

Stop That!
1 Thes. 5:20
“Do not despise prophecies.”

How many Old Testament prophets could you name?

The Jewish Talmud—an ancient commentary on the Bible—insists that there have been 56 prophets: 7 female (from Sarah to Esther) and 48 male (from Abraham to Mordechai).

How many New Testament prophets could you name?

According to *Meredith's Book of Bible Lists*, there are at least 8 from John the Baptizer to John the Apostle.

Can you name any recent or living prophets?

- 1) Nostradamus, the French prophet, who died in 1566. He is best known for his book, “The Prophecies.” You may remember the prophecy of Nostradamus that was interpreted to be a reference to Sept. 11, 2001.
- 2) Jeane Dixon, a professing Roman Catholic (who died in 1997) and who predicted the future by gazing into crystal balls and who even authored a horoscope book for dogs and an astrological cookbook. Her biography was entitled “A Gift of Prophecy: the Phenomenal Jeane Dixon.”
- 3) Thomas Monson, the current living prophet of the Mormon Church, who follows in the line of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of Mormonism.

Let's be honest with ourselves. Not every self-proclaimed prophet is from God. You get that, right? The Bible clearly teaches that there are false prophets.

But the last thing anyone would want to do is to quench the Spirit if God is really, truly working through a genuine prophet. I don't want to do that. Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to do that.

Take your Bibles and turn to 1 Thes. 5:20 where we will encounter today's text, which reads simply, “Do not despise prophecies.”

This is the second of five commands that govern how we are to respond to the work of God in our churches. There are two negative commands (of which today's text is the second of the two negative commands), and there are three positive commands.

Notice the two main words in this text:

- 1) Despise—a strong word, “to treat with contempt”

Paul is very clear. Don't fall into that trap, and if you have, stop immediately. It's ripping the church apart.

Literally, he writes, “Stop treating the messages of prophecy with contempt. Stop that!”

Like Paul, I run into people from time to time who say that Bible study isn't necessary. “Just be led the Spirit,” they say. But the Spirit works through Bible study. 2 Tim. 2:15 says that we need to learn to “rightly divide the word of God” or “properly handle” the word of God. Bible study is critical to our growth in maturity. But again, there is bad teaching and good teaching. There are false prophets and true prophets of God.

Now ...

IF (and we must emphasize the IF) there is a legitimate work of God in the church, one must not look down upon it.

IF, on the other hand, there is a work of Satan active in the church, then I'm sure we're all agreed that one must not permit that.

When looking for a background slide for today's notes, I searched in vain for the picture of someone looking down their nose at someone else. That's the idea here of contempt. You can almost hear them say, “I know better. I know what is from God and that's not it. Stop that!” The Thessalonians had become the prophecy

police, but (and don't miss this or you'll misunderstand most of what I'm saying today) they weren't well-trained in police work, and they were jumping to the wrong conclusions.

On the other hand, if we are well-trained in police work. If we are spiritually discerning. If we are walking in the Spirit. If we are sound students of the Word of God, then, again, we are obligated to stop the counterfeit work of Satan. But never, never, never in a spirit of pride or contempt.

Gal. 6:1 reads, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

Just let that soak in for a moment.

2) Prophecies—it's a plural as you can see

In other words, don't look down with contempt on ANY legitimate ministry of prophecy.

Let me stop for a moment and address the question:

How do we know if a prophecy or prophet is legitimate or not?

Paul doesn't really go into all that here, and so we won't work this question over too much either, but for now allow me to suggest a few things:

- 1) If a self-proclaimed prophet contradicts biblical teaching, then he's a false prophet. That's a no-brainer.
- 2) If a prophet predicts an event and it doesn't happen, then he is a false prophet. Sometimes prophets will try to explain away their error, but in the end, it's still an error. Don't be fooled.
- 3) If a prophet oozes with self-promotion, then do not listen to him.
- 4) If a prophet bristles at any challenges to his teaching, then beware.
- 5) If he won't take a strong stand on the gospel, walk away. Quickly.
- 6) Finally, if he creates confusion or disunity with his prophecies, then he is not speaking for the Lord. Watch for those.

Back to the word "prophet":

When you hunt down the root meaning of the word for "prophecy" in Greek you will find that it means to "speak forth" or to "cast light before others."

God's Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (Psalm 119:105). Before the New Testament was written or completed, we needed prophets to be that light to our path. They spoke on behalf of God under the inspiration of the Spirit to instruct church members in the will and purposes of God.

Sometimes they spoke about the future, events that had not yet taken place. Agabus will predict a world-wide famine (Acts 11:27-30).

Sometimes they spoke about things that were not yet known, new truths that had not been previously revealed by God (1 Cor. 13:2), such as the rapture (1 Cor. 15:51).

Sometimes they simply encouraged or comforted the saints, using the Word of God to break through depression or fear (1 Cor. 14:3).

Let me suggest that there are 3 types of prophets:

- 1) A for-teller, one who speaks for God (e.g., writers of the Bible)
- 2) A fore-teller, one who predicts an event before it happens (prophets like Agabus in Acts 11)
- 3) a forth-teller, one who heralds or speaks forth God's truths (preachers)

G. W. Garrod, *The First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, p. 143.

Question: "Are there prophets in the church today?"

That's a very difficult question to answer. I'm walking now on very soft ground. The church today is split wide open on this question.

Answer: Yes, if you mean those in general who speak forth God's Word. If you mean "forth-tellers." Like some preachers.

One commentator writes, "Prophets today are not exactly like prophets of old. Old Testament Prophets spoke the literal Word of God. Today people with the Gift of Prophecy seem to have the same seriousness and straight forward attitude toward truth. They like to share truth, regardless of what anyone thinks. Prophets today are motivated to confront anyone with what they believe is right. When controlled by the Holy Spirit, the Gift of Prophecy is a powerful tool to reprove, rebuke and exhort others. Prophets often find themselves pointing the way, declaring specific truth or standing up for something significant" (Mels Carbonell, *Uniquely You in Christ: Discover Your Divine Design—Focusing on 16 Spiritual Gifts*, 7).

If that's what you mean by prophets, then we can go with a "yes" answer here. But most people aren't using this sort of definition when they are answering our question.

They define prophets as those who speak "f-o-r" God or prophets who predict the future.

Question: "Are prophets like that in the church today?"

No, again, if you mean those who reveal new truths from God or those who predict the future. At least not in any normative way.

The gift of prophecy seems to have been a temporary gift given by Christ for the laying of the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20, "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone).

The New Testament prophet proclaimed a message from the Lord to the early Christians who did not have the completed Bible that we hold on our laps. The early Christians had the Old Testament, but for a while there weren't any New Testament books written. So, New Testament prophets filled this gap between the completed writings of the Old Testament and the development of the New Testament. They proclaimed God's message to the people who would not have had access to it otherwise. The last book of the New Testament (Revelation, e.g.) was not completed until late in the first century. So, the Lord sent prophets to proclaim God's Word to His people to bridge this gap.

If the purpose of a prophet was to reveal truth from God during the foundational period of the early church before the New Testament was completed, then why would we need prophets today since we now have the completed revelation from God?

We don't. 2 Timothy 3:16 emphasizes that the Bible is complete. We have everything we need to know in order to be fully mature as Christians.

If prophets were the "foundation" of the early church, are we still building the "foundation" today? No. I don't think so. I don't see it that way. The foundation is laid.

So, then you might say, "But Brother Daniel, aren't you making the same mistake as those that Paul is addressing. Aren't you despising the gift of prophecy? Aren't you being the prophecy police?"

No, it's just that today we are armed with the full truth of God's Word. Paul was speaking out against those who were only armed with notions, opinions and partial truths.

The New Testament speaks about the apostles and prophets being foundational and necessary. Apostles were those who saw Jesus. We do not have apostles like that today. We cannot see Jesus today. Prophets were those who filled the gap until the Bible was completed. We do not have prophets like that today. We don't need them. We have the full revelation. So, we are an informed people of God. We are called to stand against counterfeit ministry and stand with Spirit-led ministry. It's not always easy to do that, but we are called to both.

Today, if you see people claiming to speak for God, you are right to be skeptical. You should be very careful how you handle such claims. We'll talk more about that next week.

But keep v. 20 in its proper context. Prophets were very active in the day that these words were penned, and the Thessalonians were not to despise the entire ministry of prophecy because of the rogue ministry of some. The Thessalonians were not to look down upon those who prophesied for God and neither should we IF they are from God, but circumstances have changed greatly since the first century and we must recognize that truth. Still, there are certain faith lessons that we can take away from this verse.

Faith Lesson #1: Just because some abuse their ministry doesn't mean that all do. Just because some misrepresent God is no excuse to cast doubt on all. It is easy to overreact. Instead, remain calm and discerning. Remain biblical.

Some people don't go to church because of all the hypocrites. But we're not all hypocrites.

Some people don't like tele-evangelists because all they want is your money. But not all tele-evangelists will press you for money.

Just because one church mistreats you or even two or three, doesn't mean you are allowed to stay away from church.

After all, do you have your act together in perfect order? Jesus said, "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye," Matt. 7:3-5.

Faith Lesson #2: Where God is at work, Satan will always seek to create confusion and trouble.

1 Thes. 2:18, "Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us."

2 Cor. 2:11, "Lest Satan should take advantage of us."

2 Cor. 11:14, "For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light." We learned earlier that to prophesy means to "cast light before others." Satan is a master of trying to cast a false light, and sometimes we fall for his tactics.

If you find yourself quick to point fingers at others in our church, please stop that. Instead, make sure you are walking with the Lord. Are you filled with joy? Are you praying regularly? Are you thankful? These things are signs that the Spirit is at work in you. Only when you are walking with the Spirit are you able to carefully judge what is from the Lord and what is not. Until you are mature, until you are right with God, please don't find yourself despising the people of God.

Neither should we check our brain at the door. What's of God and what's not? It may not always be easy to know, but as we grow in the Lord, we will have eyes to see more clearly what is from God and what is counterfeit. Let's keep looking to him for that wisdom.