

Michael Brown: Do Not Despise Prophecy

Did you ever wonder why Paul wrote, “Do not despise prophecies,” or as the New International Version translates, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thess. 5:20)? Why would any Christian be tempted to despise prophetic words?

The answer is that prophecy can be obscure. Or confusing. Or complex.

Or it can appear to be inaccurate, only to come to pass differently than we expected or have a different application than we understood.

Or it can make us uncomfortable, revealing areas we would rather leave covered over.

And in the case of New Testament prophecy, when every believer can potentially prophesy, it often needs correction and guidance. It is sometimes flatly wrong, with people claiming inspiration without really having it.

That’s why Paul’s full exhortation included these injunctions: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:19-21).

Today, when the failed Trump prophecies have gained much notoriety and when prophecy itself is getting a bad name, it’s important we heed all of Paul’s words.

Yes, by all means, we must test everything and hold to the good. But we must not throw out the baby with the bathwater, thereby quenching the Spirit and holding prophecies in contempt. We must welcome the voice of the Spirit while rejecting both the flesh and counterfeit spirits.

Unfortunately, as is often the case in the body, we go to one of two extremes when it comes to the things of the Spirit. We either reject everything that claims to be charismatic, labeling it heretical or dangerous or unbiblical. Or we embrace everything that claims to be from the Spirit, including the heretical or dangerous or unbiblical.

Paul urges us not to be guilty of either of these errors.

Yes, he tells us, prophetic ministry continues to this day, and his exhortation to pursue the gift of prophecy remains as relevant as ever. As he wrote to the Corinthians, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy." And, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:1, 39).

These are precious gifts that can be of great value to the body to the point of saving someone's life. They can even be used to bring lost sinners to the Lord (see 1 Cor. 14:24-25).

So, let us not put out the Spirit's fire by denying the importance of this gift for our day. Nowhere in the Bible did Paul reverse his encouragement for us to prophesy. (See this debate for more.)

But by all means, let us not be foolish. Prophecy must be tested and prophets must be accountable. Any standard less than this is itself unbiblical and dangerous. If unchecked, it could even become heretical.

That's also why every ministry gift is important, from the prophetic voices that expose sin and point us to Jesus to the teaching voices that ground everything in the Scriptures, and from the evangelistic voices that compel us to reach the lost to the pastoral voices that remind us to care for the sheep.

Once again, though, a few bad apples are making all apples look bad, by which I mean rogue, unaccountable prophets who

are causing many to despise, question or reject all prophetic words. They are also bringing reproach to the name of the Lord, in whose name they claim to speak.

We must distance ourselves from these voices while affirming the voice of the Spirit today. We must test and reject false prophecies while remaining open to true prophetic words. And above all, we must put contemporary prophecies in their proper place. At best, they are a word from the Lord to be tested by the Word and applied as is appropriate. They are not to be mistaken for the Bible in any shape, size or form. And they are not God's way of satisfying our curiosity about the future.

- You should distance yourself from any so-called prophet who equates their prophecies with “the Word of God.”
- You should distance yourself from any so-called prophet who commands you to heed their words or else.
- You should distance yourself from any so-called prophet who claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet.
- You should distance yourself from any so-called prophet who refuses accountability and is not submitted to a team of godly leaders.

Even if some of their words prove accurate, they are not to be followed. And they are certainly not to be feared.

At the same time, you should reject any teaching that claims that the gift of prophecy is no longer for today or that prophetic ministry ended in the days of the apostles. The testimony of Scripture and the testimony of history are flatly against these claims. Not only so, but countless millions of believers worldwide can attest to the continuance of prophetic ministry to this day.

Right now, we find ourselves in a critical moment, where

deception and confusion are rampant in the church. And some of this is due to unaccountable and even rogue prophecy.

Yet God's purpose at this time is not to destroy prophets and prophetic ministry. Instead, His purpose is to cleanse, prune and refine, which means that it's a good time for all of us to get low.

The same God who resists the proud gives grace to the humble.
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