

**THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND THE LOCAL CHURCH - WHAT IT NO LONGER IS AND WHAT IT CONTINUES TO BE - 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 29-32 -**  
“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up....[29]....Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.”

**1 Corinthians 12:4-11 -** “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [5] and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; [6] and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. [7] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [8] For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

So we have an extensive *introduction* of the gifts of the Spirit to the local church in **1 Corinthians 12**. And we have a detailed set of instructions for the *use* of the gift of prophecy in the local church in **1 Corinthians 14**. John MacArthur deals with neither of them in his study. And the simplest way to explain this is John MacArthur does exactly the same thing in his study of *prophecy* and the *gift of prophecy* as he mistakenly does with *tongues* and the *gift of tongues*. That is, he *confuses* the terms. While dealing intently with mostly Old Testament passages dealing with *prophets* and the punishment of *false prophets*, he literally *never even mentions* the passages that deal at length - and in a very *positive* manner - with the *gift of prophecy as distributed by the Holy Spirit to the local church*. This, in spite of the clear teaching of the Scriptures. *Why?*

MacArthur is smart. He knows the easiest way to rule out the gift of prophecy *all together* is to take passages from the *Old Testament on the office of the prophet and apply those texts to the New Testament gift of prophecy*. I believe MacArthur *knows better than this*. He simply has no other way open to eliminate what Paul says about the *gift of prophecy* in the New Testament local church. It's a *desperate* move by a *biased* interpreter.

- 1) **IT IS GOOD THAT MACARTHUR'S BOOK EXPOSES THE HOST OF RELIGIOUS ZEALOTS PRETENDING TO PREDICT THE FUTURE** - While certainly not the exclusive property of the charismatic camp, we've been way too patient with millionaire pretend prophets. MacArthur has no problem piling up zany quotes: *“Benny Hinn made a series of celebrated prophetic utterances in December 1989, none of which came true. He confidently told his congregation at the Orlando Christian Center that God had revealed to him Fidel Castro would die sometime in the 1990s, the homosexual community in America would be destroyed by fire before 1995, a major earthquake would cause havoc on the East Coast before the year 2000. He was wrong on all counts, but that did not deter Hinn, who keeps making bold new false prophecies.”*

MacArthur continues, *“Hinn's failed prophecies are no less outlandish but not nearly as memorable as the notorious claims Oral Roberts began making several decades ago. In 1977 Roberts said he saw a vision of a nine-hundred-foot-tall Jesus, who instructed him to build the City of Faith, a sixty-story hospital in south Tulsa. Roberts said God told him He would use the center to unite medical technology with faith healing, which would revolutionize health care and enable doctors to find a cure for cancer. The building, completed in the early 1980s was a colossal white elephant from the start. When the City of Faith opened for business, all but two stories of the massive structure were completely vacant. By January 1987 the project was saddled with unmanageable debt, and Roberts announced that the Lord had said unless Roberts raised eight million dollars to pay the debt by March 1, he would die. Apparently not willing to test the death-threat prophecy, donors dutifully gave Roberts the needed funds in time (with the help of \$1.3 million donated at the last hour by a Florida dog-track owner). But within two years, Roberts was forced to close the medical center anyway and sell the building in order to eliminate still-mounting debt. More than 80 percent of the building had never been occupied. The promised cure for cancer never materialized either.”*

- 2) **THE MAIN POINT OF CONFUSION IN MACARTHUR'S BOOK IS EQUATING OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS WITH PAUL'S DESCRIPTION OF THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE LOCAL NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH** - MacArthur's opening paragraph in his chapter, *“The Folly Of Fallible Prophets”* is as follows: *“Dry wells, fruitless trees, raging waves, wandering stars, brute beasts, hideous stains, vomit-eating dogs, mud-loving pigs, and ravenous wolves - that is how the Bible describes false prophets (cf. 2 Peter 2; Jude). The New Testament reserves its harshest words of condemnation for those who would falsely claim to speak revelation from God. And what the Bible condemns we must also condemn - doing so with equal vigor and force. But apply those same epithets to today's false teachers and you're likely to be labeled as uncharitable or even unchristian.”*

Notice the subtle shift from *false prophets* to *false teachers* in MacArthur's words. It's more than a slip of pen. MacArthur knows full well the references he gives in **2 Peter 2**, and especially in **Jude**, say a lot more about false *teaching* (false doctrine - heresy officially taught in the church by deceiving *teachers*) than they say about inaccurate predictions of the future from false *prophets*. In fact, strikingly, *“prophets”* are not even mentioned - not even *once* - in the Book of Jude!

- 3) **IN SPITE OF WHAT SOME CHARISMATICS MAY TELL YOU, THE OFFICE OF THE PROPHET AS A BEARER OF REVELATION IS GONE, AND MACARTHUR IS RIGHT TO SAY THAT IT IS** - Let me work through two important texts with you that deal specifically with the *office* of the prophet as God's revealer of divine truth: **Ephesians 4:8-12** - “Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ [9] (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [10] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) [11] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ....”

The only point I'm picking up on in this involved passage is **verse 11** -

**“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers....”**

“And what I want to affirm is *apostles* and *prophets* are just as much a gift of Jesus Christ to His church as are *evangelists*, or *shepherds* (pastors), or *teachers*. Those last two terms are actually *one* office in the Greek - *pastor/teacher*. But my point still stands. *Apostles* and *prophets* are just as important to the church as are *evangelists* and *pastor/teachers*. But saying all of this isn't quite enough. There is still another important point that needs to be made. While *apostles* and *prophets* are important gifts of Christ to His church - just as

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as *evangelists* and *pastor/teachers* - they are not the *same kind of gift* and their *presence isn't the same kind of presence as evangelists and pastor/teachers*.

Understand, when I say *apostles* and *prophets* aren't the same *kind* of gift as *evangelists* and *pastor/teachers* I don't just mean they have a different *role*. I mean they are gifts of a different *category* all together. And the Apostle Paul is very quick to make himself clear on this point: **Ephesians 2:19-22** - “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in

whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

- 4) **NONE OF THE THINGS WE JUST SAID ABOUT THE FOUNDATIONAL GIFT OF PROPHETS TO THE CHURCH HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN 1 CORINTHIANS 12 AND 14** - This is John MacArthur’s fundamental point of confusion. MacArthur pulls out Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Deuteronomy 18:20-22 (where any prophet speaks with even the slightest error is to be *killed*), Numbers 22-23, and Jeremiah 23:16-32. These are all great texts. They’re very important texts. They are God’s way of exposing and judging leaders in Israel who would falsely elevate themselves to God’s spokesperson after the order of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Malachi. This was God’s way of *keeping cracks out of the foundation of the church!* But there is simply no way to link those texts with the *gift of prophecy* prescribed by Paul for the local church - **1 Corinthians 14:26-32** - “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. [27] If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. [28] But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. [29] Let two or three prophets speak, and *let the others weigh what is said*. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For *you can all prophesy one by one*, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.”

First, note that the *gift of prophecy* isn’t the same as *publicly preaching the Word of God*. There was, in Paul’s mind a broad base of potential involvement for the gift of prophecy in any given worship setting - **verse 31** - “For you can *all* prophesy one by one....” This is one reason MacArthur *never* quotes these verses in his book. He tries to explain the gift of prophecy as the public speaking of God’s Word by citing **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21** - “Do not despise prophecies, [21] but test everything; hold fast what is good.”

Of these verses MacArthur says, “*Respect for the supremacy of the revelation of God is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he cautioned the Thessalonians not to despise prophetic utterances. Despise (exoutheneo) carries the strong meaning, ‘to consider as absolutely nothing,’ ‘to treat with contempt,’ or ‘to look down on.’ In the New Testament, prophetic utterances (propheteia) can refer either to spoken words or written words. The verb form (propheteuo) means ‘to speak or proclaim publicly’; thus the gift of prophecy was the Spirit-endowed skill* [note that shift of words from *gift* to *skill*] *of publicly proclaiming God’s revealed truth....*”

The long and short of all of this is MacArthur’s view is the gift of prophecy is now the *act of preaching and proclaiming God’s Word*. But that hardly fits in at all with Paul’s description of the *gift of prophecy* in **1 Corinthians 14:29-32** - “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.” Personal taste and opinions aside, Paul is clearly describing something more *spontaneous* and *participatory* than a *pastor/teacher* preparing and expounding a sermonic text. The same is true of **1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 14:1-5**, and **1 Thessalonians 5:19-22**. Sermons are precious important and Biblically demanded. But they are not the same as the gift of prophecy.

- 5) **THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS MACARTHUR EXPOUNDS DEAL WITH FALSE TEACHERS, NOT THE GIFT OF PROPHECY** - As if it will help make his point MacArthur piles up New Testament texts. I’m not even pretending to list them all, but they include vitally important texts from **2 Peter 2:1-3, Jude 4** (no mention of prophets), **2 Timothy 4:3-4** (no mention of prophets), and a pretty extensive treatment of **1 John**. Many (most?) of the verses used make no mention of false *prophets* at all but spell out in detail the danger and exposure of false *teachers* who claim to speak divine truth. Because MacArthur has already *assumed* that the gift of prophecy is the same as preaching the Word, he can then move on to applying passages dealing with any and all *teaching* in the church to the *gift of prophecy* in the teaching of Paul.

- 6) **THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IS A FALLIBLE EXPRESSION OF DIVINE EXHORTATION FOR A LOCAL CHURCH EXPRESSED IN THE WORDS OF THE SPEAKER’S CHOICE** - This is why the church is told to *consider* and *weigh* the content of what is said. It is to be measured by the *absolutely sure, unchanging foundation of those who held the office of apostles and prophets*. This does not render the gift of prophecy insignificant or useless. Nothing could be clearer from Paul’s words - **1 Corinthians 14:3** - “On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their *upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*.”

**Acts 21:3-4** - “When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. [4] And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And *through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem*.” But Paul *does* go to Jerusalem. Either Luke is mistaken and it really *wasn’t* the Holy Spirit speaking to these people, *or* Paul grieves the Holy Spirit and disobeys. It’s neither. Paul knows the call of God on his life *for himself*. He doesn’t need others to speak prophetic direction into his life. He knows God was *strengthening and preparing him* for what was coming in Jerusalem. But he knew he wouldn’t let these people direct him *not* to go.

- 7) **AUTHORITY FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH COMES FROM GOD’S WORDS, NEVER PROPHETIC GIFTING** - This is evident from that fact that whenever Paul establishes leadership in local churches the only primary gift they must exhibit is that of *teaching*. In every New Testament list of qualifications for pastors you will find Paul emphasizing they must be *teachers*. He never once says they must be *prophets* or *prophetic*.