

HOW TO BE A PROPHET, PART 2

Romans 12:6

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Romans 12:6 (NIV)

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.”

I’ve discovered that I really can’t get through with this theme of being a prophet in two sermons, so we’re going to keep at it next week as well. The exercise of prophecy, as Paul sees it, is the most vital function within the Body when it gathers together. It is regarded as the highest gift, the one to be desired by all. And today, I want to look with you for some purposes for prophecy. Before we do, however, I just want to trace back to a theme I closed with last Sunday, where I spoke of a difference between the charismatic and the ecclesiastic. We said that when you’re a born-again Christian you have charisma. For charisma is the free gift of grace which all have been given through Christ our Lord. “Charismata,” or the “charismatic,” are those who believe in the grace gifts of the Lord, which are many in number and which are all designed to strengthen and to add to the Body. The pull away from the charismatic, I indicated, was the ecclesiastic. That is, that which can be programmed by man. I realize that I’m using that word “ecclesiastic” in a very narrow and non-dictionary sense. I’m using it by deliberate way as contrast. I think as a body of people, as a church, we can choose to be charismatic. That is, open to the free grace gifts of the Lord, to the sovereign intervening of God the Holy Spirit. Or we can choose, in our relationships with one another and in our worship services, to be man-directed and man-oriented so that we have a program and we perform it—whether God is here, or whether He isn’t. We’re seeking, within our church lifestyle and within our walk with the Lord, to truly be open to the gifts that He wants to give to us.

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There's always danger in becoming a charismatic body of believers. I think that we ought to remember the admonition to learn from history. For it's very easy from history to see what drives away the charismatic influence of the church. You can't program the charismatic because it is not regulatable like an ecclesiastical institution. There is always the danger that it will go astray. It's fascinating to watch the first charismatic renewal in the history of the Christian Church and how it developed, and the parallels that it has for today. The first charismatic renewal of the Church was not the charismatic renewal of the twentieth century. It was the charismatic renewal of the second century. It came in the middle of the second century, between about 130 and 160 A.D. It came at a time when the Church was undergoing some persecution, but also when the Church was organizing. When the power, more and more, of the Church was being resident in the office of bishop and those appointed to the task of ministry—by the way, a very necessary thing within the setting of that time when there were so many heresies and so much pressure on the Church from the Roman government. But there arose protest against the organization, if you will, of the Church, which had some very negative impact. The negative impact being, sometimes, the laxness of moral living. Sometimes feeling that only those who were authorized to speak for God by the Church or ordained by the Church could truly speak for God. A diminishing of the gifts of grace which so flourished in the New Testament Church. So in the midst of that kind of environment, a movement arose. There were two great emphases in this charismatic renewal of the second century.

One emphasis was upon the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves sovereignly. He can work within or work outside of the organizations that we set up for Him. The gifts of tongues and prophecy and the other gifts of the Spirit, which were so prevalent in the apostolic age, were meant to be part of the Church in every age.

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But the movement pushed that teaching of the Holy Spirit to an extreme and wound up, for example, by saying that when a prophet speaks in a Church setting, his words are as authoritative as the New Testament itself. They're not judged by the Scripture, but they stand alongside the Scripture—parallel. Their emphasis on a holy life led to a rigid kind of judgmental attitude toward believers so that they were the only spiritual believers, and every one else outside their movement was nonspiritual. They also got off the deep end on doctrine of the end times, believing that they were the last generation, and since they were, they also came to believe that the Lord was returning at a certain point of time on a Cretan mountain in Asia Minor. They set a date. And that was when their movement began to collapse.

This charismatic renewal in the second century, the church responded to it as the church often has—the institutional church. Instead of attempting to take from the charismatic renewal what was of God, since a lot in it was not of God the Church responded by pretty much rejecting the whole ball of wax and going more and more within its organizational shell. As I look at the charismatic renewal today, I see the same kinds of phenomena present. Maybe in different styles and different personalities. Maybe not quite as excessive as the second-century movement. That is the great danger of the charismatic renewal. That persons come with new doctrines, and personality cults, and ideas, and excesses, and sometimes we've a judgmental attitude toward all of those who do not see life in the Spirit exactly the way we see life in the Spirit. Instead of being a renewing movement in the body of Christ, it becomes a divisive and judgmental movement. The key to tapping the resources of what God wants in a charismatic renewal, as taught in the Scripture, is to see all the gifts of the Spirit flourish in the Church. And not to say, since there are some things happening which are beyond our control, "That kind of freedom is too risky, so we better not have any freedom at all."

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Instead of taking that kind of an attitude, Paul takes the correct attitude of saying that all of the charismata are regulated and instructed by the teaching office of the Church. Where the gifts are regulated by teaching, there they are strengthened and made powerful. But where the exercise of the gifts is neither courted nor corrected, then we fall upon reproach. That which God has intended for a blessing for the Church becomes, instead, its undoing.

One of the dangers that, of course, the charismatic renewal also has is that when people come into the fellowship of believers, they sometimes have the tendency to neglect the mind, and only feed the heart and the emotions. Yet God is a teaching God, a speaking God, a communicating God by way of revelation, and doctrine, and words of instruction. So He wants us to put both together. I don't know where, at this present moment, our church is on the pendulum. I realize there are times when we swing from one side to the other of the body of Christ at large. As a pastor, I don't feel like we're enough into the expression of the gifts of the Spirit. That's why God is putting it upon my heart to share this series with you. I believe these grace gifts of the Spirit will greatly bless us as a church. But in order to release them, they can be released partly through the proper teaching as to what purposes they serve. We have to start with prophecy, because that's number one off of Paul's list.

Paul says if you want to prophesy, you prophesy in proportion to your faith. In other words, what he's saying, in reverse, is that you'll never prophesy if you don't believe that God is speaking. If you don't believe that God is speaking through you. And that He has a Word to say through you. It takes faith to prophesy. If you don't have that trust in the immediacy of God speaking to you and wanting to communicate through you to others, and to this church body, then there can be no prophecy.

We looked last week of what prophecy was. If you're going to be a prophet, we need to define what it is. We've said some negative things about it. It wasn't speaking from a trance. It wasn't

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fortune telling. It wasn't being a great moral or political leader. It wasn't being an end-time speculator. It wasn't being a person that brings revelation that is outside, or contrary to, Scripture. But being a prophet, on the other hand, is one who sees and one who speaks for God. Today, we look at the theme "what purpose prophecy serves." And then we'll look next week at how prophecy functions and the form in which it comes.

A clear statement of the function that prophecy serves is found in 1 Corinthians 14. Especially, we'll begin with verse 3, where Paul is separating those who speak in tongues and those who utter prophecy. He indicates that speaking in tongues is speaking unto God. And, by the way, tongues is meant to edify the believer, to build up the believer. It's encouraged by all. But in contrasting prophecy with tongues, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:3, "He who prophecies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consultation." Three purposes that prophecy serves for the believer.

I. First, for upbuilding or edification.

The prophet has an "edifice complex." Edifice is a building. To "edify" means to "build up." So that if your image of a prophet is one who goes around shaking his head saying, "No, no, no, you shouldn't be doing that. You shouldn't be doing this. God's going to get you for that." If that's your conception of a prophet, it doesn't accord very well with this theme, first of all, that a prophet is meant to build up, not tear down. On occasion, there is convicting word that is spoken in order to clear the rubble, in order that something better might be built. But the prophet always has, in the last analysis, a positive thrust to his message. When the judgment is through, the mercy of God and the grace of God shine in.

How does the gift of prophecy build the church? I went through the Book of Acts just this week looking at how prophecy functions in the Early Church to build it up. I was astonished at what I discovered. In reading Acts before, I had never quite seen it there. But in focusing specifically on

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how the gift of prophecy functions to build up the Church, I discovered at least six emphases in which the church was tremendously built up through the exercise of this gift.

A. The first occasion is in Acts 11:27-28, where the prophet Agabus comes down from Jerusalem to Antioch. He brings the Word as he stands up and prophesies in the midst of the Christian congregation that there is going to be a famine take place over the whole world. This prophecy elicits on the part of the believers at Antioch a genuine concern for believers in other parts of the world. And where the other believers at that point were located, since the gospel hadn't spread very far, was in Jerusalem. The prophecy on that occasion served to build up the Church by stimulating concern of one part of the Body for another part. The result of Agabus's prophecy was a great building up of the church in Jerusalem and Judea. Built up in a practical way by simply having enough funds that when the famine came, they had something to eat.

B. Another way in which the Church was built up through prophecy is in Acts 13:1-2. In the church at Antioch, we are told that there are prophets and teachers. An interesting distinction. The Scriptures don't give us an exact definition of a prophet and a teacher, but my own understanding would be that a teacher is a person who prepares, in a systematic way, to present doctrine, and who kind of relates to the totality of a theme and a subject and spends extensive time in mental preparation as well as prayerful preparation. So that the teacher, by and large, is an organized kind of person. One thought leads naturally into another.

But the prophet is someone who speaks more spontaneously from conscience rather than simply from intellect—who speaks as the Spirit reveals it to him. He can be very exhortive or without any study preparation—although the prophet is continually bathing his heart in prayer, and a general reading of the Word, and general study. But in a moment of time, he's able to stand up and see the moment and speak the Word of God into that moment. He's not giving a systematic kind of discourse like the teacher.

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This church at Antioch was strengthened by the prophets and the teachers. While they were praying and fasting, the text of Acts says, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work for which I have called them.”

The Holy Spirit said, “Set apart...” How does the Holy Spirit speak? All of a sudden, the voice just appears in the room? I don’t think that’s how it happened. This phrase, “The Holy Spirit said,” appears to be what is happening when the gift of prophecy is exercised. “Thus says the Lord.” “The Holy Spirit said.” Evidently, within that community—that small leadership core of prophets and teachers—at that moment in time the Spirit gave direction. The call had already been upon the apostle from the time he was converted. But now the call was to be actualized. He was to go forth. And the timing was set by the Spirit. So another way the Church is built up through the gift of prophecy is that the Church is thrust into missionary expansion.

Ron Summers, starting the new church in Huntington Beach, came to this church about three years ago. The first time, his first Sunday night here, he had just come through a very devastating time in his life. Some crisis had happened, and he came from some failures in his own background and experience. While sitting here in a Sunday night service, a word of prophecy came quite unconnected to what else had happened in the meeting. It said something to the effect, “One of my ministers is in the service this evening who has been very discouraged. But if you will now apply yourself to the task that I am giving to you, I will restore you during this time. I will build you, and I will send you forth on a work that is greater than you’ve ever done before.” Something to that effect. The person who gave the prophecy, I know had no idea that Ron was in the congregation—didn’t know Ron at all. But it was a thrusting kind of direct word from the Lord which was helping him go through the next three years of study to prepare himself for the role he’s going in now. This is the miraculous dimension to prophecy, that the Spirit can speak in this kind of a way.

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C. Another way that prophecy functions to build up the Church is in Acts 15:32. The Early Church had been divided over the issue of circumcision. There were some believers who were teaching that you had to be circumcised in order to be a believer. They wanted all kinds of Jewish regulations on the believers. The church had had a big meeting in Jerusalem over this. I'm sure there were a lot of hurt feelings, as there are always hurt feelings when Christians disagree. When the church at Jerusalem had made the decision that they shouldn't load down the Gentiles with a bunch of regulations, they sent from Jerusalem to Antioch two prophets by the name of Judas and Silas. Silas, we know later, is the companion of Paul. It is striking that they would send prophets on this occasion. That fits very well with the idea of prophets building up the church. In a time of divisiveness, one needs the prophet to speak a word of strength, and a word of consolation, and a word of hope.

D. I think in Acts 19:6 we see another amazing way in which prophecy builds up the Church. The setting is at Ephesus. Paul has come there, and he's found twelve disciples. Paul asks, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They said, "We didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit." So Paul explains to them and baptizes them, lays hands upon them. And they received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues and prophesied. When you think for a moment that a prophet is one who speaks for God. Therefore, in order to speak for God, one must know something of God. Yet just moments before, when Paul came to the town and said, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" they said, "We didn't know there is a Holy Spirit." How in the world is a person in that kind of a shape able to speak authoritatively for God, when he doesn't even have his doctrine straight on the Holy Spirit? He all of a sudden spoke in tongues and prophesied.

What prophecy did in these believers, as they opened their lives to the Holy Spirit, was gave them an immediate confidence. That even though they were, so to speak, unlearned in theology

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or doctrine, they had the immediate presence of the Lord which so overcame them that they had the confidence, they had the power, to speak for God. Though they were terribly outnumbered in the city of Ephesus, that condition wasn't going to last long.

One of the dangers that bites us as Christians is this inferiority complex. "God won't use me." Or "God can't use me, I'm too weak." Or, "I don't know enough to speak for God." Or, "What would God ever want of me?" That whole kind of an attitude, where we, through lack of faith, don't believe that God can use us. In a moment, it is brushed aside through the functioning of prophecy at Ephesus where new believers into the faith are confident enough that they know when they speak, they can speak for God. They don't have to study a lifetime in order to be able to speak for God.

If I were to guess the content of their prophecy, I would suggest that they did not get up and prophesy something complicated like the prophet Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or whoever. I doubt that they gave any kind of predictive prophecy. I imagine their prophecy went something like, "The Lord is with us," and, "The Lord has heard the groaning of our heart," and, "The Lord has said the night is past. The day is come. Spring is at hand. Rejoice. The Lord is here." It was something kind of simple like that, which is an elemental expression of prophecy, but a very important one. The point is they had the confidence to speak for God.

E. Another way, I think, in which prophecy strengthens the church is functioning through Paul's admonition to the Ephesians believers in Acts 20:29-30, where he, in leaving the Ephesian believers, warns them that there are going to be those wolves that come in and not spare the flock, and there will be persons from the church themselves who will draw others away. The prophecy sensitized the church to the coming of false prophets and the emergence of defectors—and, therefore, built it up through sensitizing it to this possibility.

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F. Another way that prophecy functions to build up the church is in Acts 21:11, where Agabus the prophet again comes and makes a predictive prophecy. He says that Paul, when he goes to Jerusalem, will be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. This prophecy provides assurance for Paul that the Lord is aware of the deep trials in his life.

When you look at these functions, you see what prophecy can do in order to build up the church. To stimulate the Body to have concern for others in the Body. To thrust the Body into missionary expansion and into dimensions of growth that it had not programmed or anticipated on its own. To strengthen the church when it is going through divisiveness. To impart a profound sense of spiritual authority. To make the church sensitive to the emergence of false teachers. And also, to provide assurance to individuals that the Lord is aware of the trial that they're going to be going through. That is tremendous upbuilding of the church.

But prophecy does more than to build up.

II. Paul says prophecy also encourages.

The word used for “encourage” is the same word, in the noun form, to describe the Holy Spirit—the One called alongside. In the New Testament, the clearest example of prophecy and encouraging in the Church is found in the Book of Revelation which is, in itself I think, an extended form of New Testament prophecy, although it is what's called apocalyptic. It's revealing that which has been hidden. But we would err as Christians in going through Revelation if we simply treat Revelation as some sort of a book where we could always look at current events and ask, “Where are we in relationship to the book?” That is really to misuse the book. Much of the book is in symbols. But the symbols and the overlying emphasis of this Book of Revelation is that it is a massive Word of encouragement to a struggling Church which is hanging on to its life by a thin thread. The emperor and the government looks so strong that the

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faith itself, at the end of the first century, looks like it may be an endangered species. Will the Galileans cause survive? Revelation is a startling answer, a revelation from God to the Church. In a sermon called “The Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth,” a preacher by the name of James Stuart Stewart said, “Take this Book of Revelation. You know the historic background of the book. It is a background of blood and smoke and martyrdom and reckless, cynical laughter. Here you have the Rome of the Caesars and the Church of the Galilean locked in a death grapple. Here you have the armor fist of Nero and Domitian smashing its way through the hopes and the dreams of the Church. Here you have, in the words of an old psalmist, ‘the kings of the earth taking council together against the Lord and against His anointed, saying, “Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us.”’ Here you have the second Babylon, mother of all the abominations of the earth, drunk with the blood of the friends of Jesus, laughing in the intoxication of her triumph, shrieking with laughter to see the poor, pathetic body of Christ being crushed and mangled and battered out of existence. That is the background when this man takes up his pen to write. You and I look over his shoulder, wondering what his message is going to be. ‘What can it be,’ we think, ‘but an eulogy and a lament?’ The battle is lost, our cause is ruined. There is nothing left but to sue for mercy. Is that what we see him writing? No. But flinging defiance at all the facts, and with the ring of iron in it, and the shout of the saints behind it, ‘Hallelujah! Babylon is fallen!’ Why? What made this man write like this? It was because, at the back of the visible world, at the back of Caesar and all his pomp and pride, he had seen something which Caesar never saw, something which spelled the doom of Caesar and of all sin like Caesar’s forever. The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!”

That was a revelation to the Church in which its most trying hour brought it encouragement. In every meeting where the saints gather, there are going to be those who are depressed and discouraged—who are beaten, like the first-century saints, with the adversities of life. There are

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persons within this fellowship this morning who have wrestled with the fact that dreams you have had are not going to come true. Effort that you have exerted to achieve something seems, now, so useless. Your self-determination has served to show you nothing but your inadequacy and your failure. Do you need a word of encouragement from the Lord? Thus says the Lord, “I am with you. I will bring you through.” The Scripture, over and over again, comes to us with the assurance that “If God is for us, who can be against us?” “Have I not started a good work in you? Will I not bring it to completion?” “Having begun the race, will I not finish it?” Prophecy has this electrifying facet to it that it encourages us. It tells us God is with us. And everywhere prophecy occurs, that is going to be one of its fundamental motifs.

III. Paul says, also, prophecy is meant to comfort or to console.

There is a close interrelationship with encouraging and comforting. Prophecy is acutely aware that in the heartbreaks of life, Jesus is here.

As we were praying in the sanctuary Wednesday night in the prayer meeting, there were heavy needs that were expressed. They were needs which brought tears to the eyes. I began to think how the Lord, who is present in every room, every motel room, every bedroom, every bar room, every room in this town, He was present. He was present in all the tears that were being shed in all the rooms. I got to thinking of the tears. Tears coming from persons who were grief-stricken because their families were being wrenched apart. Tears because of the terribleness of sickness present. Tears because of death, loss of family and friends. Tears because of the bondage of the human will, the desire to be set free from certain habits and drugs, and the will was bound. What does the word of prophecy have to say to the tears of the world?

The written word of prophecy is a sure guide in this respect. Isaiah, at the turning point in his book after describing all the judgments which come upon the people of God for their unfaithfulness, turns around with a great Word of the Lord and says, “Comfort, comfort my

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people, says your God...Now, says the LORD, he who created you: [and you can put your own name in here] ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. And the flames shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, holy one of Israel, your Savior” (see Isaiah 40:1; 43:1-3).

The word of comfort and consolation is not always the word which theologically or intellectually explains away the difficulties we are facing. But it is always the word which brings us to a position of rest in the Lord. And a consolation that Jesus knows, and Jesus understands. We have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, for He himself was in all points tempted as are we.

The idea of prophecy as consolation is to calm and to pacify, to bring us rest in the midst of storm, to help us trust in Jesus. Prophecy, in this respect, leads us into the great peace of God. “Peace, peace, wonderful peace, coming down from the Father above.”

So for believers, prophecy has these three beautiful functions: to build up the body, to bring a word of comfort or exhortation, and also to bring consolation.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, speaks of two additional usages of prophecy when he indicates that when there are unbelievers in the midst of a Christian Body and prophecy takes place, there are going to be two side effects. I say “side effects” because prophecy is, by and large, not intended for the unsaved or the unconverted. Prophecy, as Paul very clearly says, is intended for the believer. But the side benefits are that when the believers are prophesying and upbuilding and consoling and exhorting one another, the person who is not a believer is sitting there seeing all this go on. And you know when God’s Spirit is moving, you can feel it. If your heart is sensitive

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at all, you can tell what God is doing. The unbeliever sitting there is going to have two profound things happen to him.

A. First of all, conviction. On hearing this, he will be convicted. The word “convict” comes from a root word meaning “to pounce upon, to attack, to harm.” That’s the idea here of being convicted—to be pounced upon, to be attacked. What it means in this setting is when the Holy Spirit is moving in the Christian Body, the Spirit is picking up the sensitive and the soft spots in the life of the unbeliever—the secrets of the heart, which are known by God. And the Spirit is, through the urging of His own counsel, pouncing on those soft spots. Believers in that Body are manifesting a profound awareness of the presence of the Lord, which is felt by the unbeliever.

It is indeed a spiritual tragedy if, when we gather together as believers, there is no awareness on the unbelievers’ part of the Lord’s presence. If an unbeliever can walk away and say, “I didn’t feel anything there; there wasn’t anything there,” that is a great indictment of the quality of what God wants to happen when His people gather together—the vibrant sense that the Lord is here.

B. That conviction, Paul says, leads to conversion. “Secrets of his heart are disclosed. So falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.” We recognize from Isaiah’s example that sometimes prophecy can have the reverse effect. It can actually harden and confirm a person greater in their disobedience. But here, Paul emphasizes the positive side—that when the Word of God is truly spoken, whether it’s the written Word or whether it’s the word functioning through the gift of the Spirit, its purpose is to draw men and women to Jesus Christ.

Might I say these purposes of conviction and conversion also apply to believers who have become careless or cold and in sin. The Word has this powerful effect of coming to convict and to change us.

So when we prophesy, and when we see prophecy exercised in the Church, we are looking for it to have these functions. We’re not looking for new revelation. We’re not looking for curiosity

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kinds of things. We're looking for the pure Word of God to be spoken in an immediate context. Which will bring the building up of the Church. Which will bring encouragement to the Church. Which will bring consolation to the Church. And it will also have the effects of conviction and conversion. Where these purposes are being sought, the Lord is being built up and edified.

I don't have a natural conclusion for the end of this sermon. I felt that the conclusion should be to take a moment or two of worship and see if the Holy Spirit may have laid it upon the heart of someone here today to speak a word for Him.

To, if you will, allow a demonstration of the teaching which has been given. Because prophecy, and all the gifts of the Spirit, need to be strengthened by guidelines that surround them. I think, in an assembly of this size, there are a couple simple things I would say. And we'll get into more of the functioning of prophecy next week. I would prefer that those who prophesy within this church be known to me personally. One of the things that happens in prophecy is we should know the character of the person that's prophesying, lest we be led astray by wrong and harmful influences. And the second kind of guideline is this: that family life should be in order. It takes away from prophecy if a person is prophesying, and they're not in right relationship with their parents or their spouse or their children. It makes it very difficult to believe what they're saying is a word from God.

I think these are two kinds of simple, helpful guidelines which can protect us from some of the excesses and wrongs we have seen in charismatic renewal prophecy. Yet we want the freedom of the Spirit to move and to speak. I'm convinced, as we've shared today, that God has more to share with us as we wait in His presence for a moment. The Scripture says, "Stir up the gift that is within you" (2 Timothy 1:6), so let's wait a moment to stir up the gift. If God is sharing with you something He wants you to speak today, we want to be open to that.