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Gift of Prophecy (Part 1)



Charisma and Character - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the subject of prophecy and its role in Christianity, drawing from 1 Corinthians 14 and other biblical references. Prophecy, which is often paired with the gift of discerning spirits, is emphasized as a means of edification, exhortation, and comfort within the church. Gregg also highlights the importance of testing prophecy to ensure its accuracy and authenticity. While prophets in the Bible were often viewed as highly respected individuals, Gregg notes that anyone can be called to prophesy and stresses the importance of discernment in determining the legitimacy of prophetic messages.

Transcript

We've lost track of how many studies we've had in this series. There haven't been a great number, but it's been enough that I've lost track of how many there are. There's probably about number five or six or something like that.

And our series is called Charisma and Character. Charisma being the Greek word for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Character being the English word for character.

And that's a reference to the fruit. So we're, in this series, hoping to survey the whole normative work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Both the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit.

Now, we happen to take the gifts of the Spirit. We're working on the gifts of the Spirit first. I don't know why, except that I named the series Charisma and Character rather than Character and Charisma.

So Charisma comes first, and that's what we're dealing with. And we talked about, we had some introduction to the gifts a few sessions back. And we talked about tongues last time.

Which some people would call the least of the gifts, but as I pointed out, the Bible doesn't call it the least of the gifts. It may be, for some of us, the least exciting of the gifts. But for some people, by no means is it the least exciting.

Some people are really captivated and infatuated with it. In any case, it is neither the best or the least of the gifts. But without interpretation, tongues has very little value in a public setting.

To the private worshipper, tongues may have as much value as any other devotional activity. But in the gathering of the saints, tongues does not have any particular value without being coupled with interpretation. In fact, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14, I think it was verse 5, he said, Therefore, he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless he interprets, that the church may be edified.

And so Paul sets tongues and prophecy in juxtaposition in his entire discussion in 1 Corinthians 14, where I'd like you to turn with me right now. Now we're going to be looking at it, and we'll be looking away from it, coming back to it. I might as well just give you some advance notice.

We will probably cover the subject of prophecy, and it warrants it. Because Paul certainly indicated that prophecy is one of the more desirable gifts, one of the more important, and it is of all the gifts in the scripture. In the list, it is probably the one about which there is the most biblical material.

The gift of prophecy is seen throughout the Old Testament. And there are statements, sweeping summary statements about prophecy in the Bible. That would suggest that it's a very, very important, central, normative thing for the church of God to benefit from.

In 1 Corinthians 14, verse 1, Paul said, Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. If you would look back just a chapter and a verse to 1 Corinthians 12, verse 31, the last verse in chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, he said, but earnestly desire the best gifts. He does not here say what they are.

But he said, earnestly desire the best gifts, and yet I show you a more excellent way. And the only thing that falls between this verse at the end of chapter 12 and the beginning verse of chapter 14, is, of course, that section that we call 1 Corinthians 13, which is well known as the love chapter. But, in fact, it's a continuation of his discussion of the gifts of the Spirit, placing them in the context of the need for love in their exercise.

To have gifts, but to have no love, Paul says, is really worthless, absolutely worthless, and profits nothing. Love, we know, is a fruit of the Spirit, so that would certainly mean that gifts without fruit are worthless. This may also mean that fruit is more important than gifts, but I'm not sure it means that.

I'm not sure we have to decide which are more important. What would you choose, the fruit of the Spirit or the gifts of the Spirit? Why be in that position, to have to make a choice like that? Why don't we just take both? I don't know if we could honestly say that the fruit is more important than the gifts. It is, in fact, more indicative of spirituality.

I would say that fruit of the Spirit is better of a person's spirituality than gifts of the Spirit are. And I would also say that gifts without fruit, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, is worthless. But I'm not sure that fruit without gifts is all that great either.

I mean, I don't suppose that the normal things the Holy Spirit chooses to do omit one or the other. And I don't know that the Church is very well off lacking in either of these categories. But Paul, at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, says, Desire earnestly the best gifts, and then he goes on to talk about the need for love.

And then when he finishes that discussion of love at the end of chapter 13, he goes back to the subject of desiring the best gifts. And he says, Pursue love, chapter 14, verse 1, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. The impression certainly is given that prophecy is one of the best gifts.

Now, I don't say it is the best gift. Paul goes on to say that the best gifts are those that edify the Church, and prophecy certainly has the potential of doing that. That's what it's for.

It's for edification, exhortation, and comfort, Paul later says in the same chapter. But it's not the only way the Church can be edified. However, I will confess that prophecy is a very exciting gift to me when it is genuine.

I remember having been a Baptist and knowing nothing about the gifts of the Spirit and beginning to attend in the early Jesus movement a Spirit-filled church. The church I went to was Calvary Chapel, and they didn't allow manifestation of very many gifts as service. The regular service was a preaching service or teaching service, I should say, worship and teaching.

They did not wish to quench the Spirit, however, and they always had an afterglow. And in the afterglow, anything might happen. After the crowd had dispersed or were fellowshiping, you could go into a back room and you could do just about anything there.

Be prayed for healing, receive the baptism of the Spirit, prophesy, speak with the leper. It just wasn't part of the normal service. So it was very uncommon, even though I was in a Spirit-filled church, very uncommon to hear a prophecy in the service.

In fact, I never heard one for the longest time. But I remember once missing a service. That wasn't very common.

Calvary had meetings every night, and I went every night that I could. But I remember once when I missed the service and someone who was in high school with me had been there the night before. And at lunchtime, we were fellowshiping.

They said, oh, you should have been there. So-and-so prophesied. And I remember

thinking, prophesied, wow.

Man, that must be really, really cool, prophesying. Not that I wanted to prophesy so much. I just wanted to hear a prophecy.

Because as a Baptist, I believed fully that certain men throughout history have been mouthpieces for God. And I always thought, man, if I could hear Elijah speak or Isaiah speak or John the Baptist speak or any prophet speak, I'd be hearing the direct words from God and hearing them with my ears just through a human mouthpiece. I remember that was so - I was so angry at myself that I missed that meeting.

I didn't realize, of course, how easy it is to go to a meeting where prophecies happen. Because, of course, anyone who's had experience in charismatic worship services knows that prophecy is not that rare among charismatics. I had been in the movement for probably several months before I ever heard a prophecy.

And now I've heard probably more than I care to have heard. Because I realize now that a lot of people do the thing that is regarded to be prophecy. And really, in fact, a lot of what they do, I wonder if it's really prophecy.

I've come to realize that it's easy to say, sayeth the Lord, a lot of times when the Lord hasn't said thus. And hasn't said anything in particular through this person. And in the book of Jeremiah, God complains about the false prophecy.

These people have run, but I didn't send them. They've spoken, but I've given them no words. And this is, I'm afraid, only too often seen in modern charismatic circles.

I don't suppose it's all that much different than it was in Israel. Prophets wielded a certain amount of influence in Israel. I mean, of course, Israel was God's people.

If someone could profess to have God's mind, God's words, and could express an opinion and convince people that this was, in fact, what God was saying, obviously, you could sway the whole direction of the people of God. And that is true, of course, in modern times, too, if prophecy is genuine or if someone can convince the church that it's genuine. I believe in genuine prophecy.

I want to make that very clear. And Paul, I think, in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, gives us a balance as far as our attitude toward prophecy. In 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 19, 20, and 21, Paul says, Do not quench the Spirit.

Do not despise prophecies. Test all things and hold fast to that which is good. Now, we don't want to quench the Spirit.

We want to allow the Spirit to speak, to move, to do whatever it is that He might wish to do. And when prophecies come, it says, Do not despise them. The word despise, in the

somewhat older English that this verse reflects, doesn't mean to be actually hostile toward something.

If you say you despise someone today, that's a very strong word. It speaks of very strong malice or animosity or hostility toward a person, hatred even. But biblically, the word despise actually means something like to regard lightly, not to take seriously enough.

And so when he says, Do not despise prophecies or prophesings, I think the King James says, he means don't take them lightly. Do not disregard them. Prophecy is important.

And of course it would be. The Word of God, whether it comes through the written page or through a genuine prophecy, is the Word of God. Now, at the same time, we are told to test all things.

This word test, the King James says prove all things, but this is, I think, test, is the same word in the Greek that John used over in 1st John chapter 4. And he was talking about the same subject. In 1st John chapter 4, beginning at the first verse, 1st John 4, 1, John said, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test. That's the same word as over in 1st Thessalonians, test all things.

Hold fast that which is good. He says, test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. I might as well acquaint you with the fact that in Paul's writing and in John's, there are times when the word spirits is used in a different sense than we would typically use it today.

When I say the word spirit, depending on what you've last been conversing about on spiritual things, you might think of the Holy Spirit, you might think of your human spirit, because the word applies. The Bible also says angels are spirits, and of course, in some context, you might think immediately of a demonic spirit. All of these are different ways in which the word spirit is used in the Bible, and there's more besides.

There are other ways in which the word spirit is used, and one of the special ways in which the word is used is as a reference to the utterance of a prophet. Not so much a reference to the spirit by which he is speaking, but the utterance itself, I believe, in Scripture is sometimes called a spirit. When John says, test the spirits, I believe that in the language of the New Testament writers, this is no different than saying, test prophecies.

How do I know this? Well, there's a number of passages where that seems to be the case. Look over at 1 Thessalonians again, or no, this time look at 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, and the opening verses. 2 Thessalonians 2, and Paul says in the opening verses of 2 Thessalonians 2, Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or be troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as from us, as though the day of

Christ had come.

Now, Paul was afraid they might receive information, false information, that the day of Christ had come, and there were several avenues by which they might get this impression, including a forged letter that professed to be from him. He was afraid that someone might send them a letter claiming it was from him and saying the day of the Lord had come. Also, a word might be given, maybe in a sermon or something in the church.

Also, he said, or by a spirit. Now, I am under the impression that in this place, too, the word spirit means a prophetic utterance. These are the various ways in which the early church got their theology, through prophetic utterances, through preaching, and through letters from the apostles.

And I believe this is another case of that. And later on, we'll look again at 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14. We won't at this moment.

But you may recall from my introduction to the gifts quite a long time ago now, that I mentioned that the gift of discerning of spirits, I have come to see differently than I once did. I once thought discerning of spirits was a gift that had to do with recognizing the presence of demonic spirits and knowing what was going on spiritually in a person's life. Just kind of having an intuitive knowledge that it's like a Russian god, that you've got a spirit of adultery in you, brother.

Not you, but I mean, that's it's like being able to discern what kind of spirits happening, what's going on spiritually in somebody. And that's how I guess I was taught in the early days of my charismatic experience, that discerning of spirits is. But as I said a few weeks ago, I believe discerning of spirits, as Paul used the word, is nothing other than testing a prophecy.

I have a number of reasons for thinking so. One is that Paul, in listing the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, lists prophecy and discerning of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues, in that order. Now, that doesn't prove what I just said a moment ago, but if I am correct, that's an interesting listing.

You've got prophecy and its companion gift, testing prophecy. Then you've got tongues and its companion gift, interpretation of tongues. Now, a further reason that I have come to the conclusion I have about this, is because when Paul talks about the exercise of the prophetic gift in the church, later on in 1 Corinthians 14, he says, let the prophets speak two or three and let the others judge.

And the word judge they use there in the Greek is the same word that he used two chapters earlier in discerning of spirits. The word there is judging. The same Greek word that he later says, let the prophets speak and the others judge.

And in the same instruction in chapter 14, he says, let the tongue speakers speak and let one interpret. So you've got tongues and prophecy both operating in the church, but only with their companion gifts. Only tongues with interpretation, only prophecy with judging prophecy or discerning.

Unfortunately, there are different words in our English Bible. They are the same word in the Greek. And if that is true, then even the reference to the discernment of spirits could be a case where the word spirits refers to prophetic utterances.

Somebody prophesies and someone discerns or judges the prophetic utterance that was uttered. The spirit that came forth. So when John, in the passage we looked at a moment ago in 1 John 4, 1 says, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they're from God, because many false prophets have gone out in the world.

It's if this is if my theory is correct about this, then he's saying, don't believe every prophecy, but test the prophecies because many false prophets have gone out into the world. Anyway, you can search that for yourself. I don't expect anyone to believe that just because I say so.

But that's something that I've evolved to in my thinking. And later on, I guess I'm sort of going over material I went over a few weeks ago. When we look at first Corinthians 14, we see that Paul said that if a prophet speaks and another is judging and something is revealed to the person who's judging it, the first speakers was to stop speaking because he said the spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets.

And while most people think that means everybody's prophetic gift is subject to himself, that is under his control. If I were a prophet, then my spirit is under is an under subjection to me, the prophet. I can control it.

That's what most people understand this to mean. The spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets. I have come to believe that what Paul actually means there is that the prophet is speaking.

And those who have prophetic discernment are sitting in judgment of the prophecy. And if one of them discerns that this is not a genuine prophecy, then the one who's speaking the prophecy has to be quiet. They interrupt and say, wait a minute, brother.

That doesn't bear witness. I don't think that's of the Lord. And and he has to stop because the spirit that is the utterance of the prophet is subject to the prophets through prophet in judgment.

Now, that is not the only way that verse can be understood. And I will say it's not the most common way that verse is understood. But I'm just saying for my own money, that's what I have come in comparing scripture.

Scripture to believe is being said there. It's very different than what I was originally taught on those verses. But we're supposed to judge the prophecies.

We're supposed to test the spirits. And that means that sometimes we test the spirits. The person speaking might be embarrassed.

I'll tell you what. One of the most uncomfortable things about being in charismatic circles is when you're in a meeting and somebody prophesies and it just doesn't go over well. You just sense that is not of God.

There might even be some heresy in it. And no one says anything. I mean, everybody knows it's wrong, but no one speaks up.

And the elders are afraid to embarrass the guy. Actually, I was in a church in Santa Cruz at one time where I actually it was my church, but I wasn't there this week. But a friend of mine from Oregon came down.

I was visiting that church. He'd come down to see me and I was out of town. So I went to my church and to tell the truth, prophecies didn't happen that often in the church I was in in Santa Cruz.

But this morning when some friends were visiting, there were having two prophetic utterances. One was from a known guy who occasionally prophesied in the church. And he, I don't know what the content of his prophecy was, but he gave a prophecy that most people kind of bore witness to.

It was kind of a rebuke and kind of a call to repentance to the church. And as soon as he finished, someone else stood up and prophesied and basically canceled out everything he said. And basically said, don't listen to that.

You know, this is what the Lord has to say. They didn't actually say, don't listen to that. But everyone who was listening could tell the second prophecy was uttered with a mind to cancel out the previous one to basically contradict it.

And these friends of mine who were visiting said it was very, very awkward. And I could imagine. I was glad I wasn't there.

I'd be very awkward. Besides, I was one of the elders. I wouldn't have to be the one saying it.

Because if I was there, I'd feel very guilty if I didn't say something. But I'd feel very awkward saying it. You've got two people prophesying.

One contradicts the other flatly in the space of a couple seconds. And the elders said nothing. Well, I don't condemn the elders completely.

Because if I was there, I was one of the elders. And I would have been very awkward, too. But I think that in a case like that, someone should say something.

Someone should say, well, brother, I don't think that is from the Lord. You know? Or something. Unfortunately, though we have some of the gifts operating in the church, we often don't have the companion gift operating as we should.

There are many churches that have tongues going wild, but no interpretations. And there are churches that have prophecies on a regular basis, but no discerning. No discerning.

And there is, of course, if you're very savvy to trends in the charismatic movement, you may know that there is a certain church in the Midwest, which I won't name, but several years ago, there was very strong emphasis, and still is a strong emphasis on that church, on the prophetic gift. This church has elevated a number of people to the status of prophet. I shouldn't say they've elevated them, because maybe some of these people are prophets.

Maybe God elevated some of them. I don't know. But this church recognizes a great host of people as prophets.

Some of them are pretty impressive. Others are not impressive in the least. But they're called baby prophets by the people in this movement, because they're not very good at prophesying.

They get it wrong more often than right. But they're still prophets. I mean, not really, but that's kind of what they seem to assume.

Now, I shouldn't be too hard on them, because I can't really say they assume everyone is a prophet who claims to be. I've just seen too many people who clearly aren't, that they say are. A friend of mine, who I think probably is a prophet, if there is one.

He's certainly got strong prophetic insights. And he's often called me out of the clear blue sky with a word from the Lord for me that was right on the money. He didn't have a clue.

He lived in another state and didn't have a clue what was going on in my life. And he called and said, God just told me to call you and say this. And he was right.

This is a guy I really respect. And I remember talking to him once about this movement at that church, this prophetic movement I was just mentioning. And something similar was happening in this town, sort of spawned by that movement there.

I was asking him his opinion about the modern prophetic movement. He said, well, you know, the way I see it, everybody who claims to be a prophet is one. They're either a true prophet or a false prophet.

If a person doesn't claim to be a prophet, he's neither a true prophet nor a false prophet. But if a person claims to be a prophet, automatically he's a prophet of one sort or another, either genuine or phony. In the Bible there are both.

But I have very seldom in charismatic circles seen people stand up and say this is a false prophet, even though a great number of prophecies that I personally have heard, my judgment is that wasn't a word from God. A lot of times it's very hard to tell. In the course of this two studies on this subject, I will go into great detail, as far as everything the Bible has to say on how to judge prophecy.

But I want to give some background on the whole subject of prophecy. I still am excited about prophecy, but I will say my excitement is tempered with a little bit of cynicism. I hate to say that because Paul said don't despise prophecies.

I don't ever want to come to a place where someone stands up and says, let's say the Lord, and I'm already automatically going, oh, brother. I don't do that automatically, but I could easily come to that place if I allowed myself to, because I've heard so many things offered as if they were prophecies, which seem clearly not to be prophecies, or even if they weren't clearly needed, because they didn't say anything of any value. And there's been a great number of personal prophecies that have come my way.

I remember, I've told this story to some of you before, but when I lived in Bandon, there was a guy who had kind of gotten out of sorts with all the churches in town, which wasn't hard to do. There weren't many churches in town, and you could get on bad terms with all of them real quick. But this fellow had sort of a home group, and he had his own kind of strange views about things.

He had a few families that followed him. And he was kind of looked on as sort of a rebel type by all the churches, but that didn't turn me off to him. I mean, I'm looked at sometimes as sort of a rebel type to the churches too.

It's a bad judgment. I'm not a rebel. But he was viewed that way.

I mean, I didn't take that as any indication of what he was. I hardly had any contact with him at all, but he considered himself a prophet. He had, in fact, once gone down to Los Angeles during the Foursquare denominations, some kind of a national conference there.

And he'd gone and stood up in their conference and prophesied that an earthquake was going to destroy Los Angeles while they were there in conference. It didn't happen, and he never repented of it. So when I heard this, it kind of negatively affected my opinion of him as a prophet, to put it mildly.

He, however, had this excuse. He said, well, who knows, maybe someone repented and God averted the disaster like he did with Nineveh. Well, I haven't noticed any major changes in Los Angeles in the area of repentance or moral conversion like there was in

Nineveh, so I doubt that that's the explanation.

But this guy happened to be very strongly committed to a certain viewpoint about the end times. In fact, it was one of his favorite subjects, and it was different than mine. And he called me once at our school in Bandon, knocked on my door, and I thought, well, to what do I owe this privilege of a prophet coming to visit me? And it was not to flatter me.

He came over to tell me that my views on end times were all wrong and that God had a word for me. The word was, if I don't change my views on end times, God would destroy the works of my hands. Well, it sounds like a very sort of King James kind of expression.

I'm not sure what is meant by destroying the work of my hands. I don't build things. If he meant the school, he missed that by a good bit because the schools only flourished more since then.

And I haven't changed my views on the end times. But I said to him, you know, why should I change my views on the end times? I mean, just because you say so? I mean, God knows my heart. God knows I'm committed to what the Scripture says.

And if God would send someone to me to change my views, he'd send him over with Scriptures and he'd show me how my view is scripturally wrong. So would you please sit down with me? We had him in. He sat there for two or three hours, and we went through Scriptures together.

And I had him nodding his head a little bit before the time was over. But he never did convert over to my way of seeing things. And he left.

And praise God, if God destroyed the work of my hands since then, I haven't noticed it. I'm not sure what to look for. It's kind of a vague prophecy.

And that's the problem with a lot of prophecies. Not only are a lot of them false, but a lot of them are so vague that you don't know whether they happened or not. And it doesn't seem very much like the kind of prophecy that God would give.

An aspect of the gift of prophecy that I think is sometimes mislabeled in the modern church is what we commonly call a word of knowledge. I made reference to this in our introduction also to the gifts. I suspect that what we call a word of knowledge may not be what Paul called a word of knowledge.

I'm not sure. We can't be sure because Paul never explained what he meant by it. Paul has given a word of wisdom to another.

He's given a word of knowledge to another. And so he goes on with the list. He never explains anywhere what a word of knowledge is.

In the modern church, modern charismatic circles, we usually speak of a word of

knowledge as somebody gets an insight about somebody that they've never had opportunity to learn through natural means. Jesus, for example, talking to the woman at the well. And he knows that she's had five husbands and she's living with a man she's not married to.

He had no natural way of knowing that. And that was what we would normally call a word of knowledge. When Peter is told by Ananias and Sapphira that they sold their property for a certain amount and he says, you're lying, and they drop dead.

How did he know they were lying? That, we assume, was another case of a word of knowledge. In the Old Testament, we have Elisha having a similar revelation about his servant Gehazi when Elisha himself had turned down a monetary reward from Naaman the Syrian whom Elisha's ministry had led to be a source of leprosy. And Gehazi said, wow, this guy was willing to give my master a lot of money and my master didn't take it.

And so he ran secretly off to this guy and said, my master changed his mind. He wants some money now. And so Naaman gladly gave him a lot of money, but Gehazi went and hid it from Elisha.

And when Gehazi came walking back home again, Elisha said, where have you been, Gehazi? He said, oh, I haven't been anywhere. And Elisha said, did not I see you? Did not my heart go out when the chariot turned to meet you? And so forth. And in other words, Elisha exposed the man's sin, though he had no natural way of knowing it.

These kinds of phenomena, which are not too uncommon in Scripture and not too uncommon in the modern charismatic movement either, although many times faked in, you know, with little hidden microphones in the ear and things like that. This phenomenon in Scripture is what we have probably, if you're in charismatic circles, come to call a word of knowledge. I mentioned some questioning in my own mind whether that's really what Paul meant when he said word of knowledge, simply because we don't know what he meant.

It seems to me like this phenomenon, it was part of the gift of prophecy in the Bible, at least in the Old Testament. It was prophets who got these so-called words of knowledge. And even when Jesus said to the woman, you've had five husbands, and the man you're now with is your sixth, she didn't say, sir, I perceive that you have the word of knowledge.

She said, sir, I perceive you're a prophet. This was the kind of stuff that prophets would have revealed to them. Now, I just want to say I'm not sure that the common knowledge idea that the word of prophecy, when Paul used it, means that phenomenon.

I'm not sure that's wrong. Maybe what prophets did in the Old Testament is a variety of things distributed now among different members of the body of Christ. But maybe also

when we actually see the operation of the word of knowledge, what we call that today, we're really just seeing another function of the gift of prophecy.

I'm not sure. But this raises questions about what prophecy includes and what it doesn't include. What is prophecy? And is everybody who prophesies a prophet? These are some important questions because there is much talk about prophecy and prophets in certain circles today.

And when things are talked about, of course, you have to decide whether the things that are being said are true or false. And the only way we can know that is to compare them, if possible, with Scripture. Let me, first of all, before I go those directions, show a number of scriptures that indicate that prophecy is more than average to believers, at least to the community of the believers.

We already saw in 1 Corinthians 14, 1, that Paul said we should covet spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. So I think we can get the impression that Paul placed a high priority on the gift of prophecy. In the Old Testament, if you'll notice Amos, it may be hard to find Amos, but actually it shouldn't be, right after Daniel is Hosea, then Joel, then Amos.

Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos. In the book of Amos, chapter 3, and verse 7, it says, Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants, the prophets. Now, this is, to my mind, this verse is almost always giving me goose bumps, even though I'm not a prophet.

It just seems to me like God won't do anything unless He has first warned His people through the prophets. And I don't know that God, I shouldn't say I don't know that God has changed, I should say I believe God has changed. I believe that God's policies, God's priorities, are not really any different now than they were in the Old Testament.

I don't think God is one whose personality or character changes. And if God had a policy of not letting things take His people by surprise when He was about to do something, if He was about to judge a nation or something, that He would let His people know through prophets first, is a very valuable thing to us today. Because, after all, we are living in perilous times, and many of us are wondering, what's going to happen? And besides, what are we supposed to do about it? I mean, is persecution coming? Really, how are we to react to these things happening in our world today? Is there any word from God? Well, I'll tell you this.

If we need to know something, God won't do anything that affects us that we need to respond to without first telling through His servants, the prophets. You know, in AD, one of my favorite dates in history, the Romans besieged Jerusalem. And once it was besieged, there was very few people who got out alive.

Many people starved in the city. Many were slaughtered by wars within the city. Many

were slaughtered when the Romans finally broke in and slaughtered people, burned down the temple full of people.

And this is a great holocaust, but before the Romans arrived, there's an ancient historian named Eusebius who wrote church history back in 325 AD. And he had some records and documents that aren't around for us anymore. And he had an interesting thing to say.

And that is that before the Romans besieged the city, there was an oracle. That is a prophetic utterance given in the church in Jerusalem. Now, we're not talking about the Jews in general, but the Christian Jews.

The church that was inside Jerusalem. An oracle warned them to leave. And they did.

And by the time the Romans arrived and besieged the city and hemmed everyone in, all the Christians were gone. According to Eusebius, not one Christian was left in the city when the Romans arrived because God had warned his people through a prophetic utterance. Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he reveals his secret unto his servants, the prophets.

There's a more modern story told by Demas Shekarion, the founder of Full Gospel Business Association, whom I know very little about except this story. But in his life story written in a book called *The Happiest People on Earth*, I think it's called, *Happiest People in the World*, he tells something about his ancestors. I think it was his grandparents.

He's of Arminian stock. Not theological Arminianism, but racial Arminian. Arminia was, some generations ago, wiped out by the Turks.

But Arminia, prior to that time, had been essentially a Christian country. The Arminians had become Christians. And I don't remember how many generations back.

I think it was Demas Shekarion. He's an old man. In fact, he may have just recently died.

I don't recall. Anyone know? Did he die? He's very old. I think it was his grandparents that this story relates to.

But they were in Arminia. And there was a young boy, if I recall, he was 11 years old. He was illiterate.

But he saw a vision. And in the vision he saw letters and words which he could not read. But he described them, or he wrote them down, and copied them from the vision he saw.

And somebody who could read, read them. And the message was that all the Christians should leave Arminia and go to America. And that if they didn't, they'd be wiped out.

And approximately, from what I understand, about half of the Christians in Arminia did. They sold their farms. They sold their properties.

They got on ships and came over to America, where most of them and their descendants still are today. About half, I think, or at least a certain percentage, didn't leave. They didn't take seriously the message.

And the Turks came in and wiped them all out. And that place doesn't have Christians anymore. It's overrun by Turks.

But this was something that they were warned about by a prophet. And those who heeded the prophet fled, and fled to safety. Now, these are just stories.

I'm not going anywhere with them in the sense of saying, now, you know, I've got a prophecy for you. I don't. I don't have any prophecy.

I'm not a prophet. But these illustrations, I think, and there are many others besides that I've heard over the years, of how the Lord will do nothing but He reveals His secret to His servants, the prophets. And both of those illustrations are New Testament illustrations, although the statement of policy is found in the Old Testament in Amos 3.7. So one can see, I think, how important it is to have the prophecy operating in the body of Christ.

If, for example, there was some desire on God's part for Christians to take some united course of action, or to relocate or do anything like that, it would be of value to have prophets around to tell them. I've often, because Paul said to desire prophecy, I've often prayed that I might prophesy. But I don't.

I've never prophesied. I'm not a prophet. I have other gifts than that.

But I've always wanted to remain among people who were spirit-filled people, so that if God ever had anything He wanted me to know, I'd always have prophets available. And I have heard, as I say, a lot of prophecies that aren't very impressive. But I've also heard some pretty good ones.

There's one particular prophecy given to me personally by a friend, who, actually he wasn't a close friend, I hardly knew him, but he was in our church, and I lived in Santa Cruz at the time, and he called me up once, and he said, I have a word from the Lord for you, and the Lord has a scripture for you. Well, God knew how skeptical I am of personal prophecies that I'd heard in the past. I've heard many people give me prophetic words that I just, you know, I just couldn't accept them as being legitimate.

And they weren't, in most cases. And God knew that I'm a little bit slow to believe that just because someone says, let's say it's the Lord, that that's really what they mean. So I know the Lord gave him this scripture as well.

He said, the Lord gave me a word for you and a scripture for you. And the moment he said, I have a scripture for you, a particular reference came to my mind. He had not given me one clue what the scripture was that he had for me.

One scripture, not a whole bunch of possibilities, but one reference came to my mind, clearly. And it took him a while to look up this scripture. When he finally looked it up, it turned out to be the reference that had come to my mind.

Of all the prophecies, the one that he had for me was the one that God brought to my mind as soon as I heard that he had a scripture for me. And I think that the Lord did that so that I'd be more willing to believe that this man really was hearing from God. And sure enough, he gave me a word, which I will not repeat at this point.

It was a very positive word, which has been fulfilled since that time. And it was a remarkable case. So I just want you to know, I've heard prophecies I don't think much of.

And I've seen the real thing in operation, too. I believe in prophecy. I think the balance is that we don't want to despise prophecies, but we do want to test all things because a gullible church can be led into all kinds of heresies and strange doctrines because there are as many false prophets, no doubt, around as there are genuine ones.

After all, anyone can be a false prophet. Anyone can just say, Thus saith the Lord. And the Bible makes it clear that both in the Old Testament and the New, there was no shortage of false prophets.

But there should be no shortage of real ones, either. If you look over at Numbers, chapter 11, in Numbers, chapter 11, Moses complained to God that he had more responsibility than he'd really asked for or cared to have in watching over these complainers, the Jews that he was leading through the wilderness, who kept murmuring and complaining and so forth. And so God said, I'll tell you what, I'll distribute the problem.

You've got the whole problem on your shoulders right now. You bring 70 elders to the tabernacle door, and I'll take some of the burden that's on you, some of the spirit that's on you, and put it on them. So such men were gathered to the tabernacle door, and the 70 men came, and the spirit came down upon them.

And there were a couple of them, upon whom the spirit came, that were not where they should be. They were not at the tabernacle door. They were in the camp.

And the spirit fell upon them as well. And we read of this in verses 26 and following of Numbers 11. Numbers 11, 26 and following.

It says, two men had remained in the camp. The name of one was Eldad, the name of the other Medad, and the spirit rested upon them. Now they were among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle, yet they prophesied in the camp.

When the spirit came on these 70, they prophesied. And a young man ran and told Moses, he said, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. And Joshua, the son of

Nun, Moses' assistant, one of the choice men, answered and said, Moses, my lord, forbid them.

Then Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them. Moses wished that he'd have more help, that he'd have more people who were bearing the burden of the Lord, that had the spirit of the Lord and were prophets like himself. He wished that all the Lord's people were prophets and he'd put his spirit upon them.

Well, sure enough, God has done that now. Because it says in Acts chapter 2, when the spirit came at Pentecost, Peter said, This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, who said, In the last days, saith the Lord, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. All flesh, all the Lord's people have received the spirit, and they can all prophesy.

Now that, of course, raises questions as to what is meant by prophesying, because I just said a moment ago, I've never prophesied. So what does it mean, they can all prophesy? Well, I suspect that the word prophecy has a wide range of operation and more than one meaning in Scripture. The word prophesy simply really means to speak for someone else, to actually be a mouthpiece for another.

In the Old Testament in Exodus, God said that Moses would be like God to Pharaoh and Aaron would be like his prophet. Aaron would speak the words that Moses told him to speak. And Aaron, therefore, was like a prophet to Moses.

He was a spokesman, a person who proclaimed forth the words of another. In the case of prophets of God, they speak forth God's words. Now, Christians prophesy in more than one sense.

There is, among the gifts of the Spirit, a gift of prophecy listed. And it's quite clear that not everyone functions in that gift. Yet, the Bible says that your sons and daughters shall prophesy and indicates that this is a general privilege of all those upon whom the Spirit comes, which is really all Christians have that privilege, if they wish it.

And I think that all Christians at one level are prophets, I mean, at a very basic level, in the sense that we are the persons through whom God speaks to the world. We are the people who speak in the mind of God. And while, of course, much of our speaking of the world might be little more than just quoting what other prophets have said in the Scripture, yet, in our world, we are God's spokespersons.

And even when we're not quoting Scripture, we are here to be speaking to people the mind of God. Not necessarily as an inspired oracle, but we are informed of God. We know God.

We have His Spirit upon us. And we are expected to speak the mind of God and do so. All

of us can do that.

At one level, that is prophesying. But not the gift of prophecy. That's different than the gift of prophecy, because Paul speaks of the gift of prophecy as a separate thing.

And that brings us to the question of what is a prophet and in what sense is a person who has a gift of prophecy the same thing as a prophet? I believe that we need to differentiate between the gift of prophecy and the office of a prophet. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 12. Some of you may have heard me say before that I have my own doubts as to whether there are apostles and prophets today.

I say I have doubts simply because I don't know. I don't know of any persons that I would recognize as apostles or prophets today. I can't say for sure that there aren't any.

But I will say I've known a lot of people who claim to be and a lot of people about whom the claim is made on their behalf by their followers. That our leader is an apostle, our leader is a prophet. And so it's not like I haven't been in the right circles to encounter people who are alleged apostles and prophets.

It's just that I've not been impressed by those who wear the label that this is really the right label for them. And therefore I must say as I get older, I wonder more. Are there really any real apostles or prophets today? I'm not saying God can't have any.

I'm just saying I don't know if he does. I'm not sure if we need today apostles and prophets though that's not the same thing as doubting the gift of prophecy in operation. And that's what I want to point out to you.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 beginning at verse 27, Paul said, Now you are the body of Christ and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church. First, apostles and prophets.

Third, teachers. After that, miracles. Then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

Then he says, Are all apostles, are all prophets, are all teachers, are all workers of miracles, do all have the gifts of healings, do all speak with tongues, do all interpret, but earnestly desire the best gifts, yet I show you a more excellent way. We read that verse already earlier. Now he says, Are all apostles, are all prophets, are all teachers? The assumed answer is no.

Not all are apostles. Not all are prophets. Not all are teachers.

Not all are workers of miracles. But, let me ask you this. Can all teach? Should every Christian in some settings teach? I think so.

It says in Hebrews chapter 5, I think it's verse 14, It says, For the time you ought to be

teachers, you have need that one teach you. Again, which be the first principles of the oracles of God. The writer of Hebrews assumed that at a certain point of maturity, all of his readers should be, in some capacity, teachers.

They should be able to teach others. Paul said in 2 Timothy chapter 2, The servant of the Lord must not strive, but should be patient toward all men, apt to teach. Anyone who serves God has to be prepared to do a bit of teaching.

But that doesn't make them a teacher. That doesn't mean that their office in the church is that of a teacher. Likewise, there may be a great many of people in the church who can prophesy.

Does that make them a prophet? Well, first of all, I don't think so. I don't think so. But, it says in 1 Corinthians 14, verse 29, Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.

A little further down in verse 31, it says, For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. You may all prophesy, but not all are prophets. Now, of course, you all may prophesy, you might just refer to the prophets.

We don't know. It's not clear. But, it seems clear to me that not everyone, Paul implies, not everyone has the ministry of speaking in tongues to the congregation with the gift of interpretation.

But there are perhaps more people who do speak in tongues than those who are in the office of a tongues speaker, that that is their contribution. How do I know there were such offices in the early church? Well, in his discussion about tongues, Paul says, If you speak in tongues, only do it one at a time, only two or three total, and only if an interpreter is present. And he says, And if there is no interpreter present, then don't speak out.

Now, that very discussion proves that there would be in some churches somebody who is recognized as an interpreter. Now, anyone might interpret because in the same chapter, Paul says, If anyone speaks in tongues, let him pray that he might interpret. Presumably, that anyone who speaks in tongues might potentially be given the interpretation.

But not everyone is an interpreter. You see, in the early church, I think, we have evidence here, that there were certain individuals who had an office recognized because of the consistency of their giftedness in a certain area, and that office might be called an apostle, a prophet, a teacher, a speaker in tongues, an interpreter. But others besides them might teach, might prophesy, might interpret, might speak in tongues, but that was not their office as they occasionally did.

Now, when we take this principle and apply it to prophecy, my understanding is, there are certainly people today who prophesy. I believe in a genuine gift of prophecy. I

believe there are genuine prophecies.

I'm not sure there are prophets today, though. There might be, but how would you know? Well, that has to be tested. A prophet in the New Testament, let's talk for the rest of this time tonight about what a prophet is, and about the history of the office of a prophet.

Next week, we'll talk about the function of the gift of prophecy, and we'll go into more detail about 1 Corinthians 14, and what Paul teaches us there. But, the office of a prophet has existed from earliest times. Abraham was called a prophet.

He's probably the first person that the Old Testament calls a prophet. He is called a prophet in Genesis 20, and verse 7. And this is when God is speaking to Abimelech, the king of Gerar, a Philistine city. He says, go to Abraham and have him pray for you, because he's a prophet, and you'll be healed.

This is the first time that the Old Testament refers to somebody as a prophet. There was someone earlier than that who was a prophet. And we know that because Jesus said so.

And that was Abel. Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, was a prophet, according to Jesus. We find this in Luke 11.

And in Luke 11, verse 49 and following, Jesus said, therefore the wisdom of God also said, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah. Now, from the blood of Abel is Him beginning to basically say all the prophets, from Abel to Zechariah. All the blood of the prophets is going to be required of them, from that of Abel to that of Zechariah.

So, apparently even before Abraham got a prophet, that was Abel. There was also another man before Abraham that is called a prophet, but the New Testament calls him that, the Old Dozen, and that was Enoch. Seven generations from Adam, Enoch was a prophet.

We know from the book of Jude that Enoch prophesied of a judgment that came, probably the flood. He lived before the flood. But then Abraham, as I say, is called a prophet as well.

Why was he called a prophet? He didn't go around prophesying. There is a difference between a prophet and somebody who just went around prophesying. You can prophesy without being a prophet.

And apparently you can be a prophet without doing a great deal of prophesying. I don't know of more than one case in the history of Abraham where he prophesied. And that

was when he took his son up on the mountain, and he himself thought he was going to kill his son.

He thought he was going to offer him up to God. He didn't know God was going to intervene and stop him from doing that. But his son, who did not know that he was the intended victim, was carrying the wood up the mountain for his own sacrifice, and said to his father, Father, here's the wood, and here's the fire, but where's the animal? Where's the lamb that we're going to sacrifice? And Abraham said, My son, the Lord will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.

Well, Moses, who recorded this story, after recording it, says because of that, a saying went around and continued to exist even in the days of Moses, centuries after Abraham's time, and that was, in the mountain of the Lord, the Lord will provide, meaning provide himself a lamb for a sacrifice. So Abraham actually predicted something, and I believe the fulfillment was the death of Jesus. Abraham actually predicted that God would provide for himself a lamb, meaning the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

So Abraham prophesied on that occasion. I know of no other case where he did in his entire story. But, although we don't do a lot of prophesying, he was a man to whom God spoke frequently.

I don't know how frequently, but there's a number of cases recorded. God told him things. In fact, on one occasion, in Genesis chapter 18, God was on his way to Sodom and Gomorrah to destroy it.

And as he was walking along in a human form, talking to Abraham, he said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do? Remember Amos? Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he reveals his secret unto his servants, the prophets. He says, Shall I hide from Abraham the thing I'm about to do? I think I won't hide it from him. And he told him that he was going down to Sodom to check out and see if things were as bad as he thought, and so forth.

And Abraham conversed with God about this, and even prayed and intervened, and so forth. And a lot of the prophets in the Bible interceded for the people. Intercessory prayer was a major function of a person who was a prophet.

Possibly as much as prophesying was. A prophet was a person who had a special one-on-one relationship with God. And that is another sense in which every Christian who has the Spirit upon him is a prophet today.

We have a direct relationship with God where he can speak to us, and we to him, and he dwells in us, and we don't have to wait for somebody to come and tell us what the will of God is. We can get it directly from him. This was apparently the thing that prophets had

in common in the Old Testament, though some of them didn't prophesy very much.

A prophet was one to whom God communicated and communed with. And of course, that is what Christians can do today. Moses, of course, is referred to as a prophet.

In fact, Moses is considered to be a prophet like none other prior to Jesus. After Moses dies, the book of Deuteronomy says, in Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 10, it says, But since that time, since Moses died, there has not arisen a prophet like Moses. Now, there have been other prophets, Rose, but not a prophet like Moses.

Moses was unusual. In fact, God himself said about Moses in Numbers chapter 12, when his own brother and sister, Miriam and Aaron, through whom God also spoke, they complained about Moses. They didn't like his choice of wives.

And so they complained about him. They said, Has God only spoken through Moses? Has he spoken through us too? And they began to rebel against Moses and complain. And God rebuked them for that.

And he said to them, this is in Numbers chapter 12, he said, If I, the Lord, if I raise up a prophet among my people, I will speak to him in a dream or in a vision or in some way like that. But Moses, my servant, is not so. He is faithful in all my house.

With him I will speak more evidently, face to face and mouth to mouth. And the image or the similitude of the Lord shall he behold. So Moses was even contrasted from other prophets by God himself.

If I speak to a prophet, it will be this way. He is a different kind of a prophet. So you've got Abel, you've got Enoch, you've got Abraham, you've got Moses.

These men are all called prophets in the Bible. So we can see from earliest times, even before there was a Jewish nation and so forth, God was speaking to those who listened and communing with people. And these people were called prophets.

Actually, of the prophets of the nation Israel, the office of prophet became a special office, which usually describes somebody who gave counsel to the kings, Israel and Judah. Not all of them did directly, but many of them did. When Israel and Judah became separate nations, God began to send prophets to both of them.

And in some cases, a godly king, or even one that wasn't altogether godly, would have prophets on his cabinet. Because he was the king over God's people, it was understood that he was not regarded as a king. And that the king had to submit to God, and the best way he'd know what God wanted was by God sending a prophet.

So there were people like Isaiah, who was a counselor to four kings or five kings in his day. Jeremiah gave counsel to the kings in his day, although they didn't welcome it.

Hezekiah did welcome Isaiah's counsel and saved the nation because of it.

Elijah gave counsel to Jezebel and Ahab, but they didn't welcome it very much. But it was very common for there to be prophets in Israel who were almost on the government dole. I shouldn't say dole, more like payroll.

It's different than a dole. They were actually employees of the royal families in Israel and Judah, because those kings needed to know what God had to say to them. The first prophet who gave counsel to kings of Israel was Samuel.

Samuel was a prophet from his childhood, and he was given prophetic messages from the time he was a little boy. In fact, before he was even grown, he had a reputation throughout the whole nation that he was a prophet of God. In the New Testament, Samuel is spoken of as if he was the first of the order of prophets, because he was the first prophet to give counsel to the kings of Israel.

So he counseled Saul and David, the first two kings, and he also established what are usually called prophetic guilds or schools of the prophets, through which God raised up additional prophets in later generations. In Acts chapter 3, we find one of the places where Samuel is mentioned as if he's the first of the order of the prophets. He's not the first prophet, but he's the first of a certain order of prophets that were known regularly in Israel's national life at a later time.

In the third chapter of Acts, Peter is preached. And he says in verse 24, Acts 3, 24, Yes, and all the prophets from Samuel and those who followed, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. So, all the prophets from Samuel, that is beginning with Samuel and on.

If you look at Hebrews chapter 11, which is the great chapter that tells about all the Old Testament heroes of faith, the writer begins to summarize after a while, because he gets tired of naming specific cases. It gets rather tedious, because there are so many cases he could give. And he even says, time would fail me to tell of all of them.

But in doing so, he mentions Samuel also in such a way as to indicate that Samuel is recognized as the first of the order of the prophets. Because in Hebrews chapter 11, it says in verse 32, And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, these are all judges of Israel in the book of Judges, also of David. By the way, David is also called a prophet by Peter on the day of Pentecost.

When Peter was preaching, he quoted from the Psalm, Psalm 16, and he said, David being a prophet, spoke here of the resurrection of the Messiah. So, even David was a prophet. But here, Hebrews 11, verse 32 says, Of David and Samuel and the prophets.

Now, that expression, Samuel and the prophets, seems to reflect the understanding that

we saw back in Acts chapter 3, that Samuel is sort of the beginning of a new order of prophets. These became the official spokesmen to the leaders of Israel and sometimes to the people of Israel as a group. When the kings wouldn't listen, the prophets would sometimes take their message to the populace.

And Samuel established orders of prophets, what are popularly called schools of the prophets. Schools of the prophets are not found in the Bible. Nor is the expression prophetic guilds.

But frequently in the books of Samuel and Kings, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, you'll find reference to companies of prophets and sons of the prophets. Samuel apparently established these in several places where he did an itinerant ministry. Jericho was one of those places.

Bethel was another place. And there were about five cities where Samuel established groups of prophets. And when Samuel passed on, he left it to the sons of the prophets.

In his own day, Elijah was the head of these schools and Elisha afterwards. And who knows who after that. And most of the prophets of Israel came from these prophetic schools or companies.

How they came up through these schools, we don't know. It's a bit misleading that people talk about them as schools of the prophets, because it implies that these people learned how to be prophets. That's what you do at a school, you learn stuff.

And even today, the prophetic movement in the church sometimes has what they call schools of the prophets. And really what they are is really schools, really courses, how to prophesy. You know, go to this school and if you're not a prophet, you can be when you come out.

You learn to be a prophet. Or maybe that's not how they say it. Maybe they say, well, maybe you're a baby prophet, and about 90% of your prophecies go awry and don't come true.

So you need to go to the schools of the prophets to learn how to make your prophecies come true, or how to not give so many false ones or whatever. But it is misleading to even use the term schools of the prophets. It's not a biblical term.

People didn't learn to be prophets by going to school. But there were people who were, I guess, recognized as prophets, who would join together for fellowship, especially at times when the nation was very apostate. You can imagine spiritual people wanting to band together with other spiritual people.

And this was done initially under Samuel and it continued through many generations under the leadership of other major guys. These people apparently pooled their

information of what they were hearing from God, and they tended to know. They knew, for example, when Elijah was going to be taken up before he was.

And so not all the prophets, though, of the Bible, came from these schools or from these companies of prophets. Amos, for example, says that he was not a prophet or a son of a prophet. And the expression son of a prophet is a reference to he was not one of these sons of the prophets, not one of these companies.

He came up independently. He was a farmer and God just called him to be a prophet. So you don't have to come up through those means to be a prophet.

But in the Bible, there were, in the Old Testament, it seems like there was hardly ever a time when there were no prophets. Because, as God said, surely the Lord God will do nothing. But he reveals his secret unto his servants, the prophets.

And that's really a wonderful thing to know, that anything we need to know, we have a direct line to God. He can let us know. If he doesn't tell me or you individually, he may tell a prophet who may speak to me or you.

Of course, that makes it incumbent on us to know how to judge real prophecy from false prophecy, especially if it's one that calls us to some course of action that's rather, you know, major. Fortunately, there haven't been very many prophecies like that, that have tried to, you know, compel you to do something really wild and extreme. But if God had something really unusual for the church to do, because of some extreme thing that was coming up that only God knew about, I have every confidence that God would inform those who are listening, those who want to obey through prophets.

In the New Testament, we find that there are prophets there too. Now, many people believe that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is not the same as the gift of prophecy in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, a prophet had to be 100% correct.

If he missed prediction, he was stoned to death as a false prophet. This was the way they kept the prophetic mystery pure. I mean, you simply can't have hit or miss prophecies, because this is the way God makes His will known to us.

Think about it. If God would tolerate a genuine prophet who was wrong part of the time, and that was the standard, you know, if a guy is not right all the time, well, you can't blame him, nobody is perfect, but if he is right, let's say 75% of the time, isn't that better than nothing? Not much. 70%, 75% right, even 90% right isn't much better than never right.

And the reason is, because if he is only 90% correct, that means he is 10% unreliable. And even when he speaks reliably, you don't know. Because he is not 100% reliable, you don't know.

Maybe what he is saying is part of that 90% that he gets right, but you happen to know that he could get it wrong 10% of the time, and you never know, you can't take it seriously. How could you ever know what God has to say, if God had established means of speaking which were not 100% reliable? Therefore the law said in Deuteronomy chapter 18 that a prophetic word must be judged, and among other things, if a prophet predicted something and it didn't come true, he is a false prophet and should be put to death. This would keep the prophetic office pure.

Now obviously that is not the standard that many people are having in the church today for prophets. Even the prophetic movement of which I spoke earlier, they say the very best prophets in their movement are only 90-something percent accurate. Now to tell you the truth, if someone prophesies 100 things and 90-something of them come true, that's kind of impressive, I have to admit.

I can't think of 100 true things to predict, or even 95 out of 100 things, because I'm not prophetic. But if a person is 95% accurate in his prophecies, you know what he is? He's not a prophet. Now that doesn't mean that 95% of the things he says are not real prophecies, because a person might genuinely prophesy without having the office of a prophet.

And here's where I'm trying to make a distinction clear. In the Bible, to call someone a prophet means that they have a gift that can be relied on every time, I think, to be true. Now there are those who say, no, that's being too rough on people.

You've got to let them have time to exercise their gift, to develop their gift. After all, some would say, you don't expect teachers who have the gift of teaching to be 100% true. I mean, when I speak to people who disagree with my position on prophets being 100% accurate, they say, well, wait, you're a teacher, right? Yes.

Do you believe you have the gift of teaching? Well, I hope I might. I think I do. And they say, well, do you think you're 100% right in everything you teach? Of course I don't.

I couldn't be. And if I was even now, I know for many years I wasn't, because I've changed my mind about some things in those years. Obviously, I believe that I could have a gift of teaching without teaching 100% true things.

And they say, well, what's the difference? Why do you require a person with the gift of prophecy to be 100% accurate, but you don't require the gift of teaching to be 100% accurate? Well, there's a number of reasons. Let me tell you what they are. One is the Bible does not indicate that teaching is the same kind of gift that prophecy is.

And the person who teaches does not attach the same kind of truth to what a teacher of prophecy does when he says, If a person says, thus saith the Lord, what they are claiming is the next words are God's exact words. Most teachers don't do that. And if

they do, you shouldn't call them teachers, you should call them prophets.

If I say, well, this scripture, I believe this scripture means so and so, and I derive my opinion from these verses over here, and I'm doing my best to understand it, and we know in part, and we prophesy in part, that we don't know everything, and we don't prophesy everything there is to prophesy. But because we don't know everything, I don't claim to know everything. The kind of truth claim that I attach to my teaching is not that this is the words directly from God.

A teacher claims only to be trying to help understand words that God gave through others, namely, in this case, through the scripture. A prophet, though, is making a very different kind of claim for his word, and therefore must be held to a much stricter accountability. Now, at the same time, I do believe that a teacher should not be, you know, just going all over the place and have unlimited freedom to teach wrong things.

As I said earlier, I think some people can teach without being teachers, and some people can prophesy without being prophets. I think that some people who are not 100% accurate, and therefore are not prophets, could nonetheless sometimes prophesy genuinely. And I think that just as everyone might teach without necessarily being a teacher, that if someone is called a teacher, his teaching should be, you know, as free from heresy as they come.

You know, I mean, if you and I are sitting around the kitchen table, and you say, you know, I was reading a verse, and I think that, you know, I understood this verse to mean such and such, and what you said is way off, you know, I mean, you're just missing it by a mile. I'm not going to hold it against you, because you're not claiming to be a teacher. Now, if you happen to be right, you might be teaching me something.

You could teach me, if you see something more clearly than I do, and that's a good possibility you might. But if you're way off, I'm not going to brand you as a heretic, because you're not teaching it. But when people do publicly teach, when people minister to the body of Christ, and have the status of a teacher, then they should be very accountable for what they teach.

It says in James chapter 3 and verse 1, Do not be many teachers. For we, meaning we teachers, will have a stricter judgment. Well, why would we have a stricter judgment? Because we're influencing the thinking of more people than you.

If you're not a teacher, then you're influencing much fewer people than I am. Because I'm a teacher. And if I'm wrong, I'm hurting more people than you're hurting, if you're wrong.

And therefore, there's a stricter judgment on teachers. And there's, I think, even a stricter one yet on prophets. Because I've never heard in the Bible that false teachers

had to be put to death, but prophets did.

So it's even worse to claim to be a prophet. But I am willing to say that many of these people in the prophetic movement genuinely prophesy from the Holy Spirit. But to call them a prophet, they're not quite qualified.

And I feel that in order to say that some of the people who are called prophets today, or let's put it this way, anyone that I'm aware of that's called a prophet today, to call them a prophet, I think, is to demean the word. It reduces the definition to something less than what it is in the Bible. Now, when people say, well, prophets in the New Testament, they weren't held to the same strict standards as prophets in the Old Testament.

I say, why not? As I understand it, the operation of the Spirit in the people of God is superior in the New Testament to that which was in the Old Testament. I mean, is this not the age of the Spirit? Is this not the time when God poured out His Spirit on all flesh? Is this not the age where everything God does, He does through His Spirit? And even the Christian life is nothing else but walking in the Spirit of God. Is not the activity of the Spirit far more universal and permeates every area of life to the believer more than in the Old Testament times? If so, then why would the prophetic spiritual gift in the New Testament be inferior to that of the Old Testament? If God could come up with prophets in the Old Testament who never got it wrong, why would He not be able to do so in the New Testament? Has the Spirit lost His ability to come up with such good prophets? I can't imagine that that would be the right answer.

I don't think the Holy Spirit is less capable of producing genuine prophets today than He did in the Old Testament. And I don't believe anything in the Bible supports the notion that a New Testament prophet doesn't have to be accurate. There are not very many people in the New Testament called prophets, but there are some.

For example, Agabus is an example of a New Testament prophet. He is specifically called a prophet. And he was in the church.

He was a Christian prophet in Acts chapter 11. In fact, let's take a look there just to see if this guy was very different than Old Testament prophets. Sometimes a real big disparity is suggested to exist between Old and New Testament prophets, not only in terms of how accurate they have to be, but also in terms of what the nature of their messages are.

You know, one thing you'll hear very often, probably, if you're in the right circles to hear these things, is that in the Old Testament, the Old Testament is mainly foretold future events. But New Testament prophets mainly foretell the Word of the Lord. Do you know the difference in that? To foretell is to predict the future.

To foretell is to preach the mind of God about the present. And there are many who say,

well, the Old Testament prophets foretold, but the New Testament prophets foretell. Well, I'm not sure that's true.

For one thing, these people must not read the Old Testament prophets much, because the Old Testament prophets did more foretelling than foretelling. There are more sermons in the book of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel than there are predictions. So I think it's a false statement.

But look at Agabus's mystery. Here's one of the few cases we have giving a specimen of an Old Testament prophet in action. In Acts 11, verse 27, it says, And in those days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.

These are Christian prophets. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Now, here's a Christian prophet.

What did he say? He said there's going to be a famine coming on the whole Roman Empire. Turns out he was right. It did come, after he said so, in the reign of Claudius Caesar.

How does that differ from what an Old Testament prophet did? He told a future thing. It happened. I don't see any significant difference in this prophet's activity than that of the Old Testament prophets.

He did the same kind of thing they did. He accurately told the future. Agabus appears again later on in Acts, in chapter 21 of Acts.

And it says, in verse 9, Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. That's Philip's daughters. And we stayed for many days in his house, and a certain prophet named Agabus, same guy we read of in chapter 11.

A certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. What is this? A prediction.

Again. We have two specimens of Agabus' messages. Both of them are preaching the same thing the Old Testament prophets gave predictions.

Now, those who say, well, New Testament prophets don't have to be 100% accurate, sometimes point out, well, this didn't happen quite the way Agabus said. Agabus bound himself with a belt and said, This, in this way, shall the Jews bind the owner of this belt when he comes to Jerusalem. Well, as you read the story, when Paul came to Jerusalem, he wasn't bound by the Jews.

He was bound by the Romans. The Jews tried to kill him, and the Romans came and rescued him, put him in chains, and took him into protective custody. Therefore, they say, Agabus wasn't quite right.

He kind of had the vision, but it was hazy. He knew that Paul was going to get bound, but he was wrong in the details, because he said the Jews were going to bind him, and, in fact, the Romans did. Well, before we hasten to say Agabus was wrong, we need to take account of the way language is used.

The Apostle Paul and Peter also, in their sermons, often said that the Jews crucified Jesus. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 2 that the Jews crucified Christ. Did the Jews crucify Christ? Well, not directly.

The Romans crucified Christ, but the Jews put him up to it. It was the Jews who actually blackmailed the Romans to do it. The Jews never drove a single nail into Jesus' hands, but Paul said they crucified him.

Why? Because it was at their behest, under their influence, and because of their activities, that Jesus was crucified. Likewise, Peter puts it this way in Acts 2, when he is preaching to the Jews. He says, you have killed and crucified Jesus by the hands of lawless men.

Meaning, by the hands of the lawless men, not of Jewish law. He says, you crucified him through the Romans. The Jews did crucify Christ, though not directly.

Did the Jews bind Paul when he came to Jerusalem? As much as they crucified Jesus, they did. It was because the Romans came in and bound Paul. This is every bit as true as to the Jews crucifying Christ.

It was really done by the Romans. Both acts were done by the Romans, but both instigated by the Jews and therefore blamed on the Jews. So, Agabus was not wrong.

He was right. He just didn't state it in the degree of detail that some people would like him to. But he was not wrong in what he said.

So, we can see that New Testament prophets, apparently, were very much like Old Testament prophets. Now, the question then is, are there still New Testament prophets? Well, good question. I don't know.

I don't know if there are apostles or prophets, but there are a couple of scriptures I'd like you to look at that may be worth throwing into the ring. As we consider the question, at least. We may not come up with a definitive answer, but we can at least look at it intelligently.

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul lists some of the offices given to the church. Now, this is not

abilities. This is not gifts of the sort that he's talking about in 1 Corinthians 12 or in Romans 12 when he lists gifts of the Spirit.

These are offices held by individuals in the church. And he says in Ephesians 4, verse 11, And he, Jesus, himself, gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. For what? For the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Now, there was a time when I would have said in a heartbeat, Yes, of course there are apostles and prophets today. And I would have argued from this scripture, I would have said, Look, Paul says God gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. If there were no evangelists or pastors or teachers today, on what grounds would we single out apostles and prophets not to exist today? If we acknowledge that three of these five exist today, why should we eliminate two of them? I would further argue, in those days, that because these gifts are given for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building of the body of Christ, and these functions are still going on, still necessary, therefore, why would God have taken any of them away? That's how I would have argued, back when I would have argued with apostles and prophets.

As I mentioned, I'm not so sure any of them are apostles and prophets today. And one of the reasons is, I'm not sure that I was thinking right about this. When I said, why should we single out those two for elimination and keep the other three? The question was rhetorical, as if there's no good answer could be given.

As if there's no good reason to exclude the apostles and prophets and include the evangelists, pastors and teachers. I was speaking rhetorically. I thought the answer was self-evident.

But I later learned it wasn't self-evident. There might be a good reason. There might be a good reason to separate apostles and prophets from the others in the list.

And that is because two chapters earlier, in Ephesians chapter 2, Paul said, in Ephesians 2 beginning at verse 19, Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but members of the household of God, having been built, as the church is built like a temple, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. He doesn't say on the foundation of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The foundation of the church is laid by the apostles and prophets.

Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. And then he goes on to talk about how the building is being built up. Now, the apostles and prophets are those who laid the foundation of the church.

In another place, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3, that he had come and he had laid the foundation of the church. He comes and builds on it. He meant Apollos.

And he indicated that many might come and build on it. Some might build with wood, hay and stubble. Some might build with gold, silver and precious stones.

But they better be careful how they build. The impression is given that the foundation had to be laid once. And Paul the apostle laid the foundation.

It remained only for others, who did not have to be apostles, to come and build on that foundation. They could be evangelists, pastors and teachers, which probably one of those is the category that Apollos would fall into, and others that came to Corinth afterwards. And as I understand it today, the apostles and prophets were necessary at the time when the foundation of the church had to be laid.

Now, you might say, well, the foundation does have to be laid in some places where the gospel has been preached. And you might have a good point there. I'm not sure I could prove you wrong on that.

At the same time, I'm not sure that that's talking about the same thing. Because to lay the foundation of a local congregation may be necessary where there is not yet a local congregation. I'm not sure it takes an apostle to do that.

An evangelist can do that. Laying the foundation of the whole church is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 2. The beginning of the church, not some local church in this location or that location, but of the church, the temple of the Holy Spirit, which started out in the days of the apostles. These men were the founding fathers, the founders.

They laid the foundation of orthodoxy and truth and established what the gospel would be and what it would not be. These early decisions had to be made for all time, and they don't have to be decided again. They were decided by the apostles and prophets.

They gave us a foundation, which is now found in the scriptures. And while I do believe in prophetic ministry, I don't necessarily believe that we would have to have persons who have the office of infallible prophet or of apostle in order to carry on the work that they founded. Which, of course, doesn't prove anything, but the hymn says, How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word.

And the prophets wrote the Old Testament. The apostles wrote the New Testament. And the church is built on the foundation of what they wrote, which is in our Bible.

We may still need prophetic utterances given to us when God has special instructions for us or special information for us, but to have infallible prophets and apostles, I'm not sure that's necessary anymore. Because if a man came today who claimed to be an apostle or a prophet, I'd say, OK, what is it that makes you such? They say, well, I go out and I

establish churches. Well, an evangelist can do that.

Well, I oversee churches and I make disciples. Well, a pastor and teacher can do that. Unless you're writing new scripture, I don't have any need for an apostle or a prophet.

And I have enough scripture. All I need now is someone to promote and evangelize and to teach and to pastor people according to what the apostles and prophets gave us. This is my understanding.

You're certainly welcome to have a different one. But I would urge you, if you're open to the idea that there are apostles and prophets today, that you hold them to the same standard, that they would have been held to in biblical times, and that you be careful not to accept everyone's claim on this. Next week, we're going to talk about the operation of the gift of prophecy among those of us who are not prophets.

You may yet prophesy. And I certainly believe that the gift of prophecy is needed in order for the church to be normative and to have current information from God on whatever basis, frequency God wants. But in this introduction, I want to make clear that I don't believe the gift of prophecy automatically makes somebody a prophet.

But that doesn't mean that we don't need the gift of prophecy. We do, and we'll have more to say about its function in the church when we finish up this topic. Okay, we can stop there.

And if anyone has any questions, I'll try to answer them.