



Conducted by
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“What does 1st Thessalonians 5:20 mean when it says ‘Do not despise prophesying’?”

When one encounters a problem passage it is important to consider the context.

In practice, this means looking at the verses which go before and those which follow. That is always sound advice, and it is advice worth following as we consider the question before us this month.

1. **First, consider the text in context.**
2. **Look at what is actually stated.**
3. **Consider the implied significance.**

1. In this case, the previous verse (v19) says ‘Quench not the Spirit.’

Now, the Spirit referred to, is unquestionably the Holy Spirit. Notice that in this verse the **Present Imperative** tense is used, which means that we have here a statement which relates to something which the believers in Thessalonica had evidently *been doing and were continuing to do up to that moment*.

An ‘Imperative’ is a command, or an instruction, consequently the sense of this particular verse is, quite literally, *‘Do not continue to quench the Spirit’*. This tells us that the Thessalonians were doing something which gave offence to the Holy Spirit. They were disregarding - and perhaps even repressing - a particular manifestation of the Spirit.

We see from the next verse that the specific gift involved was the gift of prophecy. The word which is translated *‘prophesyings’ (proheteia)*, occurs on only two other occasions (1 Cor. 14:6,22), where Paul discusses the exercise of spiritual gifts. The Church at Thessalonica, therefore is told in effect, *‘Do not continue to do what you have been doing, in quenching, or suppressing, this manifestation of the Spirit’*.

Certainly, at the very least, they were discouraging the exercise of the prophetic gift.

2. The apostolic command in verse 19, is followed by the verse at which we are now looking, verse 20. *‘And do not despise prophesying’*. This reveals why the Holy Spirit was being grieved, and here again, we have a Present Imperative, so that it means, *‘Do not continue to despise prophesying.’*

You will find that there is a significant difference between the Authorised Version and many modern versions, in the way in which verse 19 and 20 are rendered.

In the A.V. we have two short sentences; *‘Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings.’* But in modern versions - (the Revised Standard Version for example) -

only a comma separates the two commands, so that they read as one sentence.

"Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying." The implication is that, to despise 'prophesying' was to quench the Spirit.

Clearly, then, Paul, writing under the inspiration of that same Spirit, regarded the exercise of that particular gift, the gift of prophecy, as of very real importance to the spiritual growth and well being of the infant Church in Thessalonica.

3. Now, this letter was written during the Second Missionary Journey, and is, therefore reliably regarded as one of the earliest of the apostolic letters. It was written after Paul had left Thessalonica and has arrived at Corinth, about 50 AD, where he stayed for 18 months. (**Acts 18:11**). We arrive at this date because we know that the proconsul Gallio, who is mentioned in the next verse, took up his position in Corinth about that time.

The letter was probably written about 51 or 52 AD.

It is even likely, although not expressly stated, that it was Paul himself who imparted spiritual gifts to the Thessalonian Church as he had at Corinth during the year and a half he remained in that city.

4. **On the matter of spiritual gifts in the infant Church**, we learn that Paul informed the Ephesian believers, that prophets were among the Lord's gifts to the Church (**Eph. 4:11**).

Earlier in the same letter he had stated that apostles and prophets had laid the foundation on which the Church is built; that foundation being Christ himself (**Eph. 2:20**).

He followed this, in **chapter 3:5**, with the assertion that the Spirit used apostles and prophets as instruments for the revelation of new truth.

Although there are no such inspired men alive today, it should not be difficult for anyone to understand that in those days apostles and prophets fulfilled an essential role in the revelation of the truth and the establishment of the Church.

After all, the New Testament had not then been compiled. Indeed, as I have already implied, many of the books which comprise our present New Testament, had not even been written. Therefore, instead of being able to study *written* instruction and teaching, we find the prophecy - *oral* instruction - was the means by which the early Christians were taught.

Bear in mind, also, that the word 'prophesying' does not mean that a new revelation was presented every time the prophet opened his mouth!

The word '*profetes*' means '*to speak forth*', and cover, preaching and teaching generally. The prophets who served the early Church simply delivered the Spirit's message, and the exercise of the gift of prophecy meant that they were led by the Spirit, to speak in order that the Church might be strengthened and built up.

5. Now it is clear from our text, (1 Thess. 5:20), that at least *some* of the Thessalonian Christians had been inclined to undervalue this particular gift, because the word '*despise*' means '*set at nought*'. So Paul is urging them, not to 'set at nought' these Spirit-led teachers, or the messages they delivered, but to treat them with respect.

However, he also issues this warning; '*Test everything*'. In other words, 'Be on your guard, and *hold fast what is good*' (verse 21).

I stress again that this instruction - to pay attention to the prophets - was valid as long as the spiritual gifts, which included apostles and prophets, remained. But when they were removed, the *specific or special sense* of these words ceased to apply.

6. Yet, of course, there is a sense in which they still contain a message for us

today.

'Prophecy' means *'speaking forth'*. And prophecy, in the general sense of the word, is that which is preached. It is preaching and teaching.

There is no one today who possesses the gift of prophecy about which Paul writes, and we have no 'inspired' or 'Spirit-led' messengers; no apostles and prophets, such as those who served the infant Church.

But we do have those who preach and teach that which the Holy Spirit has preserved for us and presented to us in the Word. We have inherited the rich blessing of *'all things that pertain to life and godliness'*, in the New Testament scriptures. We have the recorded words of *'holy men of God who were moved by the Holy Spirit.'* (2 Pet. 1:3, & 1:21).

7. Today, it is as imperative as it ever was, that we who love the Lord do not under-value, despise or set at nought, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

We should never forget that the Lord himself told his apostles, *'He, who listens to you, listens to me; he, who rejects you, rejects me, and he, who rejects me, rejects Him who sent me.'* (Luke 1:16). This means that whenever the Word of God is faithfully presented we should receive it with open ears and open hearts.

Incidentally, I wonder how anyone can claim to accept the authority of Christ, whilst rejecting the writings of the apostles whom he authorized to speak on his behalf?

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