life and the outworking of those great truths that the Lord has revealed to us at other times.

Revelation will come in many ways. It will not just come whilst we are conscious of being in the presence of God, it will also come when we are in pursuit of other things or in our leisure times. It may come in the midst of adversity or it may be there when the pressure is off. Revelation is a sovereign work of the Lord and it comes when he wants to give it to us. Our main concern will be to hear what he is saying and to act accordingly. We have to be able to discern the voice of God from our inner thoughts or those from other sources in order to be confident that we really do have revelation from him.

God will use many ways to speak to us, including speaking directly in an audible voice, speaking through other people, using our circumstances, dreams, situations, emotions and any number of different devices. The main thing is that he does want to speak to every one of us.

Recognising the voice of God

As with all kinds of recognition, the recognition of the voice of God becomes easier the more familiar it is to us. With all relationships, the more time spent together and the more intimate the relationship becomes, the easier it is to recognise the ways and the voice of the other party.

As we spend time with God, being in his presence we will begin to recognise the things that please him or distress him. We will become more able to recognise his voice when he speaks to us and to pick out his words from those that are whispering to us from other sources, including our own hearts.

This will give us a greater capacity for recognising the voice of God when he speaks to us in other circumstances, when we are not setting the time apart for talking to him or being in his presence. It is also true that when we spend little or no time in maintaining any relationship, the intimacy is the first thing to go and the familiarity with the ways and recognition of the voice of the other party will diminish. The same applies to our relationship with God.

Sin that is not dealt with makes us turn our backs on God. When we are convicted, and do not turn to him in repentance, we cut ourselves off from revelation. We may still have the gift, but we will have no lasting fruit to show from it until we acknowledge our sin and turn back to the Father. If you feel that the Father has stopped speaking to you, it would be a good idea to look back and consider at what point the communication stopped. The last thing that the Father said to us will often be the thing that he wants dealing with before we move on.

Prophecy can also be used in the above context as when a person is ignoring God and the sin divides them from him. The word of the Lord can come through another (prophet) because the first person is not listening. The Father is so keen to speak to us he will use an intermediary if he has to. Jesus again is the ultimate in this respect.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted. **Galatians 6:1**

The operative word in the above scripture verse is gently. We are to reflect the heart of God towards his children. The other thing to remember is that if we are bringing a word from God to another person, they will in all likelihood have some foreknowledge that this is the word of God as he will have spoken it to them directly in the first place. They are either ignoring him or need confirmation. Our job in receiving revelation for another person is to give it as and when the Lord requires us to and then to get out of the way of the relationship between them and God as soon as we can.

Who can prophesy?

In the Old Testament, prophecy was restricted to the prophets. Moses looked forward (prophetically) to the time when all of God's people would prophesy.

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!
Numbers 11:29

In the New Testament, all believers can prophecy and indeed are called to have a prophetic lifestyle (ie manifesting the inner life of the Holy Spirit to those around them).

The apostle Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, on the day of Pentecost said this:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy. **Acts 2:17-18**

Not everyone has the gift of prophecy, but all believers can prophesy. Paul continues in his letter to the Corinthian church:

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified. **1 Corinthians 14:5**

Those who the Lord has given a particular aptitude for certain gifts should beware of thinking that they are more important or have a special revelation or "anointing" above their fellow believers. This is always a temptation for the person themselves and for those who hear the prophecies they bring.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. **Romans 12:3**

The Lord can, and does, use anyone and everyone to bring his word to his people. In the Old Testament he even spoke to a prophet called Balaam and who was being disobedient, through his own donkey!

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" **Numbers 22:18-30**

Those who have the gift of prophecy, as with all of the gifts of the Spirit, have been given to the church and should be accountable to the church, to build up their fellow believers and to encourage and instruct them in using these gifts to bring glory to God and to extend his kingdom.

Receiving prophetic revelation

When we receive revelation from God, we have to recognise that we act as a filter for what he is saying. Jesus used parables and scenes from everyday life to illustrate his words and to put them into a framework that could be understood by others. God will often speak the same word to several different people but use different imagery that is personal to them. For instance, he may speak to a person using images from their job, whilst speaking to someone based at home with domestic images. He speaks to them both in the same way but they express it differently in terms that they are familiar with.

Other ways in which we filter the received word of God are through our past experiences, our current situations, our personalities, our sense of our own worth and every other constituent part of our personal make-up. We have to be aware of this and allow for the fact that sometimes we will get it wrong or some part of it wrong, even though we are convinced that it is correct and we have received the word of God for the moment (if not the century). More often than not we will modify the received word through our personal 'filters' and it will be something of a mixture.

Given the purist tendencies of most prophetic people, this sounds like a formula for disaster, but in actual fact it sets us free. It means that all of those who thought that they had to get it perfectly right before they could receive from God or who had to get themselves into a near perfect state are now free to receive from God. He knows who we are inside out so he can use the way that we are to bring the emphasis on a word that he wants. His grace is sufficient to fill in the gaps that we have in our make-up. It becomes another opportunity to exercise our faith. The great joy is that when we take the plunge and step out in faith, God honours this and uses the word that we bring to achieve his purposes. It is the arrogant, know-all he will not honour.

The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God. **1 Corinthians 8:2-3**

Ways in which prophecy can be received

Prophecy can be received in a multitude of ways. For example:

- Through a revelation or a spontaneous utterance, as the Spirit of God reveals the 'mind of Christ.' (**1 Corinthians 2:9-16, 14:30**);
- Ananias and Saul - Saul has a vision of Ananias coming and laying hands on Him to restore His sight. At the same time Ananias is having a vision where the Lord appears to Him and tells Him to go and pray for Saul. (**Acts 9:10-12**);
- Cornelius and Peter - Cornelius has an angelic visitation and is told his prayers have been heard and is instructed to send men to Joppa to get Peter. Peter is on the roof praying and falls into a trance and receives a vision of eating unclean foods that prepares Him to go to the gentile Cornelius' house and impart the Kingdom of God. (**Acts 10:1-22**);
- Believers at Antioch - Prophets and teachers were gathered together and in the midst of worshipping and fasting the Spirit said (possibly through a prophetic word) to set apart Saul and Barnabas for the work which he had called them;
- Paul at Troas - In the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging them to come and help them. (**Acts 16:6-10**); and
- John on Patmos - John was caught up in the Spirit and received his revelation.

Practical tips for growth

- Stay in the word of God, it is a lamp to our feet and is our plumb line for all that we receive from the Lord;
- Develop, guard and maintain your private history with the Lord. Intimacy is the very heart of God for us and should be our heart for Him;

- Be in fellowship with other believers (in the local church), be supportive and serve where you can. Avoid the temptation to isolate yourself. The reason the Lord has released his prophetic gifts is for the strengthening of his church;
- Favour is what every prophetic person needs in order to be effective and nothing grants favour with others better than a servant heart. Don't develop an identity in your gifting but let your identity be in Jesus as you serve his body; and ...
- ... remember Balaam's donkey!

Giving prophecy

Once a prophecy is received, the way in which it is presented, the timing and the location are all things that have to be considered. Prophecy falls broadly into two categories, public and personal, and the person bringing the prophecy is accountable for the manner in which the word is brought (but not how it is received by others). Any prophecy, which contains directive or sensitive elements, must be shared with the leaders of the church beforehand.

The style and language of presentation must be conducive to the heart of God even though it comes through the personality of the giver.

Public prophecy is given to the church under the authority of the leaders. Personal directive prophecy should be witnessed and, if possible, recorded. Unrecorded, one to one (private), directive prophecies are open to abuse and should be avoided for the protection of the giver and the receiver. Always leave room to allow the hearer to question what is being brought. The person prophesying is not infallible.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. **1 Corinthians 13:9**

For example the person who prophecies with a "Thus says (or sayeth!) the Lord..." or similar does not leave room for anyone to question the veracity of the prophetic word in any way. Curiously enough there is often an accompanying emphasis on the person giving the word rather than on the word itself or on God the originator of the word.

A better way to bring prophecy is to offer them humbly with such words as, "I believe that the Lord is saying..." which gives the hearers the room to consider the prophecy and to receive it in a proper manner without undue emphasis on the person bringing the word.

Because a person brings a prophetic word in a particular style, which may be associated in the mind of some with (Old Testament) prophecy, it does not necessarily mean that a prophecy is true or that the person is a prophet nor does it mean that it cannot be weighed and challenge.

Whether public or personal, prophetic words should contain the following elements:

- A true prophetic word;
- The love of God in the heart of the person prophesying;
- The right time;
- The right place; and
- Mature oversight from a third-party.

Weighing and testing

There is a great deal of difference between a prophetic word for personal encouragement and those with direction for either an individual or for the church as a whole. For the protection of the church and those who are either giving or receiving prophecy, the Bible makes it clear that these latter words should be weighed by others to establish if it is the word of God or if there is some other influence to alter or negate the word. Of course, we should all weigh prophecy anyway and we are not obliged to receive everything that is thrust at us with the claim to being the word of God for our lives.

Two or three prophets should speak and the others should weigh carefully what is said.
1 Corinthians 14:29

It must be remembered that it is not the individual that is being weighed, rather the word that they bring. Because someone does not have the right 'credentials' does not disqualify them from prophesying. Equally a great deal of damage can be done by some well established 'prophet' who brings something from his own heart, that is not the word of God and it remains unchallenged.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-christ, which you have heard is coming and even now is in the world. **1 John 4:1-3**

The spirit of anti-christ is subtler than we sometimes recognise and whilst giving acknowledgement to Jesus on the face of it, the overall impression one is left with is of the person who brought it rather than the Lord who supposedly sent it. Weighing and testing of revelation by ourselves, our peers and church leaders is most important.

Prophecy is creative

The word of God is creative. The word of God brought creation into being. God's word has the ability to create repentance, healing and restoration.

Prophecy is the expression of his heart inspired in the heart of the prophet to create his heart of love in other people. Prophecy is love letters from Jesus to his church.

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates to even dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

Prophecy can be received in any number of ways through the Bible, dreams, visions, prayer, walking along the street, looking at creation etc. It can also be expressed in different ways such as written, sung or spoken words, actions such as drama and mime, pictorially in paintings, photography or film.

Similarly, prophecy can be expressed in any number of ways. For example:

- Speaking out a prophetic word (**1 Corinthians 14:4, 6, 19**);
- In song. (**Colossians 3:16**);
- A physical act or demonstration. (**Acts 21:11**); and
- Through writing (**Revelation 1:11**).

Areas of caution

- Avoid “owning” prophetic words. Our responsibility is to give them as accurately as we can. It is the responsibility of others to act or not act on those words. (see Ananias and Paul in Acts 9);
- When a word comes to pass, avoid the “I told you so syndrome”, God gets the glory;
- Avoid the temptation to continue past the revelation or garnishing the word to make it better;
- Be ready to embrace the cross, forgive and stay clear with others. As human vessels exercising gifts it is easy to receive rejection and be insecure. Always stay teachable and remember that we are fallible creatures serving the infallible God;
- Remember the prophetic is not a 'sanctified' form of fortune telling. The prophetic does not exist in the new covenant as a device to control others nor is it to remove the responsibility an individual has to make their own decisions, or replace an individual responsibility to have an intimate relationship with Jesus; and
- New Testament prophets are not “Moses” leading the people. They are equippers who help equip the body of Christ to hear the voice of God so that they may do the works of service that he has ordained for them.

Other revelatory gifts

Other gifts usually referred to as revelatory are the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom and the discernment of spirits. These tend to merge into one another and there are all kinds of different definitions that seem to be important to some people. The word of wisdom and knowledge seem to be particularly difficult to divide at times.

Often when we receive a word of knowledge, particularly if it is about someone else, there is the temptation to go and tell them immediately. The next thing we have is a problem, because we did not listen to the Lord about what he wanted us to do with that word. It might be for our own protection or for us to pray about and bringing the word prematurely or even at all to the other person might have the opposite effect of the original intention.

The gift of discernment of spirits is particularly important when deciding the source of the prophetic word. It is essential for those who are called upon to exercise authority over others, particularly in the context of the prophetic. Sometimes there is no evidence other than the warning notices that spring up in the heart when the gift is operating. The discernment of spirits gives a starting point very often to uncovering a whole host of things that have not been previously realised.

Much of what we receive from God and the way in which he does it is the same as that received by others. One commentator, recognises this in saying that the difference between the prophet and the other people of God is that whereas the others read his word at a normal pace, the prophet is a speed reader. We all get there in the end.

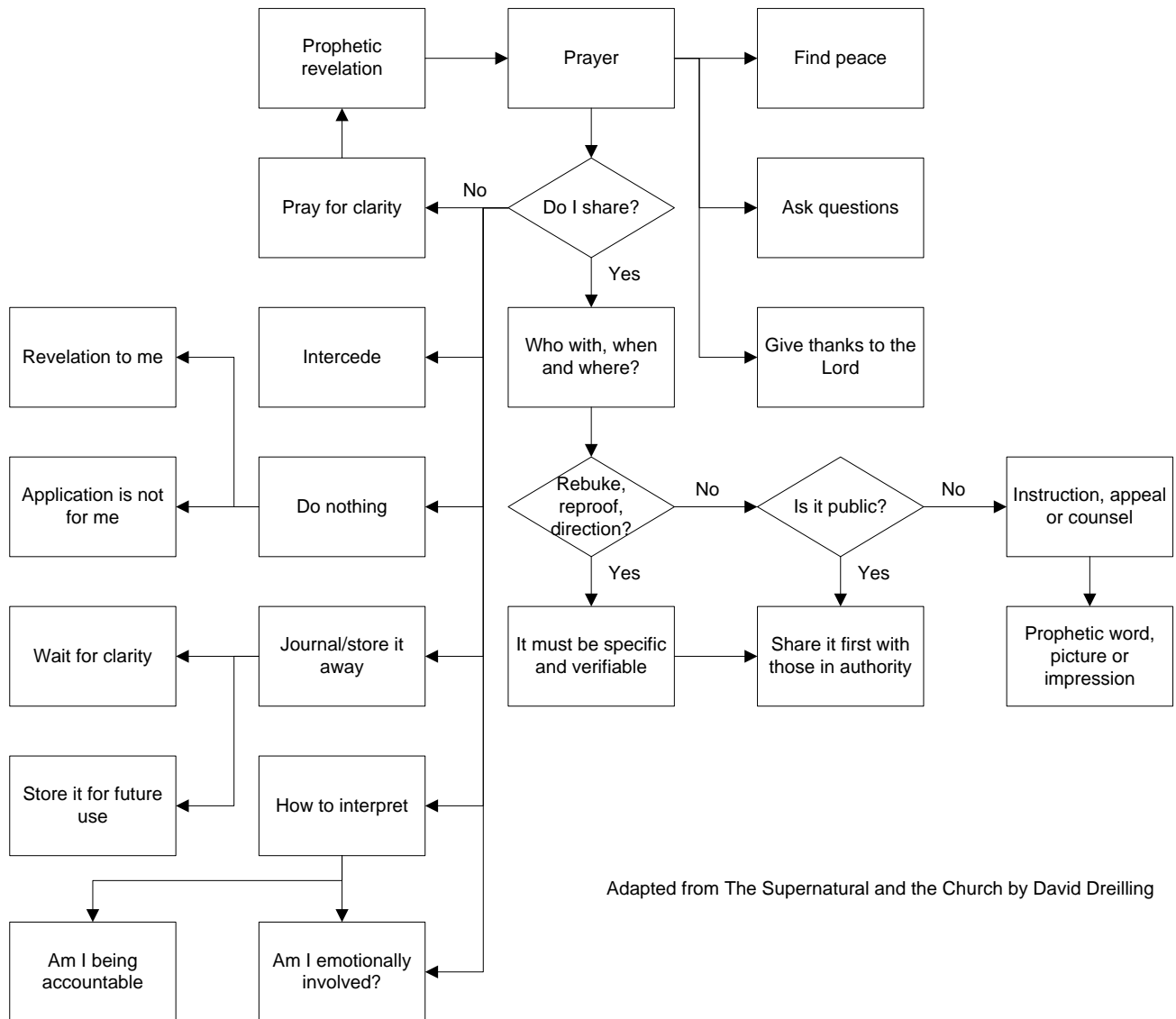
Although we often refer to gifts of the Spirit, the bible teaches us that these gifts are a manifestation of the gift of the Holy Spirit himself to all believers.

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **Acts 2:38**

Nowhere do we find that these manifestations listed in different books of the bible are the only ones or that there is an order of importance to the different gifts¹. Paul tells the church at Corinth that they should prophesy in order in meeting rather than all speak in tongues together but this was about how to conduct themselves in public worship rather than preferring one gift over another

Prophecy flowchart

This is not exhaustive but it is an indication and illustration of the process of receiving prophecy from God.



Adapted from The Supernatural and the Church by David Dreilling

¹ Paul tells the church at Corinth that they should prophesy in order in meeting rather than all speak in tongues together but this was about how to conduct themselves in public worship rather than preferring one gift over another (1 Corinthians 14).