



THE PROPHETIC CALLING OF EVERY BELIEVER

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“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 prophecies 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

prophecy 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.

True prophecy comforts and strengthens faithful believers, warns straying believers, and convicts the lost of their sinful condition.

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 despera-

tion 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

