

1 Thessalonians 5:20 Commentary

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JESUS IS COMING AGAIN
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 Chart by Charles Swindoll

1 Thessalonians				
Overview				
1 Th 1:1-10	1 Th 2:1-20	1 Th 3:1-13	1 Th 4:1-18	1 Th 5:1-28
LOOKING BACK			LOOKING FORWARD	
Personal Reflections History			Practical Instructions Hortatory	
Ministry In Person		Ministry in Absentia (Thru Timothy)	Ministry by Epistle	
Word and Power of the Spirit		Establishing & Comforting	Calling & Conduct	1Th 4:13ff Comfort
				1Th 5:12ff Commands

1 Salvation	2 Service	3 Sanctification	4 Sorrow	5 Sobriety
Paul Commends Spiritual Growth	Paul Finds the Church	Strengthening of the Church	Directions for Spiritual Growth	Holy Living in Light of Day of the Lord
Exemplary Hope of Young Converts	Motivating Hope of Faithful Servants	Purifying Hope of Tried Believers	Comforting Hope of Bereaved Saints	Invigorating Hope of Diligent Christians
Written from Corinth Approximately 51AD				

1Thessalonians 5:20 **do not despise prophetic utterances.** ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: [propheteias me exoutheneite](#); (2PPMM)

Amplified: Do not spurn the gifts and utterances of the prophets [do not depreciate prophetic revelations nor despise inspired instruction or exhortation or warning]. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

Barclay: Don't make light of manifestations of the gift of prophecy. ([Westminster Press](#))

NLT: Do not scoff at prophecies, ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: and never despise what is spoken in the name of the Lord. ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Wuest: Stop counting as nothing divine revelations given in the local assembly by the one who receives them, (Eerdmans)

Young's Literal: prophesyings despise not

DO NOT DESPISE PROPHETIC UTTERANCES: [propheteias me exoutheneite](#); (2PPMM):

- 1Thes 4:8; Nu 11:25, 26, 27, 28, 29; 1Sa 10:5,6,10, 11, 12, 13; 19:20, 21, 22, 23, 24; Acts 19:6; 1Co 11:4; 1Co 12:10,28; 13:2,9; 14:1,3, 4, 5, 6,22, 23, 24, 25,29, 30, 31, 32,37, 38, 39; Eph 4:11,12; Rev 11:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)

DO NOT LOOK DOWN WITH CONTEMPT

Hiebert - "Do not treat prophecies with contempt" names a specific action whereby the Spirit may be quenched." I would add that the context is also a clue as to how the Spirit can be quenched! For example, if we fail to give thanks in everything (and instead grumble or complain or dispute), we certainly will quench the Spirit.

Despise (1848)(**exoutheneo** from **ek** = an intensifies + **outheneo** = bring to naught) is a strong verb which means to despise someone or something on basis it is worthless or of no value. To treat something or someone as of no account. To set at naught. To make something of no account (disregard, reject with contempt, despise). And remember that God's commandments always include His enablements, specifically the "Enabler!" What do I mean by using a term that society often uses in a negative sense? I am referring to the indwelling Spirit Who Alone can enable us to obey these commands. Yes, we still have to make a volitional choice to obey (examine everything), but we can only do so successively as we rely on His supernatural power, not our frail ("fallen") natural power. See "[Paradoxical Principle of 100% Dependent and 100% Responsible](#)" (100/100) ([See also the related discussion of God's commands and our need for the Spirit](#))

Williams paraphrases it "Stop treating the messages of prophecy with contempt."

As noted with the negative command in verse 19, the combination of a negative particle (*me*) with the **present imperative** suggests that the recipients are being told to stop doing something they have begun -- they were to stop despising prophetic utterances. Note also that the verb **exoutheneo** is in the second person plural as are **all** the commands in 1Thes 5:19, 20, 21, 22, indicating that the command is intended for the entire Thessalonian church.

Barclay sums up Paul's command explaining that "The prophets were really the equivalent of our modern preachers. It was they who brought the message of God to the congregation. Paul is really saying, "If a man has anything to say, don't stop him saying it."

[\(1 Thessalonians 5 Commentary\)](#)

BDAG writes that **exoutheneo** means "(1) to show by one's attitude or manner of treatment that an entity has no merit or worth (disdain)....(2) to have no use for something as being beneath one's consideration (reject disdainfully)... (3) to regard another as of no significance and therefore worthy of maltreatment, treat with contempt. ([Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#))

There are 11 uses of **exoutheneo** in the NT...

Luke 18:9 And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and **viewed** others **with contempt**:

Luke 23:11 And Herod with his soldiers, after **treating** Him **with contempt** and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate.

Acts 4:11 "He is the stone which **was rejected** by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone.

Romans 14:3 (note) Let not him who eats **regard with contempt** him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him.

Romans 14:10 (note) But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you **regard** your brother **with contempt**? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.

1 Corinthians 1:28 and the base things of the world and the **despised**, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are,

1 Corinthians 6:4 If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?

1 Corinthians 16:11 Let no one therefore **despise** him. But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brethren.

2 Corinthians 10:10 For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech **contemptible**."

Galatians 4:14 and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not **despise** or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. (Paul is saying that during the time of trial in connection with my physical disability, the Galatians showed no disdain.)

1 Thessalonians 5:20 do not despise prophetic utterances.

There are 6 uses in the Septuagint = 1 Sam. 8:7; 10:19; Pr. 1:7; Jer. 6:14; Dan. 4:31; Amos 6:1) and here are 2 representative passages...

1 Samuel 8:7 And the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not **rejected** (Hebrew = ma'ac = reject, despise, refuse; Lxx = exoutheneo) you, but they have **rejected** (Hebrew = ma'ac = reject, despise, refuse; Lxx = exoutheneo) Me from being king over them.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools **despise** (Hebrew = buwz = to despise, hold in contempt; Lxx = exoutheneo) wisdom and instruction.

Prophetic utterances (4394) (**propheteia** from **pró** = before or forth + **phemí** = tell) has the literal meaning of speaking forth, with no connotation of prediction or other supernatural or mystical significance.

Vine notes that...

Though much of the Old Testament prophecy was purely predictive, see Micah 5:2, e.g., and cp. John 11:51, prophecy is not necessarily, nor even primarily, = foretelling. It is the declaration of that which cannot be known by natural means, Matthew 26:68, it is the forth telling of the will of God, whether with reference to the past, the present, or the future, see Genesis 20:7; Deuteronomy 18:18; Revelation 10:11; 11:3. The relation between Aaron and Moses illustrates the relation between the prophet and God, Exodus 4:16; 7:1...

With the completion of the canon of Scripture prophecy apparently passed away, 1Corinthians 13:8, 9. In his measure the teacher has taken the place of the prophet, cp. the significant change in 2Peter 2:1. The difference is that, whereas the message of the prophet was a direct revelation of the mind of God for the occasion, the message of the teacher is gathered from the completed revelation contained in the Scriptures.

Instructions given to the prophet of apostolic days serve as a general guide to the teacher now. Building up the

saints is to be his sole aim, 1Corinthians 14:5, 12, 26; Ephesians 4:12; to this end his words must be distinctly spoken, and his language must be suited to his hearers, 1Co 14:7, 9, 11, 16; he must avoid confusion of every kind, since confusion is of the flesh, not of the Spirit, 1Co 14:32, 33. Teachers are to defer one to another, 1Co 14:30, nor is any teacher to be judge of the profit, or otherwise, of his own utterances, 1Co 14:29. Acceptance of these divine regulations is evidence of spirituality, 1Co 14:37, 38.

Propheteia or prophetic utterances in its purest form is found in the Scriptures themselves, the speaking forth of the the Word of God. Propheteia in fact refers specifically to the Scriptures in Peter's epistle...

But know this first of all, that no **prophecy** of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no **prophecy** was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (See **notes 2 Peter 1:20; 21**)

Paul gives perhaps the best definition of the prophetic gift in 1 Corinthians...

But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. (1Corinthians 14:3)

In short, prophetic utterances are to build up, encourage and comfort believers.

The gift of prophecy today is the most clearly illustrated by the gift of preaching, of proclaiming the Word of God. God used many Old and New Testament prophets to foretell future events, but that was never an indispensable part of prophetic ministry.

In the well respected theological journal Bibliotheca Sacra, the late Dr John Walvoord makes the following statements...

Divine revelation, of course, received a tremendous addition when Jesus Christ came in the flesh. He was a revelation of God in His person and life as well as in His **prophetic utterances**. Throughout the apostolic period special revelation continued as God communicated truth to individuals and to churches. (Volume 130, page 23)

The Olivet Discourse is one of the great **prophetic utterances** of Scripture dealing not only with the age as a whole in its progress and signs of the end but portraying the great truth of the second coming of Christ later to be expounded in greater detail in the Book of Revelation. (Volume 129, page 315).

The OT has a pointed example of despising or showing contempt for prophetic utterance in 2 Kings...

Then he (Elijah) went up from there to Bethel; and as he was going up by the way, young lads came out from the city and mocked him and said to him, "Go up, you baldhead; go up, you baldhead!" (2 Kings 2:23)

There is little doubt that Paul's instructions regarding **prophetic utterances** followed by the command to **examine everything carefully** relates in some way to what occurred in the church at Thessalonica between the first and second epistles. In his second letter Paul wrote...

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming (**parousia**) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together (episyngoge) to Him (referring to his previous letter where he had explained the Rapture - see 1Th 4:13, 14, 15, 16, 17-see **notes 1Th 4:13; 14; 15; 16; 17**), that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the Day of the Lord has come. (**2 Thessalonians 2:1-2**) (**Comment:** Undoubtedly some in their midst had claimed a message or prophetic utterance that the church was in now in the **Day of the Lord** but when examined carefully with Scripture, this utterance could be proved false.)

Hiebert explains that...

Prophecies refers to the utterance of various declarations of the divine counsels under the immediate inspiration of the Spirit. The plural noun without the article denotes the individual cases as the Spirit spoke through the prophets for the instruction and edification of the church. The prophetic function held an important place in the life of the early church. In Ephesians 4:11 (note) the **prophets** are named next to the apostles as Christ's gift to the church. They were the human channels through whom the Spirit made known His will and purpose for His people. The prophetic revelation might at times concern the future (Acts 11:28) but not necessarily so. The prophetic message generally was in the nature of instruction and guidance concerning the present (Acts 13:2). The basic function of the prophet was to "speak forth" the counsel of God.

Through this important gift, the Spirit guided the development of the e and doctrine of the young church. With the completion of the divine revelation in the New Testament canon such direct communication of new spiritual revelation has ceased. Today the prophetic ministry in the church is not the disclosure of new revelation

directly from the Spirit but rather the proclamation of God's message for His people as gathered from the inspired Scriptures under the illumination of the Spirit and made relevant to the contemporary situation. Believers need to be on guard against any professed revelation from the Spirit today that goes beyond, or is inconsistent with, the revelation embodied in the Scriptures. ([Hiebert, D. Edmond: 1 & 2 Thessalonians: BMH Book. 1996](#))

J Vernon McGee applies this passage writing that believers today are not to...

look down upon Bible study as something that is beneath you. Do not be indifferent to the Word of God. We have a lot of folk who are in Christian service, but they are ignorant of the Bible and they look down on Bible study. Occasionally I hear such a person saying, "You just spend all your time in Bible study and you don't do anything. What you need to do is get out and get busy." Well, what is needed is to get busy studying the Word of God, and after you do that you will see how to get busy and really be effective. ([McGee, J V: Thru the Bible Commentary: Thomas Nelson](#))

Comment: As an aside I spoke recently to the secretary in a local Bible church in which the leadership has made the decision that they want to avoid teaching too much doctrine! Paul would tell them stop looking with contempt on sound doctrine or perhaps he would say don't hypocritically call yourself a Bible church!

Clarke comments that Paul is saying...

Do not suppose that ye have no need of continual instruction

Without it ye cannot preserve the Christian life, nor go on to perfection. God will ever send a message of salvation by each of his ministers to every faithful, attentive hearer. Do not suppose that ye are already wise enough; you are no more wise enough than you are holy enough. They who slight or neglect the means of grace, and especially the preaching of God's holy word, are generally vain, empty, self-conceited people, and exceedingly superficial both in knowledge and piety.

Ray Stedman has an excellent summary writing that Paul's **command** says in essence...

Do not ignore the Scripture's wisdom: Do not despise prophesying. Unfortunately, because of certain cultic tendencies in our day, we think of prophesying as some special power to predict the future either for ourselves individually or for the world at large. But prophesying was not that. **Dr. F. F. Bruce**, who is one of the great expositors of our day, says prophesying is

declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit.

In those early days, before the New Testament was written, this was done orally; prophets spoke the mind of the Spirit in an assembly. But since the writing of the Scriptures we have very little need for any kind of prophesying other than that based upon the Scriptures. **So prophesying really becomes what we call today expository preaching and teaching.** It is what I am doing right now. It is opening the mind of God from the Word of God. Do not despise that, says the apostle. That is the wisdom of God. That is telling you how to act, how to think and how to order your life. Do not treat it lightly. It will save you countless headaches and heartaches if you observe it. ([Living Christianly](#)) (Bolding added)

John Calvin has a similar explanation observing that...

This sentence is appropriately added to the preceding one, for as the Spirit of God illuminates us chiefly by doctrine, those who give not teaching its proper place, do, so far as in them lies, quench the Spirit, for we must always consider in what manner or by what means God designs to communicate himself to us. Let every one, therefore, who is desirous to make progress under the direction of the Holy Spirit, allow himself to be taught by the ministry of prophets.

By the term prophecy, however, I do not understand the gift of foretelling the future, but as in 1 Corinthians 14:3, the science of interpreting Scripture, so that a prophet is an interpreter of the will of God. For Paul, in the passage which I have quoted, assigns to prophets teaching for edification, exhortation, and consolation, and enumerates, as it were, these departments. Let, therefore, prophecy in this passage be understood as meaning—interpretation made suitable to present use. Paul prohibits us from despising it, if we would not choose of our own accord to wander in darkness.

Matthew Poole surmises that some of the Thessalonians "despise it (prophecy) because of the outward meanness of the persons which prophesy; some, through a proud conceit of their own knowledge; some, by a contempt of religion itself. (Matthew Poole's Commentary on the New Testament)

Barnes feels that...

The reference here seems to be to preaching. They were not to undervalue it in comparison with other things. It is possible that in Thessalonica, as appears to have been the case subsequently in Corinth, (cp. 1Co 14:19), there were those who regarded the power of working miracles, or of speaking in unknown tongues, as a much more eminent endowment than that of stating the truths of religion in language easily understood. It would not be unnatural that comparisons should be made between these two classes of endowments, much to the disadvantage of the latter; and hence may have arisen this solemn caution not to disregard or despise the ability to make known divine truth in intelligible language.

A similar counsel may not be inapplicable to us now. The office of setting forth the truth of God is to be the permanent office in the church; that of speaking foreign languages by miraculous endowment, was to be temporary. But the office of addressing mankind on the great duties of religion, and of publishing salvation, is to be God's great ordinance for converting the world. It should not be despised, and no man commends his own wisdom who contemns it (Albert Barnes. Barnes NT Commentary)

Guzik - We recognize that the Lord speaks to and through His people today, and we learn to be open to His voice. Of course, we always test prophecies (following the command to test all things), but we do not despise prophecies.

James Denney adds that...

The prophet was a man whose rational and moral nature had been quickened by the Spirit of Christ, and who possessed in an uncommon degree the power of speaking edification, exhortation, and comfort. In other words, he was a Christian preacher, endued with wisdom, fervor, and tenderness; and his spiritual addresses were among the Lord's best gifts to the Church. Such addresses, or prophesyings, Paul tells us, we are not to despise.

Now **despise** is a strong word; it is, literally, to set utterly at naught, as Herod set at naught Jesus, when he clothed Him in purple, or as the Pharisees set at naught the publicans, even when they came into the Temple to pray.

Of course, prophecy, or, to speak in the language of our own time, the preacher's calling, may be abused: a man may preach without a message, without sincerity, without reverence for God or respect for those to whom he speaks, he may make a mystery, a professional secret, of the truth of God, instead of declaring it even to little children; he may seek, as some who called themselves prophets in early times sought, to make the profession of godliness a source of gain; and under such circumstances no respect is due. But such circumstances are not to be assumed without cause. We are rather to assume that he who stands up in the Church to speak in God's name has had a word of God entrusted to him; it is not wise to despise it before it is heard. It may be because we have been so often disappointed that we pitch our hopes so low; but to expect nothing is to be guilty of a sort of contempt by anticipation. To **despise not prophesyings** requires us to look for something from the preacher, some word of God that will build us up in godliness, or bring us encouragement or consolation; it requires us to listen as those who have a precious opportunity given them of being strengthened by Divine grace and truth. We ought not to lounge or fidget while the word of God is spoken, or to turn over the leaves of the Bible at random, or to look at the clock; we ought to hearken for that word which God has put into the preacher's mouth for us; and it will be a very exceptional prophesying in which there is not a single thought that it would repay us to consider. ([1 Thessalonians 5 Commentary](#))

Vincent has a lengthy, interesting note on prophetic utterances writing that...

The emphasis on prophesyings corresponds with that in 1 Cor. 14:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 22 ff. Prophecy in the apostolic church was directly inspired instruction, exhortation, or warning. The prophet received the truth into his own spirit which was withdrawn from earthly things and concentrated upon the spiritual world. His higher, spiritual part (pneuma), and his moral intelligence (nous), and his speech (logos) worked in harmony. His spirit received a spiritual truth in symbol: his understanding interpreted it in its application to actual events, and his speech uttered the interpretation. He was not ecstatically rapt out of the sphere of human intelligence, although his understanding was intensified and clarified by the phenomenal action of the Spirit upon it. This double action imparted a peculiarly elevated character to his speech. The prophetic influence was thus distinguished from the mystical ecstasy, the ecstasy of Paul when rapt into the third heaven, which affected the subject alone and was incommunicable (2Cor. 12:1, 2, 3, 4). The gift of tongues carried the subject out of the prophetic condition in which spirit, understanding, and speech operated in concert, and into a condition in which the understanding was overpowered by the communication to the spirit, so that the spirit could not find

its natural expression in rational speech, or speech begotten of the understanding, and found supernatural expression in a tongue created by the Spirit. Paul attached great value to prophecy. He places prophets next after apostles in the list of those whom God has set in the Church (1Co 12:28). He associates apostles and prophets as the foundation of the Church (Eph. 2:20). He assigns to prophecy the precedence among spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1, 2, 3, 4, 5), and urges his readers to desire the gift (1Co 14:1, 39). Hence his exhortation here.

In summary in issuing this negative command, Paul is saying that some in the Thessalonian church had a low opinion of prophesying and/or viewed this activity with contempt. Whatever the exact nature of the problem that evoked the tendency to undervalue prophecy, Paul is declaring that they must guard themselves against the reaction of despising all prophesying. Believers need to remember that wherever the Spirit of God is at work, the devil will seek to introduce confusion. They must not disparage the true manifestations of the Spirit but be alert to detect the false, which leads into the next section.

The Prophetic Calling of Every Believer

by Bob DeWaay

“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” (1Thessalonians 5:19-22)

Paul instructs us to take prophetic utterances seriously. To “despise” means to treat with “dismissive disdain.”¹ In 1Corinthians 14:31, Paul wrote, “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted.” He spoke, not about utterances of official authoritative prophets, but about prophetic utterances that could be given by any member of the congregation.

Today many are confused about the meaning of the term “prophecy” as it was used in the 1st century church, and what, if anything, it is in the church today. Some assume that prophesies were spontaneous, “ecstatic utterances” caused by the Holy Spirit. Some, who hold this view, believe that these utterances have ceased. Others hold the same view, but believe that these ecstatic utterances are also for the church today. Still others believe that prophecy in the first century was the Holy Spirit giving inspired revelation that was necessary to fill in the gap caused by the incomplete canon of the New Testament. Those who hold this latter view generally say that all prophecy has ceased.²

Here is what I believe: that prophecy, as addressed by the passages above, is to proclaim valid implications and applications of authoritative Scripture. Under the New Covenant, every redeemed child of God has the Holy Spirit, and therefore may prophesy. This is an implication of Peter’s citation of Joel in Acts 2:17—rather than the Holy Spirit only coming upon certain persons as under the Old Covenant, He indwells every true New Covenant believer. This is why they “may all prophesy” as Paul wrote.

The Reformation Teaching on Prophecy in the Church

The restoration of prophecy for every believer was important to both Luther and Calvin. The alternative was that only the teaching magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church had the authority to prophesy. Luther often cited 1Corinthians 14:31 as proof of Rome’s error in this regard. For example, consider how Luther used the passage here:

Also, “You can all prophesy, one by one” [1 Cor. 14:31]. What sense is there to this drunken prattle of the pope and his papists, though handed down over many generations: “We command, we earnestly direct, the Church of Rome is Mistress of the churches and the articles of faith”? All right, let her sit and teach and be a mistress, yet here she is commanded to be silent, if a revelation is made to one sitting by. Not only she, but each of us, one by one, may prophesy, says Paul, a master and corrector even of Peter when he acted insincerely [Gal. 2:14ff.]. How much more ought we not then confidently judge the church of Rome in its insincerity and feigned authority. We are not to be judged by this church lest we imperil our own salvation and be found to deny Christ.³

In the following discussion of 2Peter 1:19, Luther cites 1Corinthians 14:31 in his discussion of prophecy in the church:

But why does he say: “We have a sure prophetic Word”? Answer: I believe indeed that henceforth we shall not have prophets like those the Jews had in times past in the Old Testament. But a prophet must really be one who preaches about Jesus Christ. Therefore although many prophets in the Old Testament foretold future things, they really came, and were sent by God, to proclaim the Christ. Now those who believe in Christ are all prophets; for they have the real and chief qualification prophets should have, even though they do not all have the gift of foretelling the future. For just as through faith we are brothers of the Lord Christ, kings, and priests, so we are also all prophets through Christ. For we can all state what pertains to salvation, God’s glory, and a Christian life. In addition, we can also talk about future events insofar as it is necessary for us to know about them. For example, we can say that the Last Day will come and that we will rise from the dead. Furthermore, we understand all Scripture. Paul also speaks about

this in 1 Cor. 14:31: “For you can all prophesy one by one.”⁴

Calvin rebuked “enthusiasts” who thought that the utterance of spontaneous ideas apart from the scripture was prophecy:

In like manner, when Paul says to the Thessalonians, “Quench not the Spirit,” he does not carry them aloft to empty speculation apart from the word; he immediately adds, “Despise not prophesying,” (1 Thess. 5:19, 20). By this, doubtless, he intimates that the light of the Spirit is quenched the moment prophesying falls into contempt. How is this answered by those swelling enthusiasts, in whose idea the only true illumination consists, in carelessly laying aside, and bidding adieu to the Word of God, while, with no less confidence than folly, they fasten upon any dreaming notion which may have casually sprung up in their minds? Surely a very different sobriety becomes the children of God. As they feel that without the Spirit of God they are utterly devoid of the light of truth, so they are not ignorant that the word is the instrument by which the illumination of the Spirit is dispensed.⁵

The Reformation view was that prophecy was the teaching of the Word and proclamation of the terms of the gospel. Since every believer has the Holy Spirit, every believer has the “keys of the kingdom” and can authoritatively declare the terms of entrance into the kingdom. All are anointed and all have the authoritative teachings of Christ and His apostles. Therefore they may prophesy.

Matthew Henry saw prophesying as taught in 1Thessalonians 5:20 as a means of grace:

Despise not prophesyings (v. 20); for, if we neglect the means of grace, we forfeit the Spirit of grace. By prophesyings here we are to understand the preaching of the word, the interpreting and applying of the scriptures; and this we must not despise, but should prize and value, because it is the ordinance of God, appointed of him for our furtherance and increase in knowledge and grace, in holiness and comfort. We must not despise preaching, though it be plain, and not with enticing words of men's wisdom, and though we be told no more than what we knew before. It is useful, and many times needful, to have our minds stirred up, our affections and resolutions excited, to those things that we knew before to be our interest and our duty.⁶

This view is commonly found from the Reformation through the 19th century. For example, consider the 19th century scholar Albert Barnes' comments on 1Thessalonians 5:20:

But the office of addressing mankind on the great duties of religion, and of publishing salvation, is to be God's great ordinance for converting the world. It should not be despised, and no man commends his own wisdom who contemns it—for it is God's appointment—the means which he has designated for saving men. . . . There is nothing else that has so much power over mankind as the preaching of the gospel.⁷

Every believer who accurately announces the terms of the gospel to the lost is prophesying with the full authority of God.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prophecy

The ground for the teaching that “all may prophesy” is the work of the Holy Spirit in every believer. In 1John 2, John warns against “antichrists” (false anointed ones) and reminds believers that they all have an anointing from the Holy One and need no man to teach them. The implication of 1John 2 is that every believer has the Holy Spirit, every believer has been given “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (not delivered to some church bishops to solely interpret), and therefore no authoritative teaching exists that can only come from certain people who claim a special anointing.⁸ The authoritative teachings of Christ have already been delivered to us. Our role is to “prophesy”—to declare the valid implications and applications of these teachings to be binding on our hearers.⁹

This does not mean that God has not raised up teachers (elders who labor in the word and doctrine – 1Timothy 5:17 KJV), but that every believer can also both speak prophetically and judge prophecy as is appropriate in a given setting. For example, in our Sunday Bible studies we all open the Scriptures and explore together the implications and applications thereof, sharing them with one another. This gives each one an opportunity to prophesy. But during the worship service, the Word is expounded by someone called and equipped in public proclamation to a bigger audience. But in every case, prophecy must be judged, and all may judge it. In a congregation the seemingly lowliest person can correct the teachings of a church authority if that authority teaches what is contrary to Scripture. When they make this correction, they are judging prophecy. That is something Luther insisted on as a necessary protection against potential wolves.

When we discuss the work of the Holy Spirit in a congregation and the need for prophecy, we must keep a key principle in mind. It is found in this passage: “I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (Revelation 19:10b). Prophecy testifies about the person and work of Jesus Christ—that is its great central theme. Jesus made this clear: “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me” (John 15:26). Those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will proclaim true words about Messianic salvation. They prophesy as they bring the claims of the gospel (using the keys of the kingdom) to the minds of the lost. They authoritatively declare that those who repent and believe the gospel shall be saved and that those who reject the gospel will be damned. That is their life theme.

This theme is particularly emphasized in Luke/Acts. In Luke, the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth (Luke 1:41); Zacharias (Luke 1:67); and Simeon (Luke 2:25) and they all spoke forth words about Jesus Christ and salvation. Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high (Luke 24:49). Then in Acts Jesus told them that when they received the Holy Spirit, they would be His witnesses (Acts 1:8 – the term witnesses here is the root of the same word for “testimony” in the passage in Revelation). When Peter received the Holy Spirit, he powerfully testified about Jesus Christ and salvation (Acts 2). The apostles, when persecuted and told not to teach in the name of Jesus, prayed, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4; see verse 31). The promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8 is shown to be fulfilled throughout the rest of Acts as the Holy Spirit anointed God’s messengers to proclaim with authority and boldness the terms of the gospel.

Since the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, and Jesus said the Holy Spirit would testify about Him, then valid prophecy in the church should be gospel-centric. We all prophesy when we gather together in prayer, open up God’s word, and explore together the glories of our mutual salvation, while proclaiming the terms of the gospel with authority and power. When we do, Paul describes a possible outcome: “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1Corinthians 14:24, 25). This does not mean, like some falsely assume, that the content of the prophecy was the secrets of someone’s heart. Paul taught in the same chapter that prophecy was for “edification, exhortation, and consolation.” True prophecy comforts and strengthens faithful believers, warns straying believers, and convicts the lost of their sinful condition. The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. So the convicted person is brought to see that their secret sins are exposed to God’s just eyes and they face His certain judgment unless they obtain the imputed righteousness of Christ through faith.

Paul told the Thessalonians to not quench the Holy Spirit or despise prophecy. When the word of God is not proclaimed with authority and accuracy and when the word of God is not applied directly to the hearts and souls of people through valid prophecy, then the Spirit is quenched in the Christian assembly. When that happens we cannot expect true edification, exhortation, or consolation to occur, nor can we expect that unbelievers will be convicted of sin.

Paul used the term “revelation” in 1Corinthians 14 as the content of prophecies of believers. This causes some to imagine that Paul was entrusting to the church the ability to get new revelations beyond the apostolic teaching. This is not the case. Paul, in Ephesians, uses the term “revelation” in a way that will help us understand how this relates to prophecy. Paul prayed, “That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:17, 18). The prayer for “revelation” was that they would understand in a more profound manner the depth and glories of the implications of their eternal salvation and relationship to Christ. This fits with our definition of the content of prophecy as “the testimony of Christ.” So the “revelation” they share prophetically is a deeper understanding of the glories of Christ and of the many aspects of His saving work in their lives.

Why Prophecy Must be Judged

The New Testament teaches that prophecy in the church must be judged. This can be shown in several important passages. For example: “And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment” (1Corinthians 14:29). This passage is often misunderstood to mean that certain official or authoritative prophets could prophesy and other official prophets could judge them. Those who teach this and also believe that prophecy contains special, new revelations subjectively revealed to prophets, thereby use the subjective to judge the subjective. So in that case, a person claims special status as official “prophet” and utters something purported to be a word from God. Then other persons with the same special status decide whether they think it is from God or not.

This interpretation is false on two fronts. First, “prophets” in this passage is functional terminology meaning “ones who prophesy” and not people with a special office.¹⁰ It can be seen in passages such as 1Corinthians 14:1, 31 that everyone in the body could prophesy. Second, if we assume that prophecy is a subjective impression about ideas that may or may not be from God we have a problem. Why? Because prophecy speaks of the implications and applications of God’s authoritative Word as I have argued. Earlier Paul warned the Corinthians to not go beyond what is written (1Corinthians 4:6). The Corinthians were rather unstable and prone to elitist, hyperspiritual ideas. That Paul would turn the church over to the subjective ideas of prophets and then tell them to judge those ideas by themselves rather than by an objective standard is very doubtful.

Further evidence that prophecy is judged by objective standards is found in Romans 12:6 – “And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith.” There are interpretive issues with this verse, depending upon how the Greek is understood and translated. The word “proportion” is analogia, from which our word “analogy” is derived. Another issue is whether “faith” is objective (the faith) or subjective (one’s level of faith). The verse contains a definite article in the Greek, so the phrase reads “according to the analogy of the faith” or “in accordance with the faith.”¹¹ Charles Hodge commented on this, “[A]ccording to the proportion signifies, agreeably to the rule or

standard; and the apostle's direction to the prophets is, that in all their communications they are to conform to the rule of faith, and not contradict those doctrines which had been delivered by men whose inspiration had been established by indubitable evidence.”¹²

Likewise, in the passage previously cited in 1Thessalonians 5, prophecy is to be judged. Paul says, “examine everything carefully” right after the warning to not despise prophecy (see verse 21). In that passage, “examine” is a translation of dokimazo_ which means “to put to the test” and has the connotation of testing to prove or verify what something is made of. The result, according to Paul in 1Thessalonians, is that good and evil are identified, the good to be embraced and the evil shunned. Judging prophecy is by objective scripture, not subjective means.¹³

Since prophecy, according to the interpretation I am proposing, is to bring out valid implications and applications of God's revealed truth, it is essential that prophecy be judged. Why? A valid implication of Scripture is authoritative because it is logically connected to the inspired text. This means that implications are binding on believers.¹⁴ An invalid implication would bind people in ways God has not bound them. This would be abusive and constitute falsely speaking for God. On the other hand, true prophecy is a great blessing to the body because it reveals true implications and applications of God's Word for the benefit of all. If prophecy were not judged, the true and the false would be on equal footing and the body of Christ would be unable to hold fast to the good and avoid the evil because they would not be able to tell the difference.

Gospel Preaching as Prophecy - The proclamation of the gospel is prophecy in its most important form. Let me illustrate. If I say to someone, “According to the Law of God, everyone is a sinner and stands condemned as a law-breaker. The penalty for all law-breakers is eternity in hell. Since you, like everyone else, have broken God's law, you stand condemned. God is perfectly just and cannot lie. God said that the soul that sins must die. But God is also loving and merciful. So God's own Son, Jesus Christ, came into human history through the virgin birth, lived a sinless life, and shed His blood on the cross to avert God's wrath against sin, and was bodily raised from the dead and appeared to many witnesses. If you repent of living for self, trusting self, and spurning God's Word and put your faith in Jesus Christ, you will be saved. But if you neglect God's offer of salvation through the finished work of Christ, you will face God's wrath in eternity and there will be no escape.” – I have truly prophesied in a most powerful and true way. Those words are not inspired Scripture, but they are valid implications from Scripture. They have the authority of God not because I uttered them, but because they correctly describe the certainty of the consequences of either faith or unbelief. When they are applied to a given sinner, they constitute a valid and authoritative application.

John MacArthur prophesies in this manner in his book *Hard to Believe*: “The Lord says, “If you don't know Me on My terms, I don't know you at all. If you haven't come in repentance, conviction of your own sin, and abandonment of self with such desperation that you cry out for salvation and righteousness and heaven, whatever the cost, then you didn't pass through the narrow gate. You haven't come humbly seeking forgiveness, knowing you don't deserve it.”¹⁵

Martin Luther also prophesied: “What schools! What faculties! What theologians! What bilge! What newfangled rubbish! So much for your understanding of the words of God, namely, captivity to the obedience of Christ. (It is captivity to the obedience of your own understanding.) By divine authority we confidently conclude and boldly declare: “Thus says the Lord of Hosts, monastic vows made and kept apart from faith are sins, and therefore such vows are pointless and blameworthy.”¹⁶

These are valid prophecies if they contain valid implications from Scripture. Any Christian can judge these by examining the Biblical arguments and evidence that MacArthur and Luther gave that led to these prophecies. If they reflect valid implications from Scripture, they are true prophecies.

Since every believer is called to discipleship and every disciple is called to preach the gospel, every believer has a profound prophetic calling. We can all “bind and loose.” We can use the keys of the kingdom, declare with prophetic authority the terms of entrance, the terms for forgiveness, and show from Scriptural implications the binding terms of the New Covenant.

Conclusion - Paul warned, “Do not despise prophetic utterances.” What constitutes despising prophecy? Despising prophecy is the refusal to allow the Lord's flock to bring the authority of Scripture to bear on one another and church leaders. This happens, for example, when a church member hears false teaching coming from the pulpit, does Biblical research to bring out valid implications, goes to the pastor and proves that the pastor has promoted what is false and the pastor refuses to defend his own teaching or listen to the evidence of the church member. The pastor has despised the prophecy of the member and claimed the right to give false prophecy from the pulpit and then furthered the sin by refusing to allow his own prophecy to be judged.

This is precisely what Luther claimed the Roman Catholic Church was doing in his day. Church authorities alone claimed the right to prophesy, and when doing so falsely, claimed immunity from being judged. This process is being repeated in many versions of evangelicalism today.

We need to return prophecy to the members of the church. Every member of the congregation, whether in a position of leadership or not, has access to the authoritative Scriptures and may bring forth valid implications and applications from them. Together, as we prophesy, we benefit from edification, exhortation, and comfort. The lost are convicted of their sins while the saved grow in the grace

and knowledge of the Lord.

End Notes

1. Martin, D. M. (2001, c1995). Vol. 33: 1, 2 Thessalonians (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (184). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
2. Walter J. Chantry, Signs of the Apostles, (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1973; 1993 ed) 50, 51 espouses the view that gifts such as prophecy have ceased upon the completion of the New Testament. See also, Paul P. Enns, in : The Moody Handbook of Theology. Chicago, Ill. : Moody Press, 1997, c1989, S. 276, who articulates this view. In my research I noticed that the view that prophecy has ceased did not become a prevalent view until the 20th century.
3. Martin Luther, (1999, c1958). Vol. 40: Luther's works, vol. 40 : Church and Ministry II (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (vol. 40, page 32). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
4. Martin Luther, (1999, c1967). Vol. 30: Luther's works, vol. 30 : The Catholic Epistles (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (vol. 30, page 164). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
5. John Calvin, Beveridge, Henry: Institutes of the Christian Religion. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, I, ix.
6. Henry, Matthew: Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, s.v. 1 Thess. 5:20.
7. Albert Barnes, "Ephesians through Philemon" in Barnes Notes, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 reprint of 1884-1885 edition) s.v. 1Thessalonians 5:20.
8. See CIC issue 63, Antichrists and The Antichrist, [HTTP://CICMINISTRY.ORG/COMMENTARY/ISSUE63.HTM](http://CICMINISTRY.ORG/COMMENTARY/ISSUE63.HTM) for an extended discussion of this matter in 1John 2.
9. This is the essence of "binding and loosing"; see CIC issues 1 and 2 [HTTP://CICMINISTRY.ORG/COMMENTARY/ISSUE1.HTM](http://CICMINISTRY.ORG/COMMENTARY/ISSUE1.HTM)
10. See Gordon Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" in The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 693, 694.
11. Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 reprint, written in 1835) 390, 391 makes a strong argument for "the faith" being the objective content of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.
12. Ibid.
13. In 1Corinthians 12:10, "discerning of spirits" follows "prophecy." Comparing that passage to 1John 4:1, we have further evidence that prophecy is to be judged by objective standards.
14. Binding and loosing means "forbidding or permitting" on scriptural basis. See CIC issue # 1 for a detailed explanation of this.
15. John MacArthur, Hard to Believe (Nashville: Nelson, 2003) 89.
16. Martin Luther, (1999, c1966). Vol. 44: Luther's works, vol. 44 : The Christian in Society I (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 44, Page 276). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

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