

Intro: Last week we saw how God's plan to take the Gospel to the Gentile world entered a new phase—the revival and evangelization of those in the city of Antioch. We saw that certain men from Cyrene and Cyprus went and shared the love of God with the Antioch residents.

The Church's response was to send Barnabas, a trusted and seasoned leader who saw the grace of God among them and rejoiced at what God was doing among the Gentiles.

Barnabas in turn goes and gets Saul of Tarsus because frankly the work of grounding these new Christians in the faith was overwhelming.

Today we'll continue looking at their ministry along with the ministry of some Jerusalem prophets who came to bring needed encouragement. We'll mainly look at the subject of NT prophecy today and unpack this idea biblically.

If we look closely at this text we'll see that...

1. The key to accelerated Spiritual growth is gathering around the Word.

Acts 11:25-26 “Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they **met with** the church and **taught** large numbers.”

Now look closely, don't miss it. Note the word “met with” in Greek it's one word. It's the word *synago* which is the verb form of *synagogē*. It means to gather together or to congregate. **This is the context of their instruction. In community.**

Illus. A friend of mine's mom, Rhoda was a bit of a home body. She didn't go out much, didn't drive and she had recently lost her husband to cancer. Rhoda dove into her Christian walk with Jesus—leaned on him—and there is no way without Christ she would have made it through that situation. Before I left for college I chatted with her and said, “Rhoda, you may want to think about getting into a local church.” She said, “nope. I've got my teaching tapes, my Bible study guides, and TBN (which she diligently dieted on each day). What do I need church for?”

After I came back 1st year of college I saw her again and sure enough, she was studied up—but weird. Just had that ghostly isolated look on her face. My brief conversation with her told me she was not healthy. After the next year she had plugged into my old church and became the Sermon Tape Library Administrator. I saw her at church and man I mean to tell you it was like she had been born again *again*. **She was doing wonderful because her study was now contextualized in the church. She was practicing synago in the ecclesia!**

Don't miss this next phrase: “they taught them for a year.” Saul and Barnabas taught the believers in Antioch, taking them through a year-long intensive providing instruction. **Researchers have discovered that it only takes about a year of intense study and focus to become proficient in most functional skill sets.**

This was Paul's intention for believers everywhere: Colossians 2:6-7 “So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, ⁷ being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.” Intense study in isolation produces a dogmatic fellow who cannot see anything from anyone else's perspective. **But in community we learn to become sympathetic listeners—growing through the questions, crises and perspectives of others in our group.**

The accelerant to spiritual growth is 3 or more people gathered around the Word in an intense study—intensely learning and applying the Scriptures to life. That takes about 1-3 years.

2. All believers are disciples and all disciples are believers.

11:26 “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Here, the term disciples is being used of all believers in the city and region of Antioch. By the time we get to the book of Acts, Luke uses the term “disciple” as synonymous and interchangeably with “believer.”

Matthew 28:19 “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” Disciples are made when we baptize (conversion) them into the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Disciples are also made as we teach those new converts to obey all that Christ has commanded. When someone comes to faith in Jesus, trusting Christ for salvation that person is a born-again disciple of Christ. They are also entering a life-long process of sanctification—meaning to be increasingly set apart in devotion to Christ.

This is most often how Luke uses this term. A good example is chapter 6...

Acts 6:1, 7 “In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number... The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, ‘It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables.’ So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.”

Here, Luke is not talking about the Apostles (the 12) but the believers in that region.

A Christian is a Christ-Partisan. This name is likely an external designation, a name outsiders gave them.

Christians most often self-identified as “Believer; disciple; saint; followers of the Way”

There is no such thing as a super-disciple.

Illus. Sitting on the hillside at Fishnet—I heard this preached and it lit a fire in me to become an elite, special-forces branch of Christian called “a Disciple.” But the guy who preached it, was dead wrong. Meaning, there isn’t this 2-tiered system where regular and unremarkable believers—if they pray, work, and fast diligently enough can become a super-Christian and earn the title “disciple.” The term “disciple” does not describe elite Christians. It describes all believers in the NT and is equivalent to “believer; saint; elect; Christian.” Some disciples are less mature, some are more mature—but all are disciples of Jesus.

At Antioch the disciples (followers/believers) in Jesus were first Called “Christians.”

More reinforcements show up from the mother church—Jerusalem. Luke introduces us to the concept that...

3. New Testament prophets were vital to the life and health of the early church.

²⁷“In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the reign of Claudius.”

In those days, means that Luke is reflecting on a previous era. He is remembering a time when the Jerusalem church experienced an intense famine. God prepared the church for this by predicting it through a prophet named Agabus.

Let's take some time to unpack this idea of prophecy in the church.

Definition of Prophecy: It is the act of God (not something we can conjure or muster up) revealing a message through a human spokesman (mediator) for individuals or groups. Prophecy could take the form of warnings, covenant lawsuit, comfort, prediction and direction, or even judgment. Prophetic oracles could be preventative (Isaiah) or restorative (Jeremiah).

What about the New Testament?

In the NT they were intended for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the Church. Prophets appear in the NT and are integral to the life and health of the church.

Types of Prophecy: There is a glaring shift between Old Covenant prophecy and New Covenant prophecy. Prophecy was possibly the most common practice in the ancient near east. In a Jewish context prophecy could be divided into two types:

A. Literary prophecy (Directional and Doctrinal): Prophets who received and spoke forth oracles to Israel and surrounding nations resulting in a book that bears their names (such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea) etc. Or, those acts and oracles preserved through narrative accounts (such as Deborah, Samuel, Elijah). **These are the prophecies that end up being part of the canon—those books considered to be part of the ongoing progress of revelation.** The nature of the revelation that they received was either directional or doctrinal.

- **Directional Revelation:** God revealing a preferred direction so they will stay the course or change course. Samuel warning Saul that he will forfeit the kingdom.
- **Doctrinal Revelation:** God revealing a fuller revelation of truth to Israel. *Sheol or Messiah, or the nature of God.*

B. Non-literary prophecy: Prophets who served the function of delivering messages for the **edification, exhortation, and comfort** of Israel. Prophets who functioned this way did not leave behind any literature which reveals the contents of their preaching.

- 1 Sam 10:5 “When you arrive at the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place prophesying. They will be preceded by harps, tambourines, flutes, and lyres.”
- 1 Kng 18:3 “Obadiah was a man who greatly feared the Lord ⁴ and took a hundred prophets and hid them, fifty men to a cave”

The vast majority of Israel's prophets (as well as NT prophets) are unnamed. We have no idea what the contents of their preaching was. If a prophetic speech act was not recorded for posterity then (1) it was not Scripture, (2) it was not binding on all men in all ages. It was in fact historically situated—not for all men in all times.

Which of these do we see functioning in the NT? The second category—non-literary prophets. These NT prophets did not leave behind any books (only Apostles and close associates of Apostles wrote NT scripture); and the few instances we have of them prophesying is not to add new doctrine in the progress of revelation, but to prophesy *direction* for spiritual growth.

Paul explicitly states what the role of Church Prophecy is:

1 Corinthians 14:3, 4 “On the other hand, the person who prophesies speaks to people for their **strengthening**, (upbuilding, edification) **encouragement**, and **consolation**...the one who prophesies builds up the church.” What does this mean? The prophetic ministry in the NT mirrors or sustains that function of non-literary prophets in the OT—who delivered messages of edification, encouragement, and consolation—not *revelation*.

Agabus is the proof-of-concept here. Agabus is one of the only named prophets in the NT and the two prophecies recorded in Acts are *not doctrinal revelation—they are directional*.

Summary: The few examples we have of them prophesying is not as literary prophets revealing doctrine but as non-literary prophets who reveal direction—Edification, Encouragement, Consolation and comfort to the church.

The Marks of True Prophecy (Why these marks? Because there's a lot of false prophecy and false prophets in the world).

1.) They tell the truth. And they don't weasel out of it when their prophecies turn out to be false.

Deut 18:22 When a prophet speaks in the Lord's name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

Illus. John Piper tells a heartbreaking story of a woman who came up to him and prophesied that his then pregnant wife would die delivering a girl. His wife not only survived but they had a boy.

Example: I had a friend who was told by a so-called visiting prophet that his little storefront church was going to become a mega-church and impact the entire region. 15 years after his storefront church closed he has been an insurance salesman and has no prospects to go back into full time ministry. It was false.

2.) They bear the fruit of the Kingdom. If the purported "word" from God is **controlling, manipulative, bondage** to the so-called "prophet's" will; or tears someone down—then that is most certainly not a "message" from the Lord. It can't be. **Because Paul says prophecy is edification, encouragement, and consolation. For the building up of the body of Christ. For the encouraging support of God's people who are facing trying circumstances.** For the comfort of those who've experienced heartbreaking losses and difficulties.

- You might be a false prophet if...your followers end up living in your "compound."
- You might be a false prophet if...the result of your preaching is *controlling others* *not releasing them to serve Christ freely.* It is for freedom that Christ has set you free—not so that you can come under the bondage of someone's control. Because that's not the fruit of the Kingdom.

3.) They speak consistently with revealed truth. Paul said "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command" (1 Cor 14:37). Anyone claiming or alleging to have a revelation from God for someone would not contradict what God has already revealed through the Apostles and the Literary Prophets.

Illus. Kenneth Hagin—his tour of hell.

4). **They glorify Christ not themselves.** If the glory, fame, notoriety is being transferred to the “prophet” then it is not of God. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the TRINITY! And even *He* doesn't talk about himself. He leads us to Jesus. Points to Christ. **Jesus said, “the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me” (Jn 15:26).** So, what should be the focus of God's preachers and those who speak and preach in his name? **JESUS! Not themselves.**

5). **They are open to evaluation. Paul is clear in his letter to the Corinthians.** Any alleged message from God must undergo **evaluation (14:29)**. Any supposed “prophet” who does not allow for testing the spirits to evaluate the source of the message is false. **The demand for uncritical acceptance of a message supposedly given from the Lord is not something a genuine prophet would ever do.** Unless of course their Isaiah—and there aren't any more Isaiahs.

Illus. This one time, a lady came up to me and gave me an apocalyptic vision and told me this vision she saw about me and my dad, and the encouragement of the Word was that I would work things out with my dad. I informed her that that would be rather difficult considering that my dad passed away when I was 14. She said, “oh my. I wonder the spiritual meaning of it is then?” **You wonder why Paul has to tell the church not to despise prophecy?** This is why. Because of false prophecies and self-appointed prophets who aren't open to the possibility that they might be wrong in this case.

6). **They are humble when they get it wrong.**

Illus. Now, sometimes people get it right. In the middle of suffering with having lost my voice, Pastor Daniel shared a strong impression with me that I would get my voice back. So sometimes, people get it exactly right. And we rejoice when the Spirit gives words of edification, words of encouragement, and consolation.

But what Happens when we sometimes get it wrong? We're not talking about OT literary prophets who are held to the public stoning standard if they miss it. In Acts 21, Agabus this same man, prophesied that **Paul would be bound by the Jews and delivered to the Gentiles. But Paul was captured by Gentiles and delivered to the Jews.** Both FF Bruce and Theologian Wayne Grudem note that in the second prophecy—Agabus got the details wrong.

This is why we must test all spirits as to their source, why we must evaluate all supposed words from the Lord and why we must give each other grace and show charity.

When people get it wrong they don't weasel out of it by backdating conditions that were not stated at the time the “Word” was given.

Conclusion: A Couple in my coaching group in a previous Church. It was clear that God was speaking and we all knew it.

Folks, the key to accelerated spiritual growth among the Antioch Christians and us is gathering together around the Word.

Disciples who are believers and saints—Christians who are being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Open to God's supernatural presence in our midst as we gather to speak to us individually and corporately about a change of direction in our attitudes, our thoughts, and the way we live our lives.