

PROPHETIC ECCLESIOLOGY

*The Church as a Prophetic Community:
Biblical, Historical and
Contemporary Perspectives*



SEUN EMMANUEL AFOLABI



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Prophetic Ecclesiology: The Church as a Prophetic Community

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Published by Divigom Penmanship Book

Telephone: +234 806 148 3576

*To the Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd and
the Prophet of prophets, and to his church in every
nation, called to hear his voice and to speak his
word faithfully.*

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Preface

This book grew out of a conviction and a concern. The conviction is that the church, by its very nature, is called to be a prophetic community: a people who hear the word of God, embody it and proclaim it to the church and to the world. The concern is that this calling is widely misunderstood. In some places the prophetic is neglected; in others it is distorted, commercialised or turned into a tool of control.

My purpose is to offer a thorough account of what it means for the church to be prophetic, grounded first in Scripture, informed by the long history of the church, and attentive to the realities of African Christianity, especially in Nigeria. I have tried to write for three audiences at once: students and scholars who need rigour, pastors and ministers who need practical wisdom, and ordinary believers who want to understand their own calling.

The book is arranged in eight parts. Part I lays the foundations: it defines prophetic ecclesiology, explains the method and sources used, examines the nature, purposes and forms of prophecy, and surveys the prophetic strand in the history of the church. Later parts treat the Old Testament roots, the work of Christ and the Spirit, the apostolic church, offices and discernment, the church in practice, the church in society, and the challenges and future of the prophetic church. Appendices provide practical forms, a study guide, prayers and further resources.

Each chapter ends with a summary, questions for reflection and suggestions for further reading, so that the book can serve in private study, in classrooms and in church groups. I offer it in the hope that it will strengthen the church's listening, deepen its obedience and renew its witness.

Seun Emmanuel Afolabi

Acknowledgements

All glory belongs to God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, whose word gives the prophetic vocation its meaning and whose grace has sustained this work.

I am grateful to the pastors, teachers, mentors and fellow believers whose lives, preaching and counsel have shaped my understanding of the church. I thank my family for their patience, prayers and encouragement during the long labour of writing.

I thank the scholars, past and present, whose works are cited in these pages, and the congregations and ministry colleagues who have allowed me to test these ideas in the setting of real church life. Their questions and challenges have strengthened this book. Any shortcomings that remain are my own.

Finally, I thank Divigom Penmanship Book for the opportunity to bring this work to publication.

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Abbreviations

OT	Old Testament
NT	New Testament
LXX	Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures
MT	Masoretic Text, the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament
cf.	compare
ch. / chs.	chapter / chapters
e.g.	for example
i.e.	that is
v. / vv.	verse / verses
ff.	and following verses or pages

Scripture references follow the standard order of the biblical books. Where a translation is not indicated, the rendering is the author's own.

Part I: Foundations

Chapter 1: Defining Prophetic Ecclesiology

Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who keeps the law. (Proverbs 29:18, author's rendering)

1.1 Introduction

Every generation of Christians must answer two questions. The first is who Jesus is. The second, which follows from the first, is what kind of people his followers are called to be. The first question belongs to Christology. The second belongs to ecclesiology, the theological study of the church. This book argues that the second question cannot be answered faithfully without recognising a dimension of the church's life that is too often treated as optional, marginal or dangerous: its prophetic character.

The word church translates the Greek *ekklesia*, an assembly called out for a purpose. In the New Testament that purpose is never merely to gather. The church is called out in order to be sent, called to belong to God in order to bear witness to God before the world. The Spirit who forms the church is the same Spirit who spoke through the prophets, and the Lord who builds the church is the same Lord whom the prophets announced. A church that has lost its prophetic voice has lost something essential to its identity, not merely something useful to its mission.

Prophetic ecclesiology is the attempt to think through the nature, structure, life and mission of the church with the prophetic calling at the centre rather than at the edge. It asks what the church is, and answers that the church is, among other things, a community that hears the word of God, speaks it, embodies it and suffers for it in the midst of history. This chapter lays the conceptual groundwork. It defines the key terms, distinguishes prophetic ecclesiology from neighbouring approaches, proposes a working definition, and sets out the marks by which a prophetic church may be recognised.

1.2 Why the Question Matters

There are at least four reasons why prophetic ecclesiology deserves sustained attention at this moment in the history of the church.

First, the prophetic is among the most widely used and most widely abused words in contemporary Christianity. In many congregations around the world, and certainly across West Africa, prophecy is a daily reality. People seek words of direction concerning marriage, business, travel and health. Where this is practised with humility and accountability, it can build up the body. Where it is practised without discernment, it can enrich the speaker, manipulate the hearer and bring the gospel into disrepute. A rigorous doctrine of the church's prophetic nature is needed both to affirm what is genuine and to expose what is counterfeit.

Second, the church in many nations lives in tension with unjust structures of power. Corruption, poverty, violence and the neglect of the vulnerable are not simply social problems on which the church may or may not comment. They are matters on which the biblical prophets spoke with startling directness. A church that is silent in the face of injustice must ask whether it has forgotten the tradition from which it came.

Third, academic ecclesiology has often described the church in structural, sacramental or institutional terms while giving little space to the Spirit's ongoing speech. Pentecostal and

charismatic movements, meanwhile, have emphasised the Spirit's gifts but have sometimes lacked a fully developed doctrine of the church to hold those gifts in order. Prophetic ecclesiology seeks to bridge this gap.

Fourth, the pastoral need is acute. Pastors and congregants ask practical questions every week. Who may prophesy? How should a prophetic word be tested? What is the relationship between the prophet and the pastor? Can a church be prophetic without being political? These questions need answers grounded in Scripture and tradition rather than improvisation.

1.3 Defining Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the branch of systematic theology that studies the church: its origin, nature, marks, ministries, worship, mission and destiny. Classically it addresses questions such as how the church relates to Christ and to the Spirit, what makes the church one, holy, catholic and apostolic, how the church is ordered and governed, and what its relation is to the kingdom of God and to the world.

Ecclesiologies differ according to what they treat as most basic. Avery Dulles, in his well-known study *Models of the Church*, identified several recurring images: the church as institution, as mystical communion, as sacrament, as herald, and as servant. Each model captures something true and each has characteristic weaknesses. The institutional model can harden into clericalism. The communion model can become inward-looking. The sacramental model can neglect the proclamation of the word. The herald model can neglect embodiment. The servant model can lose its distinctive message.

Other theologians have proposed further emphases. Miroslav Volf argued for the church as a free community of persons reflecting the communion of the Trinity. Jürgen Moltmann spoke of the church in the power of the Spirit, an open fellowship oriented to the coming kingdom. Lesslie Newbigin urged the church to see itself as a missionary community and a hermeneutic of the gospel. Each of these contributions is valuable, and prophetic ecclesiology draws on them. But it adds a distinct emphasis: the church is a community that exists under the word of God and bears that word into the world, even when doing so is costly.

1.4 Defining the Prophetic

1.4.1 Beyond prediction

In popular usage, to prophesy is to predict the future. The biblical vocabulary is wider. The Hebrew word *navi*, usually translated prophet, probably denotes one who is called or who speaks on behalf of another. The Greek *prophetes* means one who speaks forth. The core idea is mediation: the prophet stands between God and the people and speaks God's word to them. Prediction is sometimes part of this, but it is never the whole and seldom the centre.

It is customary to distinguish foretelling from forthtelling. Foretelling announces what God will do. Forthtelling declares what God requires and says now. The great majority of prophetic speech in the Old Testament is forthtelling: it calls the people back to covenant faithfulness, denounces idolatry and injustice, comforts the afflicted and interprets the events of history in the light of God's purposes. Even when prophets foretell, they do so in order to summon a response in the present.

1.4.2 The prophetic imagination

Two twentieth-century scholars have shaped how the prophets are understood. Abraham Heschel, in *The Prophets*, portrayed the prophet as one who feels the pathos of God, a person overwhelmed by divine concern for justice and mercy and therefore unable to remain neutral before injustice. Walter Brueggemann, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, argued that the prophet's task is to criticise the dominant consciousness that has made injustice seem normal and to energise the community with an alternative vision grounded in God's freedom and faithfulness. He described this as a twofold work of grieving and hoping, of dismantling false security and awakening new possibility.

These insights are indispensable. They remind us that prophecy is not primarily an ecstatic experience or a technique for obtaining information, but a way of seeing and speaking that is shaped by God's own character. The prophet sees the world as God sees it and says so.

1.4.3 The prophetic in the New Testament

The New Testament continues and transforms this inheritance. Jesus is recognised as a prophet, and the crowds say as much. Yet the New Testament goes further, presenting him as the one to whom all the prophets pointed. At Pentecost, Peter understands the outpouring of the Spirit as the fulfilment of Joel's promise that sons and daughters, young and old, men and women would prophesy. What had been the gift of a few becomes, in principle, the possibility of the whole community. Paul can therefore wish that all of the Corinthians would prophesy, and he gives detailed instruction on how prophecy is to function in an orderly assembly. Ephesians lists prophets among the gifts the ascended Christ gives to build up the church.

We may therefore speak of the prophetic in three overlapping senses: the prophetic word (specific utterances inspired by the Spirit), the prophetic office or ministry (those recognised and gifted to speak regularly in this way), and the prophetic vocation (the calling of the whole people of God to bear witness). Prophetic ecclesiology is concerned with all three, but its distinctive claim concerns the third.

1.5 A Working Definition

Bringing these threads together, we may offer the following working definition, which the remainder of the book will test and refine.

Prophetic ecclesiology is the theological study of the church as a Spirit-formed community that hears, discerns, embodies and proclaims the word of God to the church itself and to the world, standing in continuity with the prophets of Israel and the witness of Christ, and living in faithful tension with every power that resists God's reign.

Several features of this definition deserve comment.

- Spirit-formed. The prophetic life of the church is not a human achievement. It depends on the Spirit who speaks, gifts and empowers.
- Hears and discerns. Prophetic speech begins in listening. A church that does not hear God cannot speak for God, and a church that does not test what it hears cannot protect itself from error.
- Embodies. The church does not only say a prophetic word; it is a prophetic sign. Its common life, its generosity, its reconciliation across divisions and its care for the poor are themselves forms of witness.

- To the church itself and to the world. Prophecy begins with the household of God. The Old Testament prophets spoke first to Israel. A church that criticises only the world while exempting itself has misunderstood the prophetic task.
- In continuity with Israel and with Christ. The church's prophetic identity is received, not invented. It is anchored in Scripture and fulfilled in Jesus.
- In tension with powers. Prophetic faithfulness frequently carries a cost, as the stories of Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Stephen and countless later witnesses show.

1.6 Distinguishing Prophetic Ecclesiology from Related Approaches

To clarify the concept further, it is helpful to say what prophetic ecclesiology is not.

1.6.1 *It is not merely charismatic ecclesiology*

Charismatic and Pentecostal theologies emphasise the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy. Prophetic ecclesiology shares and values this emphasis, but it is broader. It includes the ethical and social dimensions of the prophetic tradition, such as justice, covenant fidelity and critique of power, which are sometimes overlooked in a focus on spiritual manifestations. It also insists on discernment and order alongside gifting.

1.6.2 *It is not merely political or liberationist ecclesiology*

Liberation theologies rightly insist that the church must side with the oppressed, and they draw heavily on the prophets. Prophetic ecclesiology agrees that justice is central, but it holds that the church's prophetic voice arises from the word of God and the presence of the Spirit, not from any political programme. Its critique of power is grounded in God's covenant, and it remains open to critique itself.

1.6.3 *It is not an office-centred model*

Some Christian traditions understand the prophetic primarily in terms of a particular office held by particular individuals. Prophetic ecclesiology acknowledges the office but does not reduce the church's prophetic nature to it. The whole body shares in the prophetic calling, and the office exists to serve and equip that wider vocation, as Ephesians 4 indicates.

1.6.4 *It is not opposed to order and tradition*

It is sometimes assumed that the prophetic and the institutional stand in permanent conflict. Scripture does show tension between prophets and priests or kings, but it also shows cooperation. Samuel, Isaiah and Ezekiel each moved between worship, politics and proclamation. A healthy church needs both stability and challenge. Prophetic ecclesiology seeks not to abolish structure but to keep it accountable to the living word.

1.7 Marks of a Prophetic Church

The ancient creed confesses the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These marks remain foundational. Building upon them, we may suggest five marks by which a church's prophetic character may be recognised. These are offered as practical criteria, not as a replacement for the creedal marks.

1. A church under the word. It reads, preaches and obeys Scripture as the final measure of every claim, including every prophetic claim. It does not allow any personality, however gifted, to stand above the word.

2. A church open to the Spirit. It expects God to speak, makes room for the gifts, and cultivates attentiveness in prayer and worship, while testing everything as Paul commands.
3. A church of justice and mercy. It shares God's concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, and refuses to baptise exploitation or silence in the face of wrong.
4. A church of truthful speech and humble character. Its leaders and members speak truth without manipulation, and the fruit of the Spirit confirms the gifts of the Spirit.
5. A church willing to suffer. It accepts that fidelity may cost reputation, comfort or safety, and it does not trade its message for favour.

No congregation embodies these marks perfectly. They describe a direction of travel, a pattern of repentance and renewal, rather than a finished achievement. Indeed, the prophets themselves spoke most urgently to communities that had fallen short, and a prophetic church will be marked by a readiness to hear their critique of itself.

1.8 The Biblical Vocabulary and Images of the Church

A definition of the prophetic church must be built on how the Bible itself speaks about the church. The New Testament uses a wide range of terms and pictures. Paul Minear, in his study *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, counted nearly a hundred of them. No single image captures the whole, and each contributes something to a prophetic understanding.

1.8.1 Ekklesia: the called-out assembly

The Greek word *ekklesia* was used in secular Greek for the assembly of citizens summoned to decide public matters. The Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, used it for the congregation (*qahal*) of Israel gathered before the Lord, especially at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10). When the first Christians called themselves the *ekklesia* of God, they claimed continuity with the assembly of Israel. They were the gathering that hears the word of God, as Israel had at the mountain. In the book of Acts, the word is used both for the local congregation (Acts 8:1; 13:1) and for the believers more broadly (Acts 9:31). In Paul's letters, it is used for the local church in a city, for house gatherings, and for the universal body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

1.8.2 Laos: the people of God

The term *laos*, people, appears where the New Testament applies Israel's covenant language to the church: you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). Notice the purpose clause. The people exist to proclaim. The word *laos* also gives us the word *laity*. In a prophetic ecclesiology there are no spectators; all God's people are a people of the word.

1.8.3 Soma: the body of Christ

Paul's image of the body (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4) stresses interdependence, diversity of gifts and shared life under Christ the head. The prophetic implication is that no gift, including prophecy, is self-sufficient, and no member can say to another, I have no need of you. The body image also guards against celebrity ministry. The head is Christ; every other member is a servant of the whole.

1.8.4 Temple and household

The church is called the temple of God, in which the Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22), and the household or family of God (1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19). As temple, the church is the place of God's presence and must be holy. As household, it is a family of brothers and sisters under one Father, marked by mutual care and honest speech. Together, the images say that the church is both a sacred space and a home.

1.8.5 Flock, vine, field, building and bride

Other images add depth. The flock stresses dependence on the shepherd (John 10; 1 Peter 5). The vine and branches stress abiding in Christ and bearing fruit (John 15). The field and the building stress growth and construction by God's labourers (1 Corinthians 3:5-9). The bride stresses love, fidelity and future glory (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7). Each of these implies a prophetic task. A flock must recognise the voice of its shepherd and not follow strangers (John 10:4-5). A vine must bear the fruit that the Father seeks. A bride must remain faithful to her one husband.

1.8.6 Pilgrims, exiles and witnesses

First Peter addresses believers as exiles and sojourners (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11), and Hebrews describes people who confess that they are strangers and exiles on the earth (Hebrews 11:13). Acts presents the church as a company of witnesses (Acts 1:8). These images underline that the church lives between the times, with a loyalty beyond any earthly state, and speaks as a witness who has seen and heard.

1.9 The Creedal Marks of the Church in Prophetic Perspective

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in the fourth century, confesses belief in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Each of these classical marks has a prophetic dimension.

1.9.1 One

The unity of the church is a gift of the Spirit and a calling (Ephesians 4:3-6). Christ prayed that his followers might be one so that the world would believe (John 17:21). A prophetic church works for unity, but it refuses unity at the price of truth. The prophets who stood against the consensus of the court prophets show that unity built on falsehood is not the unity of the Spirit. At the same time, division caused by pride, ethnic prejudice or the cult of personality is itself a prophetic failing, as Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians shows (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

1.9.2 Holy

The church is holy because it belongs to God, and it is called to holiness of life (1 Peter 1:15-16). The prophets of Israel insisted that holiness was not merely ritual purity but justice and mercy. A prophetic church therefore understands holiness as both separation from sin and engagement with a broken world, following the example of Christ, who was holy and yet ate with sinners.

1.9.3 Catholic

Catholic here means universal, spanning all places, peoples and times. The church is not a tribal or national institution. The prophetic vision of Isaiah, in which all nations stream to the mountain of the Lord, and the vision of Revelation 7:9, with its multitude from every nation,

tribe, people and language, shape this mark. A prophetic church resists ethnic exclusivism and nationalism, and affirms its fellowship with believers across the world and through history.

1.9.4 Apostolic

The church is apostolic because it is founded on the testimony of the apostles and sent as the apostles were sent. Apostolicity is, first, faithfulness to apostolic teaching, which for us is the New Testament. It is also continuing mission. The church that does not teach what the apostles taught, or does not go where the apostles went, has lost an essential mark. The apostles were themselves prophetic witnesses who heard from the risen Lord and bore his word to the world.

These four marks, read prophetically, show that the prophetic nature of the church is not an extra to be added to the classical doctrine but an expression of it. A church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic will be a church that hears and speaks the word of the Lord.

1.10 The Prophetic Church as a Hearing Church

The first prophetic act of the church is to listen. The central confession of Israel begins with a command to hear: Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). The prophets repeat the summons: hear the word of the Lord (Isaiah 1:10; Jeremiah 2:4; Amos 3:1). Jesus ends his parables with the challenge, he who has ears to hear, let him hear (Mark 4:9), and warns his disciples to pay attention to what they hear (Mark 4:24). Mary of Bethany is commended for sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his teaching (Luke 10:39, 42). Paul writes that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). James adds that we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). The risen Christ addresses each of the seven churches with the call to hear what the Spirit says (Revelation 2:7).

A hearing church studies the Scriptures with reverence, expecting God to speak. It listens in prayer. It listens to the Spirit, who still guides and gifts. It listens to the testimony of the saints of all ages. It listens to the cries of the poor and the questions of the world. And it listens to criticism, including prophetic criticism of itself. The theologian Karl Barth, in his reflections on the Word of God, insisted that the church is first of all the community that is addressed by God; its speaking is always a response to a prior hearing. A church that talks without listening produces noise rather than prophecy.

1.11 The Prophetic Church as an Embodying Church

The prophets embodied their message. Hosea married and named children in ways that spoke to Israel's condition. Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign. Jeremiah bought a field as Jerusalem was falling, an act of hope. Jesus lived what he proclaimed, and the New Testament connects the church's witness with its common life. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35). The early Christians held their possessions loosely and cared for one another, and their way of life drew the attention of outsiders (Acts 2:42-47). Paul tells the Philippians to shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15), and Peter urges believers to keep their conduct honourable among the Gentiles, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God (1 Peter 2:12).

Lesslie Newbigin argued that the congregation is the primary hermeneutic of the gospel, meaning that the world interprets the gospel largely through the lives of those who claim to

believe it. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, in *Resident Aliens*, similarly described the church as a colony of heaven whose very existence is a political and moral statement. Whatever one makes of the details of such proposals, the central insight is biblical: a church's life preaches. A congregation marked by reconciliation across tribe and class, by generosity, by honesty in money matters and by care for the weak embodies a prophetic message that no sermon alone can deliver. Conversely, a congregation marked by division, financial scandal or abuse of power contradicts its own message so loudly that words are drowned out.

1.12 The Prophetic Church as a Proclaiming Church

A church that only embodies and never speaks is mute. The New Testament links life and word. Paul calls believers ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:20). He asks, how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:14). After being flogged and warned not to speak, the apostles daily in the temple and from house to house did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:42). Proclamation addresses not only the individual conscience but also public life. The prophets spoke to kings and nations; Paul reasoned with Roman governors; the book of Revelation challenged an empire.

The content of the church's proclamation is the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, the kingdom of God and the call to repentance and faith. The form varies: preaching, teaching, testimony, song, writing, public declaration and dialogue. The tone is humble yet bold. It is humble because the church speaks as a recipient of grace and a fallible witness. It is bold because it speaks on behalf of One whose authority is complete.

1.13 The Prophetic Church as a Suffering Church

Prophetic witness is costly. Jesus said, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10-12). He told his disciples that a servant is not greater than his master; if they persecuted him, they would persecute them also (John 15:20). Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples, saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Paul told Timothy that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12), and told the Philippians that it had been granted to them not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake (Philippians 1:29). The book of Revelation says that the saints overcame the accuser by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Revelation 12:11).

Throughout history, from Stephen to the martyrs of the early centuries, from the Reformation to the present day, believers have paid with reputation, freedom and life for faithful witness. In many parts of the world today, Christians face discrimination, violence and death for their faith. A prophetic ecclesiology must therefore include a theology of suffering and martyrdom, and a church must remember its persecuted members in prayer and practical solidarity. Not all suffering is persecution, and the church must be careful not to claim persecution when it is merely experiencing the consequences of its own folly. But where fidelity to Christ and to truth brings opposition, the church should expect it and endure it with joy.

1.14 Three Common Misunderstandings

1.14.1 The prophetic is simply negative criticism

Some think that being prophetic means being against things: against the government, against other churches, against culture. But the prophets also comforted, encouraged and gave hope. Isaiah 40 opens with the command, comfort, comfort my people. Brueggemann's account of the prophetic imagination includes both criticism and the energising of a new vision. A church known only for what it opposes has not captured the prophetic spirit.

1.14.2 The prophetic is simply prediction

We have seen that prediction is only a small part of biblical prophecy. A church that seeks prophecy mainly to learn the future may neglect the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). The primary question prophetic ministry asks is not, what will happen to me? but, what does God require of us now?

1.14.3 The prophetic is the property of special personalities

Where prophecy is regarded as the special possession of a few gifted individuals, the congregation becomes an audience, the leaders become unaccountable and the risk of manipulation rises. The New Testament, while recognising particular ministries, insists that the gift is for the whole body and that all are to weigh what is said. The prophetic vocation belongs to the community.

1.15 Illustrative Cases for Reflection

The following three cases are composite illustrations, not accounts of real churches or persons. They are intended to help readers apply the ideas of this chapter. Readers may wish to discuss them in a group and return to them after reading later chapters.

Case A: A word about a marriage

A visiting speaker tells a young woman in a congregation that the Lord has shown him that she will marry a particular young man in the church. The two barely know each other. Family and friends begin to treat the matter as settled. Questions to consider: What biblical principles apply to personal prophetic words concerning major life decisions? How should the pastor respond? What responsibilities do the speaker, the congregation and the two young people have?

Case B: A road, a contract and a community

A local government awards a road construction contract in a community. Members of a congregation know that the contractor has paid bribes and that the road is being built poorly, endangering lives. The pastor wonders whether the church should speak. Some members fear retaliation. Others argue that the church should stay out of politics. Questions to consider: How does the prophetic tradition address corruption? What forms of speaking and acting are appropriate? What risks are involved, and how should the church weigh them?

Case C: A famous and gifted leader

A founder of a large and rapidly growing ministry is widely praised for his preaching and prophetic gifts. Members who raise concerns about financial secrecy and harsh treatment of staff are told that they are questioning the Lord's anointed. A few quietly leave. Questions to

consider: Which marks of a prophetic church are present, and which are absent? What structures might have prevented the situation? What should members of conscience do?

1.16 The Plan of the Book

This book unfolds in eight parts. Part I, of which this chapter is the opening, establishes the foundations: the method and sources of the inquiry (Chapter 2), the nature, purpose and forms of prophecy (Chapter 3), and a survey of the prophetic strand in the history of the church's self-understanding (Chapter 4). Part II examines the Old Testament roots of the prophetic community. Part III turns to Christ, the Spirit and the birth of the church. Part IV considers the apostolic and early church. Part V addresses offices, order and discernment. Part VI explores the prophetic church in practice, in worship, prayer, pastoral care and leadership. Part VII considers the church's relationship to society, with particular attention to Africa and Nigeria. Part VIII confronts the challenges of false prophecy, abuse and commercialisation, and looks toward renewal and the church's eschatological hope.

Throughout, the intention is to serve three audiences at once: students and scholars who need a rigorous account, pastors and leaders who need practical guidance, and ordinary believers who wish to understand their calling more deeply. The writing therefore aims to be academically careful and pastorally warm.

1.17 Chapter Summary

- Ecclesiology studies the church; prophetic ecclesiology studies the church as a community that hears, embodies and proclaims the word of God.
- The prophetic is broader than prediction. It includes forthtelling, covenant critique, comfort and a vision of God's future.
- The New Testament extends the prophetic gift across the whole people of God, while recognising particular ministries.
- Prophetic ecclesiology differs from purely charismatic, political or office-centred approaches, and it does not oppose order and tradition.
- Five marks of a prophetic church are proposed: under the word, open to the Spirit, committed to justice and mercy, truthful and humble, and willing to suffer.
- The biblical images of the church, and the creedal marks of one, holy, catholic and apostolic, each carry a prophetic dimension.
- A prophetic church hears, embodies, proclaims and suffers, and avoids three common misunderstandings of the prophetic.

1.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you explain the difference between foretelling and forthtelling to a new believer?
2. In what ways does your own church community reflect, or fail to reflect, the five marks of a prophetic church?
3. Why is it dangerous for a church to emphasise the prophetic gift without emphasising discernment?
4. How can a church be critical of injustice without becoming merely political?

5. Which of Dulles's models of the church is most familiar to you, and how might a prophetic emphasis enrich it?

1.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*.
- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.
- Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*.
- Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.
- Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.
- Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.
- Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*.
- Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*.

Chapter 2: Biblical-Theological Method and Sources

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16, author's rendering)

2.1 Introduction

A book about the prophetic nature of the church must be clear about how it knows what it claims to know. It is not enough to assert that the church is a prophetic community; one must show where such a claim comes from, how it is tested and what would count against it. This is the task of method. In theology, method concerns the sources a theologian draws upon, the weight given to each, the way they are interpreted and the criteria by which conclusions are judged.

The question of method is especially urgent in a study of prophecy. Prophecy claims a kind of authority that can easily escape scrutiny. If a person says that God has spoken, who may question it? Prophetic ecclesiology cannot dodge this problem; it must confront it. A theology of the prophetic that does not supply tools for testing prophetic claims is not merely incomplete but dangerous. This chapter therefore sets out the sources, principles and safeguards that will govern the rest of the book.

2.2 The Approach of This Book

The method adopted here may be described as biblical-theological, historically informed, ecclesially accountable and contextually aware. Each term carries weight.

- **Biblical-theological.** The primary source is Scripture, read as a unified story of God's dealings with creation, Israel, Christ and the church, rather than as a collection of isolated proof texts.
- **Historically informed.** The church did not begin with us. The creeds, the fathers, the councils, the reformers and the revival movements have wrestled with the same questions, and their insights and errors are instructive.
- **Ecclesially accountable.** Theology is done within and for the church. Its conclusions are to be offered to the community for testing, not imposed upon it.
- **Contextually aware.** The gospel is always received in particular cultures. This study is written with sensitivity to the African and especially Nigerian setting, while remaining attentive to the universal church.

2.3 Scripture as the Primary Norm

2.3.1 Authority and inspiration

Christians have historically confessed that Scripture is the inspired word of God and the supreme written authority for faith and life. The classic text is 2 Timothy 3:16, which speaks of Scripture as God-breathed. Peter adds that no prophecy of Scripture came by human impulse, but that people spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. These texts matter for our purpose because they tie the very origin of Scripture to the prophetic work of the Spirit. The Bible is itself the supreme example of prophetic speech preserved for the church.

It follows that all other claims to divine speech must be measured by Scripture. Within the Reformation tradition this principle is often expressed as *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone as the final authority. Some traditions prefer to speak of *prima scriptura*, Scripture first among the sources of theology. In either formulation, no later prophetic utterance may contradict, replace or add to the revelation given in Christ and attested in the biblical canon.

2.3.2 *The unity of the canon*

The Bible is one story told across two testaments. The prophets of Israel announce a covenant God who judges and redeems; the New Testament proclaims that this God has acted decisively in Jesus. Prophetic ecclesiology reads the Old Testament not as a discarded prelude but as the soil from which the church grows. Equally, it reads the New Testament not as an abolition of the prophetic tradition but as its fulfilment and extension. The church therefore inherits both the prophets' vocabulary and their vocation.

2.4 Principles of Interpretation

Respect for Scripture's authority requires disciplined reading. Prophetic texts in particular have suffered from careless handling, whether by treating every prophecy as a coded timetable of future events or by ignoring them as irrelevant ancient poetry. The following principles guide the reading adopted in this book.

1. Attend to the original context. Each text was spoken or written to a particular audience in a particular situation. Meaning begins there.
2. Respect the literary form. Prophetic books contain oracles, laments, narratives, visions, sign-acts and poetry. Poetry is not read as prose, nor apocalyptic imagery as straightforward reportage.
3. Read within the canon. A single text is interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture, with clearer passages helping to illuminate those that are obscure.
4. Read in light of Christ. The New Testament itself reads the prophets christologically, as seen in Luke 24 and in the apostolic preaching in Acts.
5. Move carefully from text to application. What a passage meant for its first audience, and what it means for the church today, are related but not identical. The move requires attention to continuity and difference.

These principles echo the guidance of many biblical scholars, such as Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, who stress that sound application depends on sound interpretation. A particular warning is needed here. Many abuses of the prophetic arise from lifting a verse out of context to support a personal agenda, often financial or political. The method of this book is designed to resist such practices.

2.5 Tradition and the Witness of the Church

The church does not read Scripture alone. It reads in the company of those who have gone before. The ecumenical creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, express the church's settled understanding of the gospel. The Nicene Creed confesses the Holy Spirit as the one who has spoken through the prophets, a line that anchors prophetic experience within the doctrine of the Trinity. The early fathers, the medieval theologians, the reformers and later renewal movements each contribute perspective.

Tradition is not placed on the same level as Scripture, yet it is not ignored. It functions as a wise companion, guarding against novelty for its own sake and reminding us that the Spirit has been active throughout the church's history, not only in our own day. Chapter 4 will survey this history in some detail.

2.6 Reason and the Theological Disciplines

Faith seeks understanding. The use of reason in theology is not a concession to unbelief but an expression of the command to love God with the mind. Reason helps to define terms, to detect inconsistency, to organise material and to draw out implications. A prophetic ecclesiology also benefits from the neighbouring disciplines: biblical studies, church history, sociology of religion, anthropology and ethics. For example, sociological study of religious movements can help explain why charismatic authority is attractive and how it can slide into control. Such insights supplement rather than replace theological judgement.

2.7 Experience and Context

The Wesleyan tradition has often spoken of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as four interacting resources for theology, a pattern popularly called the quadrilateral. Whatever the label, it is clear that Christian experience shapes how Scripture is heard. In the African setting this is vividly true. As scholars such as Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh have argued, the translation of the gospel into African languages and cultures has made Christianity at home in the continent in a way that earlier missionary frameworks did not anticipate. Ogbu Kalu and Allan Anderson have documented how Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Africa often see prophecy, healing and spiritual discernment as natural expressions of faith.

Experience is a real witness but not an infallible one. A powerful experience does not authenticate itself. The apostle John instructs believers not to believe every spirit but to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Experience is therefore received as a question to be examined in the light of Scripture, not a verdict that overrides it. Context likewise informs but does not control. The gospel speaks into every culture, affirming what is good, challenging what is false and transforming what is broken.

2.8 The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation

Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth would guide his disciples into all the truth. Christian interpretation is therefore not a purely technical exercise. It is carried out in prayerful dependence on the Spirit who inspired the text. Yet reliance on the Spirit does not cancel study, any more than the Spirit's inspiration of the prophets cancelled their human personalities and historical settings. The Spirit works through disciplined reading, through the counsel of the community and through the humility that is willing to be corrected.

This point is crucial for prophetic ecclesiology. Claims of Spirit-led insight are tested by their conformity with Scripture, their fruit in character and their reception by the wider body. The Spirit does not contradict himself, and he does not bypass the community he has formed.

2.9 Criteria for Evaluating Prophetic Claims

A theology of the prophetic must offer criteria. The Bible provides several, which will be developed more fully in Part V. For the purposes of method, we may anticipate five.

1. Consistency with revealed truth. The word must agree with the gospel and with the teaching of Scripture (Deuteronomy 13; Galatians 1:8).
2. Confession of Christ. The Spirit of God exalts Jesus as Lord (1 John 4:1-3; 1 Corinthians 12:3).
3. Fruitfulness of character. Jesus said that false prophets are known by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20).
4. Fulfilment and faithfulness. In Israel, a prophet whose word did not come to pass was not to be heeded (Deuteronomy 18:21-22), though fulfilment alone is never sufficient if the message leads people away from God.
5. Community discernment. Paul instructs that others should weigh what prophets say (1 Corinthians 14:29) and that the Thessalonians test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

2.10 Reading the Genres of Prophetic Literature

Method is not only about which sources to use; it is also about how to read them. The Bible is not a single kind of text. The prophetic books and the passages about the prophetic church in the New Testament come in several literary forms, and each form makes its own demands on the reader. Misreading the form is one of the commonest sources of error in the handling of prophecy.

2.10.1 Narrative

Much of what we know about the prophets comes from narrative, such as the stories of Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha in the books of Samuel and Kings, and the story of the early church in Acts. Narrative shows what happened; it does not always tell us what should happen. When Elijah calls down fire or Peter's shadow is said to heal, the reader must ask what the story is teaching about God and his purposes, before asking whether the event is to be repeated. Narrative describes; it does not automatically prescribe. A careful reader looks for the narrator's own evaluation, the wider pattern of the book and the clear teaching of other parts of Scripture.

2.10.2 Poetry and oracle

Most of the words of the writing prophets are poetry. Hebrew poetry is characterised by parallelism, in which a second line restates, intensifies or contrasts with the first, a feature first systematically described by Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century. It is full of metaphor, hyperbole and imagery. When Amos says that justice should roll down like waters, or Isaiah speaks of mountains being laid low and valleys lifted up, the reader must not turn poetry into literal engineering. Prophetic poetry aims at the heart and the imagination as well as the mind. Reading it as though it were a legal contract or a scientific treatise misses its force.

2.10.3 Symbolic actions and visions

Prophets enacted messages (Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 13; Ezekiel 4 and 5) and received visions (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Daniel 7; Zechariah 1 to 6). These are interpreted by the text itself or by the surrounding oracles. The reader should resist the temptation to invent private interpretations of symbols. In Zechariah and Daniel, an angel often explains the vision. Where the text gives an interpretation, that interpretation governs.

2.10.4 Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic writing, such as Daniel and Revelation, uses strange creatures, numbers and cosmic imagery to unveil the spiritual dimension of history. Its symbols draw on the Old Testament and on the imagery of the ancient world. It is written to console and challenge communities under pressure, and its primary function is not to provide a calendar but to reveal where power truly lies. Reading Revelation as a puzzle that predicts the headlines of our own century ignores the way its first readers would have understood it.

2.10.5 Letters

The New Testament letters address specific situations. First Corinthians is a response to reports and questions from a particular church. When Paul gives instructions about prophecy, tongues and order, he is addressing issues peculiar to Corinth as well as stating principles. The task of the interpreter is to distinguish between the particular circumstance and the enduring principle. For example, the instruction that the Corinthians should allow two or three prophets to speak and the others to weigh (1 Corinthians 14:29) reflects a principle of shared, tested, orderly prophecy that is applicable beyond Corinth, even if the precise number may be a local detail.

2.11 The Old Testament in the New: Fulfilment, Typology and Echo

A prophetic ecclesiology depends heavily on how the New Testament reads the Old. The risen Jesus himself, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, interpreted to the disciples in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27), and spoke of everything written about him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms being fulfilled (Luke 24:44). The apostolic preaching in Acts follows the same pattern, as in Peter's use of Joel and the Psalms at Pentecost.

Several ways in which the New Testament relates to the Old may be distinguished.

- Direct fulfilment. A specific promise is seen to be fulfilled in an event, such as the ministry of John the Baptist as the voice crying in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:2-4).
- Typological fulfilment. A person, event or institution in Israel's history prefigures something greater in Christ. Israel's exodus, the temple, the Passover lamb and the figure of David all point forward. The New Testament sees patterns in God's dealings, not merely isolated predictions.
- Thematic or canonical fulfilment. Themes such as the new covenant, the Servant of the Lord, the remnant and the new exodus are developed across the Old Testament and find their climax in Christ and the church.
- Echo and allusion. The New Testament writers often evoke a larger Old Testament context by quoting or alluding to a few words. Richard Hays, in *Echoes of Scripture* in the Letters of Paul, has shown how Paul's use of Scripture often works by echo, inviting readers to hear the whole passage from which a phrase is drawn.

Scholars debate how to explain particular cases. For example, Matthew 1:22-23 applies Isaiah 7:14 to the birth of Jesus, and Matthew 2:15 applies Hosea 11:1, which speaks of Israel's exodus from Egypt, to the infant Jesus' return from Egypt. Some see these as examples of typology, in which Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel; others see them as examples of a double or fuller sense. G. K. Beale's *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* offers a thorough guide to these questions. For our purposes, the key point is that the

New Testament reads Israel's prophetic tradition as a witness to Christ and as the story into which the church has been grafted. This is why Chapters 5 to 8 of this book give so much attention to the Old Testament.

2.12 Common Pitfalls in Handling Prophetic Texts

The history of the church and the experience of many congregations show recurring mistakes in handling prophetic passages. A careful method will avoid the following.

2.12.1 Proof-texting

Proof-texting is the practice of quoting a verse in isolation to support a conclusion that the passage as a whole does not support. It often involves ignoring context, genre and the purpose of the author.

2.12.2 Transferring promises without regard to their original recipients

Many popular promises were addressed to particular persons or communities. Jeremiah 29:11, I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope, is a widely quoted example. In context, it is part of a letter to the exiles in Babylon, assuring them that after seventy years God would bring them back (Jeremiah 29:10). It does not promise every individual a trouble-free life or a particular career. Yet it does reveal the character of a God who has good purposes for his people, and the church may take encouragement from that character, while remembering that the first generation of exiles lived and died in Babylon. Likewise, 2 Chronicles 7:14 was addressed to Israel in the context of the temple, as noted in Chapter 31, and Isaiah 54:17, no weapon formed against you shall prosper, was addressed to the restored Zion. They are not blank cheques for any nation or individual.

2.12.3 Misusing the language of anointing

The phrase touch not my anointed, and do my prophets no harm (1 Chronicles 16:22; Psalm 105:15) is sometimes quoted to deter criticism of church leaders. In context, it refers to God's protection of the patriarchs when they were wandering among foreign nations and foreign kings. It cannot be used to place pastors or prophets beyond the reach of question or correction. Nathan rebuked the anointed king David, and Paul publicly opposed Peter (Galatians 2:11-14).

2.12.4 Spiritualising or allegorising without warrant

Turning every detail of a text into an allegory about the reader's circumstances distorts the meaning and invites subjectivity. Allegory has a place when the text itself signals it, as in Galatians 4:21-31, but it should not be a general technique for discovering hidden meanings.

2.12.5 Presentism

Presentism reads current events or political figures into biblical texts as though the prophets had them in mind. History is littered with such readings, from identifying rulers as the antichrist to finding modern nations in the oracles of Ezekiel. The record of these identifications is a record of embarrassment. The prophets spoke first to their own times, and any application to ours must be disciplined by that fact.

2.12.6 Ignoring the translation question

A single English word may represent several Hebrew or Greek terms, and vice versa. Proverbs 29:18 in the King James Version, where there is no vision, the people perish, is often taken to mean that churches need a leader with a vision. The Hebrew word translated vision

(chazon) refers to prophetic revelation, and the parallel line shows that the issue is the absence of the revealed word, with the result that the people cast off restraint. This is why the epigraph of Chapter 1 reads as it does. Interpreters without access to the original languages should compare several reliable translations and consult trustworthy commentaries.

2.13 Tradition: Learning from the Whole Church

The ancient African theologians Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine were among the greatest contributors to Christian doctrine. Thomas Oden, in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, has argued that African Christians should recognise this heritage as their own. Alongside this, the Ethiopian church has a history stretching back to the fourth century. African believers who read the history of doctrine are therefore reading their own story, not merely that of Europe.

Tradition performs several functions in theological method.

1. It preserves the church's settled convictions. The ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) defined the church's faith in the Trinity and in the person of Christ. These decisions are not lightly set aside.
2. It provides a check against novelty. Vincent of Lérins, a fifth-century monk, proposed a rule of thumb: that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. While the rule cannot settle every question, it expresses a healthy suspicion of teachings that have no roots in the church's historic faith.
3. It offers wisdom from experience. The church has encountered many of our questions before. The Didache's tests for prophets, Augustine's reflections on pride and Edwards's marks of a genuine work of the Spirit are examples.
4. It exposes our blind spots. Reading authors from other times and places helps us see assumptions we take for granted.

At the same time, tradition is not infallible. The Reformers insisted that councils and church leaders can err and that Scripture is the final judge. Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, too, carry their own inherited assumptions that merit examination. The aim is a conversation with tradition under the authority of Scripture.

2.14 Reason and the Human Sciences

Reason functions in theology as a servant. It helps us define terms, argue coherently, detect fallacies and organise knowledge. A prophetic ecclesiology can draw on several disciplines.

- Historical study clarifies the original settings of the biblical books and the development of doctrine.
- Sociology helps explain how religious authority works. Max Weber distinguished charismatic authority, which rests on the perceived extraordinary qualities of a leader, from traditional and legal-rational authority, and observed that charisma tends to become routinised. This insight has already shaped our reading of church history in Chapter 4.
- Psychology sheds light on religious experience. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, remains a classic study, and modern psychology of religion examines phenomena such as suggestion, group dynamics and the effects of stress and expectation.

- Anthropology helps us see how religion functions in different cultures, including in African societies.
- Ethics and law provide frameworks for analysing abuse, safeguarding and accountability.

Such disciplines must be used with discernment. Sometimes critics of religion use these tools to explain away all spiritual experience as nothing but psychology or social control. Such reductionism is not warranted by the data. The Christian theologian can accept the insights of the human sciences about how experience works while maintaining that God is truly active in his creation. A person may be moved by social dynamics and by the Spirit at the same time. The task is to discern which is which, and to be honest where we cannot tell.

2.15 Experience, Testimony and the Question of Evidence

Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity has been described as an experiential faith, one in which the testimony of what God has done is a central way of communicating truth. Testimony is biblical. The psalmist says, come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul (Psalm 66:16). The apostles said, we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:20). Testimony shapes the faith of the community and strengthens believers. A theology of the prophetic must therefore value testimony.

At the same time, testimony requires care. Claims of healing, prophecy or deliverance should be handled with honesty and humility. Several practices are wise.

1. Report what happened accurately, without exaggeration. Luke wrote his Gospel after investigating everything carefully from the beginning (Luke 1:3). Truthfulness is a Christian virtue even when the story is dramatic.
2. Distinguish between what was observed and what was concluded. A person may report that she was ill, prayed and recovered, and may attribute the recovery to God; the first parts are observation, the last an interpretation.
3. Seek corroboration where possible, especially in the case of medical claims. Medical records, the testimony of independent witnesses and follow-up over time guard against error and protect the credibility of the church.
4. Do not use testimonies to shame those who were not healed or whose prayers were not answered as they hoped.
5. Remember that God is the author of ordinary providence as well as extraordinary signs.

In many African cultures, dreams and visions are regarded as important avenues of communication from the spiritual world. This is not foreign to the Bible, in which dreams and visions are frequent. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 3, not every dream is revelation, and the Bible urges testing. Experience is a witness that must be heard and weighed.

2.16 Method in Practice: Two Worked Examples

2.16.1 Example one: a claim of divine guidance

A member of the church announces that God has told him to resign from his job, sell his house and give all the proceeds to a particular ministry, because a prophet said that a great blessing would follow. How would the method of this chapter help the church to respond?

1. Scripture. Does the Bible command or commend such an act in general? Scripture praises generosity, but it also warns of recklessness and neglect of family responsibilities (1 Timothy 5:8). It teaches that giving is to be voluntary and cheerful, not driven by pressure or by promises of return (2 Corinthians 9:7).
2. Tradition. How has the church historically understood guidance and giving? The early church warned against prophets who ask for money (Didache 11).
3. Reason. What are the practical consequences? Does the man have dependants? Has he sought wise counsel? Is the ministry accountable?
4. Experience. What is the member's own sense of the matter? Is he under pressure? Is there fear of missing a blessing? What has been the experience of others in similar situations?
5. Community. Have mature believers been consulted? Has the pastor been informed? Has the matter been weighed in the manner of 1 Corinthians 14:29?

The likely conclusion is to urge caution, to encourage the man to seek counsel and to refuse to treat the prophetic word as binding. The method protects both the individual and the church.

2.16.2 Example two: interpreting a favourite promise

A pastor wishes to preach on Jeremiah 29:11 to encourage a congregation facing hardship. The method suggests starting with the context: Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, the false prophets who promised a swift return, the seventy years, the instruction to seek the welfare of the city. The sermon can then draw out what the passage reveals about God's character and purposes, the call to faithful presence in difficult times and the assurance that God has not abandoned his people. It will avoid the claim that every believer will enjoy prosperity and success. It will connect the passage to Christ, in whom the promises of God find their Yes (2 Corinthians 1:20). The congregation is thus encouraged without being misled.

2.17 Key Terms Used in This Book

- Church (ekklesia): the community of those called together by God in Christ, both local congregations and the universal body.
- Prophetic: pertaining to the Spirit-inspired speech and witness that communicates God's word and purposes.
- Prophecy: a specific utterance given by the Spirit for edification, encouragement, comfort, instruction or warning.
- Prophet: one who is gifted and called to speak God's word, whether in the Old Testament sense or as a member of the church's ministries.
- Discernment: the Spirit-enabled and community-based process of testing claims, spirits and utterances.
- Ecclesiology: the doctrine of the church.

2.18 Limits and Humility

Every method has limits. The author writes as a Christian within a particular tradition and a particular place, with all the strengths and blind spots that implies. The aim is not to produce a final word but to contribute to an ongoing conversation. Readers from other traditions are invited to engage critically, and all conclusions are offered for testing in the manner that this very chapter commends.

2.19 Chapter Summary

- A sound theology of the prophetic requires a clear method with identified sources and safeguards.
- Scripture is the primary and final written norm; tradition, reason and experience serve under it.
- Careful interpretation attends to context, genre, canon and Christ.
- The Spirit guides interpretation within the community, not apart from it.
- Prophetic claims must be tested by consistency with truth, confession of Christ, character, faithfulness and communal discernment.
- Reading well requires attention to genre, to the New Testament use of the Old and to common pitfalls such as proof-texting and transferring promises without regard to context.
- Tradition, reason, the human sciences, testimony and the community all serve under Scripture, as the worked examples show.

2.20 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why might claims to divine speech be especially in need of testing?
2. What is the difference between sola scriptura and prima scriptura, and why does it matter for prophetic ministry?
3. Describe a time when a text of Scripture was misused. What principle of interpretation could have prevented it?
4. How should a church balance respect for personal spiritual experience with the need for accountability?
5. Which of the five criteria for evaluating prophetic claims is most neglected in your setting?

2.21 Suggested Further Reading

- Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.
- Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*.
- Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*.
- Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.
- Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*.
- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.
- G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.
- Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*.
- Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*.

Chapter 3: The Nature, Purpose and Forms of Prophecy

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them! (Numbers 11:29, author's rendering)

3.1 Introduction

The church cannot be called prophetic until it is clear what prophecy is. Chapter 1 defined the prophetic in broad terms and Chapter 2 set out the method by which claims are tested. This chapter examines prophecy itself: its nature as divine-human communication, its purposes in the life of God's people, and the many forms it takes in Scripture. The aim is to replace both naive enthusiasm and reflexive suspicion with a mature, biblically grounded understanding.

3.2 The Nature of Prophecy

3.2.1 *God speaks*

The foundation of all prophecy is the conviction that God speaks. Scripture opens with a God who creates by speaking and who addresses human beings in the garden. The covenant relationship between God and Israel is sustained by speech: promise, command, warning and invitation. Prophecy is the continuation of this divine address through human mediators. It presupposes a personal God who is not silent.

3.2.2 *Mediation and calling*

The prophet stands between God and people. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses promises that God will raise up a prophet like him and put his words in that prophet's mouth. In the stories of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the prophetic ministry begins with a call: an overwhelming encounter with God's holiness, a commissioning and often a protest from the one who is called. The prophet does not volunteer on the strength of ambition. The prophet is sent. Amos expresses it vividly, insisting that he was no professional prophet but a herdsman whom the Lord took and sent.

3.2.3 *The Spirit as the agent of prophecy*

The Spirit of God is the means by which prophets are enabled to speak. When the Spirit rests on the seventy elders in Numbers 11, they prophesy, and Moses expresses the hope that the Lord would put his Spirit on all the people. That longing anticipates the promise of Joel and its fulfilment at Pentecost. Peter explicitly connects the new age of the Spirit with the democratisation of prophecy. Prophecy is therefore a pneumatological reality; it cannot be generated by technique, training alone or human charisma.

3.2.4 *Human participation*

Although prophecy originates with God, the prophets are not mere mechanical instruments. The distinct voices and styles of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos show that God speaks through personalities, histories and cultures. In the New Testament, Paul says that the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, meaning that a person under the Spirit's influence is not out

of control. This matters pastorally. It means that prophetic speakers are responsible for how they speak, when they speak and what they say.

3.3 The Vocabulary of Prophecy

Scripture uses several terms for prophetic figures, and they illuminate different aspects of the role.

- Navi: the most common Hebrew term, generally understood as one who is called or who speaks for another.
- Ro'eh and hozeh: seer, referring to one who sees. First Samuel 9:9 notes that the one now called prophet used to be called seer.
- Ish ha-Elohim: man of God, a title used of Moses, Samuel, Elijah and Elisha.
- Prophetes: the Greek term meaning one who speaks forth. It appears frequently in the New Testament for both Old Testament figures and for Christian prophets.

These terms suggest that prophecy involves seeing, hearing, speaking and belonging to God. A prophet perceives something of God's purpose, receives a word and communicates it faithfully.

3.4 The Purposes of Prophecy

Why does God give prophecy? The biblical answer is richer than prediction. At least six purposes may be identified.

1. Covenant faithfulness. The Old Testament prophets were enforcers of the covenant, calling Israel back to loyalty to the Lord and to justice among neighbours. They announced blessings for obedience and judgement for persistent rebellion.
2. Edification, encouragement and consolation. In 1 Corinthians 14:3, Paul says that the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding, encouragement and consolation. This is a defining description of New Testament prophecy, and it places the building up of the church at the centre.
3. Conviction and conversion. Paul observes that when an unbeliever enters a gathering where prophecy is practised, the secrets of the heart are disclosed, and the person falls down and worships, confessing that God is truly present (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).
4. Direction and guidance. In Acts 13, prophets and teachers at Antioch hear the Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul for mission. Guidance is real but is received within the community and tested by it.
5. Warning and preparation. Agabus foretells a famine in Acts 11, enabling the church to send relief, and later acts out Paul's coming imprisonment in Acts 21. Warning serves wise preparation, not fear.
6. Hope and consolation in history. Prophets interpret the present and promise God's future. Isaiah 40 speaks comfort to an exiled people, and Revelation encourages persecuted churches with a vision of the end.

These purposes are interrelated. Genuine prophecy always points people toward God and builds up the community. It is never mere display, and it is never designed to enrich or exalt the speaker.

3.5 The Forms of Prophecy

The Bible displays an impressive variety of prophetic forms. Recognising this variety guards against the narrow assumption that prophecy always means a private word of personal guidance.

3.5.1 The oracle

The most typical prophetic form is the oracle, introduced by a messenger formula such as Thus says the Lord. The prophet speaks as an envoy delivering the king's message. Oracles may announce judgement, salvation, instruction or challenge.

3.5.2 The covenant lawsuit

In several prophets, God is portrayed as bringing a case against his people for breaking the covenant. Micah 6 and Hosea 4 present the heavens and earth as witnesses and lay out the charges. This form shows that prophecy is bound to ethical accountability.

3.5.3 The woe and the lament

The prophets pronounce woes upon those who exploit others, as in Isaiah 5 and Habakkuk 2, and they also lament over the suffering of the people. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because his messages are drenched in grief. The prophetic voice may therefore be one of sorrow as much as anger.

3.5.4 Visions and dreams

Many prophets receive visions: Isaiah in the temple, Ezekiel by the river Chebar, Daniel by night. Visions can symbolise and reveal what ordinary sight cannot. They are always interpreted and applied by the word that accompanies them.

3.5.5 Sign-acts and embodied messages

Prophets sometimes enacted their message. Isaiah walked stripped and barefoot as a sign to Egypt and Cush. Jeremiah wore a ruined linen belt to portray the ruin of Judah's pride. Ezekiel modelled a siege of Jerusalem with a clay tile. In the New Testament, Agabus binds himself with Paul's belt. These acts remind the church that the prophetic message may be lived and shown, not only spoken.

3.5.6 Narrative and historical interpretation

The books Jews call the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) interpret Israel's history through the lens of covenant faithfulness. Prophetic discernment includes the capacity to read events theologically, asking what God is doing and what he requires.

3.5.7 Apocalyptic

Books such as Daniel and Revelation use symbolic imagery to unveil the cosmic conflict behind history and to assure God's people of final victory. Apocalyptic is prophecy for times of intense pressure and calls for patient endurance.

3.5.8 Prophetic worship and intercession

First Chronicles 25 speaks of musicians who prophesied with lyres, harps and cymbals. Abraham is called a prophet in connection with intercession in Genesis 20. Prophecy and prayer are closely related; the prophet speaks to the people for God and to God for the people.

3.5.9 Prophetic preaching and teaching

In the New Testament, Spirit-anointed proclamation and teaching may bear prophetic character, bringing the word of God to bear on the present situation of the hearers. Not every sermon is prophetic in the narrow sense, but all faithful preaching serves the prophetic task of declaring the word of the Lord.

3.6 Prophecy and the Closed Canon

A major question for the church is how ongoing prophecy relates to Scripture. Christians have given different answers. Cessationists hold that prophecy in the sense of new revelation ceased with the apostolic age, so that Scripture is the complete and sufficient word. Continuationists hold that the gift of prophecy continues, though always subordinate to Scripture. Many Pentecostal, charismatic and Reformed charismatic thinkers distinguish between canonical revelation, which is complete, and church prophecy, which is fallible and open to testing. Wayne Grudem, for example, has argued that New Testament congregational prophecy differs in authority from Old Testament prophetic speech and from apostolic teaching.

This book works with the following convictions. First, the canon of Scripture is closed and sufficient for faith and practice. No prophecy adds to it. Second, the New Testament expects the gift of prophecy to function in the church and instructs believers to pursue it, not to despise it. Third, because contemporary prophecy is mediated through fallible people, it must always be weighed. Fourth, the legitimacy of the gift does not excuse its abuse, and the possibility of abuse does not justify its suppression. Readers who prefer a cessationist reading can still benefit from the prophetic ecclesiology described here, since its central claims concern the church's witness to the word and its critique of injustice.

3.7 The Conditional Character of Prophecy

Many prophetic statements are conditional, even when no condition is stated. Jeremiah 18:7-10 expresses the principle: if a nation against which God has spoken turns from evil, God relents of the judgement he intended; and if a nation God has promised to bless turns to evil, the blessing will be withheld. The book of Jonah illustrates the point. Nineveh repents and the announced destruction does not occur. This does not mean Jonah was a false prophet. It means that prophecy is a living summons into relationship with a responsive God, not a fixed machine.

This has pastoral consequences. Not every unfulfilled warning indicates a false word, since repentance may have changed the outcome. Conversely, fulfilment of a prediction does not prove that a prophet is from God, as Deuteronomy 13 warns. The test is always larger than a single fulfilled or unfulfilled statement.

3.8 The Character and Cost of the Prophet

The prophetic office is not glamorous. Jeremiah was beaten, imprisoned and thrown into a cistern. Elijah fled in despair. John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus warned that the prophets were persecuted and that his followers would share their fate. Authentic prophetic ministry is marked by humility, integrity and willingness to bear a cost. False prophets, by contrast, often tell people what they want to hear (Jeremiah 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:3), flatter the powerful and profit from their ministry.

The character of the messenger is not a minor matter. The Spirit gives gifts, but the Spirit also produces fruit. A prophetic ministry that displays pride, greed or sexual immorality should alarm the church no matter how striking its apparent gifts.

3.9 Personal Prophecy and Corporate Prophecy

A distinction is useful between prophecy addressed to a community and prophecy addressed to an individual. Most of the biblical examples are corporate: messages to Israel, to a city or to a congregation. There are also personal words, such as Nathan to David or Agabus to Paul, but these are comparatively rare and are embedded within relationships of accountability. Where personal prophecy is practised today, certain safeguards are wise: it should be offered tentatively rather than dictatorially; it should not replace Scripture, prayer, counsel and personal responsibility in making decisions; and it should be shared with the knowledge of church leadership. A person should never be pressured to marry, give money or take a major risk solely on the strength of a prophetic word.

3.10 Common Misconceptions

- Prophecy is only prediction. In fact most prophecy is a call to faithfulness in the present.
- Prophecy is only for special people. Scripture expects the Spirit to give prophetic gifts across the community, while recognising specific prophetic ministries.
- Prophecy is always dramatic. Often it is quiet encouragement, a timely word or the courage to tell the truth.
- Prophecy bypasses leadership and discernment. The New Testament insists it is to be weighed.
- Prophecy is a means of personal gain. The prophets of Scripture condemned those who prophesied for money or favour.

3.11 Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Glance

Prophecy was not unique to Israel. Texts from the ancient Near East show that kings and communities in the surrounding cultures also consulted figures who claimed to speak for the gods. Letters from the city of Mari on the Euphrates, dating from about the eighteenth century before Christ, mention men and women who delivered messages from the gods to the king. Oracles addressed to the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal in the seventh century before Christ have also been preserved. An inscription discovered at Deir Alla in Jordan, probably from about the eighth century before Christ, refers to a seer called Balaam, son of Beor, a name familiar from Numbers 22 to 24.

Scholars debate how much to make of these parallels, and they caution against hasty conclusions. Yet the comparison highlights several distinctive features of Israelite prophecy as presented in the Bible.

- The prophets' message is bound to a covenant with one God, who alone is Lord, and who demands exclusive loyalty.
- The prophets give considerable attention to ethical demands, such as justice for the poor and fidelity in worship, rather than only to the success of royal projects.

- The prophets are willing to criticise the king, even to announce his downfall, rather than serve as his guarantor.
- The prophetic words are remembered, collected and handed down as Scripture for a community that continued to find in them the voice of God.

These features distinguish the biblical tradition and give it its enduring power. They also remind us that the claim to speak for God is common to many religious traditions, which is why tests of true prophecy, as given in Deuteronomy, are necessary.

3.12 Prophecy and the Other Voices of Scripture

Prophecy does not stand alone in the Bible. It is one of several channels through which God communicates. The law (Torah), associated with Moses, provides the covenant constitution. The priests teach the law and maintain worship. The sages, whose work is gathered in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, offer wisdom drawn from observation and reflection. The psalmists give voice to prayer and praise. The historians interpret events. The prophets announce God's present word in light of all these. Jeremiah 18:18 reflects the recognition of the three traditional sources of guidance in Israel: instruction from the priest, counsel from the wise and the word from the prophet.

This diversity has implications for the church. A congregation needs teachers who explain the faith, wise elders who offer counsel, pastors who care and prophets who speak the timely word. When the prophetic is isolated from the rest, it may become erratic or sensational. When the prophetic is absent, the church may become smug or stagnant. Chapter 14 will take up the five-fold ministries of Ephesians 4 in this light.

3.13 Dreams and Visions

Dreams and visions play a significant role in the Bible. Joseph received dreams that shaped his destiny, and he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's officials and of Pharaoh, saying that interpretations belong to God (Genesis 40:8; 41:16). Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and saw visions of his own. In the New Testament, Joseph the husband of Mary is guided by dreams (Matthew 1 and 2). Peter sees the sheet descending in a vision at Joppa (Acts 10:9-16), and Paul has a vision of the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). Joel's promise includes old men dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions, as Peter cites at Pentecost (Acts 2:17).

Yet the Bible also warns about dreams. Ecclesiastes observes that a dream comes with much business (Ecclesiastes 5:3, 7). Jeremiah attacks prophets who say, I have dreamed, I have dreamed, and who prophesy the deceit of their own hearts, and he draws the distinction: let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? (Jeremiah 23:25-28). Numbers 12:6 indicates that the Lord speaks to prophets in visions and dreams, but that Moses is distinct in speaking with God face to face. Dreams may be a means of revelation, but they are not the highest or the most reliable.

In African societies, where dreams are often taken very seriously, the church needs a balanced teaching. The following principles may help.

1. Dreams may come from many sources: God, the mind processing the day's concerns, bodily conditions, anxieties and cultural expectations. Not every dream is a message.
2. A dream that is believed to be from God must agree with Scripture and be tested like any other prophetic claim.

3. Interpretations of dreams should not be pronounced as final authoritative statements. They should be offered tentatively and checked with mature counsel.
4. Dreams should not be used to accuse others of witchcraft or wrongdoing. Such accusations require evidence and proper processes.
5. Believers should not fall into dependence on dream interpreters, as though without them they cannot walk with God. Scripture, prayer and the fellowship of the church are the primary means of guidance.
6. A person disturbed by recurrent frightening dreams may need pastoral prayer and also medical or psychological help.

3.14 Prophecy, Signs and Wonders

Signs and wonders accompany prophetic ministry in the Bible. Moses performed signs before Pharaoh and Israel. Elijah and Elisha were associated with miracles of provision, healing and even resurrection. Jesus' miracles marked the arrival of the kingdom. The apostles worked signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 5:12), and Hebrews 2:3-4 says that the message of salvation was confirmed by those who heard him, God also bearing witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul reminded the Corinthians that his speech and message were not in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that their faith might rest not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Several qualifications are necessary.

- Signs serve the message. They point beyond themselves to the God who acts. They do not validate a speaker whose message departs from the gospel (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).
- Signs are not the only evidence. John the Baptist did no sign, yet the people said that all that John said about this man was true (John 10:41). Many faithful servants of God have worked no miracles.
- The cross defines power. Paul speaks of Christ crucified as the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). The greatest sign in the Christian faith is a death and a resurrection.
- The desire for signs can become unhealthy. Jesus rebuked a wicked and adulterous generation that seeks for a sign (Matthew 12:39). Faith that depends on a constant supply of the spectacular is fragile.
- Healing ministry should be pursued with compassion, honesty and respect for medical care.

A prophetic church can believe in the God who still works wonders, pray expectantly for the sick and welcome signs of his presence, while insisting that the heart of its message is the word of the cross and that all claims are to be tested.

3.15 Prophecy and Time: Past, Present and Future

Prophetic speech engages time in three directions. First, it looks back. The prophets constantly recalled the story of the exodus, the covenant at Sinai and God's faithfulness in the past. Memory fuels repentance and hope. In the Lord's Supper, the church likewise remembers. Second, prophecy speaks to the present. It interprets the signs of the times, calling for obedience here and now. Third, it looks forward to the future that God has promised.

The relationship between the near and the far future in prophecy has long been debated. Prophetic texts sometimes seem to merge events close to the prophet's day with events of a more distant fulfilment, a feature sometimes called prophetic telescoping or foreshortening, like mountain peaks seen from a distance that appear to be close together though separated by long valleys. Isaiah 61:1-2, for example, is quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19, who stops before the phrase and the day of vengeance of our God, suggesting that the fulfilment unfolds in stages. Interpreters must be cautious in assigning fulfilments, and humble about the unknown.

The grammar of Hebrew prophecy sometimes describes future events in the past tense, a feature sometimes called the prophetic perfect, expressing the certainty of the event. When Isaiah writes of the Servant, the sufferings are spoken of in ways that suggest the matter is as good as done. This reminds the reader that prophecy is not merely forecasting but an announcement of what God has determined.

3.16 Who May Prophecy? Women, Men, Young and Old

The prophetic tradition shows God using a remarkable variety of people. Women among the prophets include Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3) and, in the New Testament, Anna, who spoke about the child Jesus to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38), and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). Mary's song is a prophetic hymn. Young people appear: Samuel was a boy when called, Jeremiah was a youth, and Timothy was exhorted not to let anyone despise his youth. Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. The prophets came from priestly families, as with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and from the royal court, as with Isaiah. John the Baptist came from the wilderness.

The promise of Joel includes sons and daughters, old men and young men, and even male and female servants (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18). No class, age or gender is excluded from the potential of receiving the Spirit's prophetic gifts. The church should be open to hearing God's word from unexpected sources, while remaining committed to testing it.

3.17 A Method for Studying a Prophetic Text

To strengthen the habits formed in Chapter 2, this section offers a simple method for studying a prophetic text, with an example.

1. Identify the text and its boundaries. Where does the unit begin and end?
2. Establish the historical and literary context. When was it written, to whom and in what circumstances? What comes before and after?
3. Identify the form. Is it an oracle, a lament, a lawsuit, a vision, a narrative or an apocalypse?
4. Observe the details. Note the key words, repeated terms, images and structure.
5. State the message in the original setting. What was God saying to those first hearers?
6. Relate it to Christ and the whole canon. How does the New Testament take up this theme?
7. Apply it to the church today. What continuities and discontinuities exist? What does it ask of us?

As an example, consider Amos 5:21-24. The context is the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century before Christ, a time of prosperity masking oppression. The form is a divine oracle in poetic language, in which God rejects the people's festivals and offerings. The key

words are hate, despise and take no delight, followed by the contrast with justice and righteousness. The message to the original hearers is that worship divorced from justice is unacceptable and that God demands a society shaped by fairness. The New Testament takes up the theme in Jesus' statement about the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23) and James's definition of pure religion (James 1:27). For the church today, the passage asks whether our services, offerings and festivals are accompanied by a concern for the poor and honest dealings in our economic life. The application is thus drawn naturally from the text rather than imposed upon it.

3.18 Chapter Summary

- Prophecy is divine speech mediated through human beings by the Spirit, grounded in a personal God who communicates.
- Its purposes include covenant faithfulness, edification, conviction, guidance, warning and hope.
- It takes many forms: oracle, lawsuit, woe, lament, vision, sign-act, narrative, apocalyptic, worship and preaching.
- The canon is closed, and contemporary prophecy is subject to Scripture and to testing.
- Israelite prophecy is distinctive among its ancient neighbours; dreams, visions and signs serve the message and are always tested.
- Prophecy engages the past, present and future, and God may use women and men, young and old.
- Prophecy is often conditional, and the character and cost of the prophet matter.

3.19 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which purpose of prophecy do you think is most needed in your church today, and why?
2. How does the idea of conditional prophecy change the way we evaluate unfulfilled predictions?
3. What safeguards should a church put in place for personal prophecy?
4. Which of the forms of prophecy is most neglected in your tradition?
5. How should a congregation respond when a gifted person displays flawed character?

3.20 Suggested Further Reading

- Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*.
- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*.
- Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*.
- Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now*.
- D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*.
- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.
- Craig S. Keener, *Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today*.

Chapter 4: The Prophetic Strand in the History of Ecclesiology

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. (Hebrews 13:7, author's rendering)

4.1 Introduction

The prophetic calling of the church is not a modern discovery. Throughout two thousand years, the church has wrestled with how the Spirit speaks, who may speak, and how the community should respond. The story is neither a simple tale of decline from an early golden age nor a straightforward narrative of progress. It is a story of recurring tension between structure and Spirit, order and renewal, institution and charisma. This chapter surveys that history in broad strokes, tracing the prophetic strand from the early church to the present and showing how it has shaped, and been shaped by, the church's self-understanding.

A caution is needed at the outset. This is a survey, not an exhaustive history. Its purpose is to identify patterns that will inform the constructive work of later chapters. Historical sources, especially for movements regarded as heretical, are often preserved by opponents, so conclusions must be held with appropriate humility.

4.2 The Early Church

4.2.1 *Prophets in the first and second centuries*

The New Testament shows prophets active in the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus and elsewhere. This continued into the second century. The Didache, an early Christian manual of church life, devotes attention to itinerant apostles and prophets and gives practical tests: a visitor who stays beyond a brief period, or who asks for money in the Spirit, is to be regarded as a false prophet. The Shepherd of Hermas likewise offers criteria for distinguishing true from false prophets, emphasising humility, a quiet manner and a life consistent with the message.

Writers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century testify that prophetic gifts were still found in the church. Irenaeus defended these gifts against those who rejected them while also opposing the teachings of false prophets. The early church thus affirmed both the reality of the Spirit's gifts and the necessity of discernment.

4.2.2 *Montanism and its legacy*

Around the second half of the second century, a movement arose in Phrygia in Asia Minor, led by Montanus and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. Its adherents called it the New Prophecy. They claimed fresh revelation through ecstatic utterance, expected the imminent descent of the heavenly Jerusalem, and urged strict discipline, including fasting and a heightened view of martyrdom. Many bishops opposed the movement, partly because of its claims to authority and partly because of the manner of its prophesying, which they judged disorderly. The movement spread widely, and the North African theologian Tertullian eventually sympathised with it.

The controversy sharpened an enduring question: can new prophecy stand alongside the apostolic witness without threatening it? The church's response, which gradually hardened, was to emphasise the apostolic tradition, the settled canon and the authority of bishops. In the process, the prophetic ministry that had been prominent in the first century became less visible in the ordinary structures of church life. Some scholars have judged that the reaction against Montanism contributed to the marginalisation of prophecy. Others note that the church was defending the sufficiency of the apostolic message against real doctrinal risks. Both observations contain truth.

4.3 The Patristic and Imperial Church

With the conversion of Constantine and the growing partnership between church and empire in the fourth century, the church gained security and influence but also faced new temptations. The prophetic role shifted. Charismatic authority was increasingly channelled into the office of the bishop and, alongside it, into monastic and ascetic movements. The desert fathers and mothers withdrew from a church they feared was becoming comfortable, and their witness constituted a kind of silent protest.

Prophetic courage nevertheless appeared within the institution. Ambrose of Milan confronted the emperor Theodosius after a massacre at Thessalonica in 390 and required public penance before he would be readmitted to communion. John Chrysostom, preaching in Constantinople, denounced luxury and the neglect of the poor, and his boldness toward the imperial court contributed to his exile. Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa spoke forcefully for the poor and against usury and exploitation. These figures show that the prophetic voice does not require a separate office; it can arise wherever a pastor or teacher is willing to speak the word of God to power.

4.4 The Medieval Period

The medieval church is often remembered for hierarchy and sacramental life, yet it was also rich in prophetic figures. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century abbess, received visions and wrote and preached with notable authority, rebuking clergy and rulers alike. Francis of Assisi called the church back to evangelical poverty. Joachim of Fiore, in the same century, developed an influential vision of history in successive ages, which fuelled apocalyptic hopes in later centuries. Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century wrote boldly to popes, urging reform and the return of the papacy from Avignon to Rome.

Alongside these, movements such as the Waldensians, and later John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, protested against corruption and called for the church to be governed by Scripture. Hus was burned at the stake in 1415. Medieval history thus shows two things: that the prophetic spirit persisted within the church even under heavy institutional pressure, and that those who spoke it frequently suffered for it.

4.5 The Reformation Era

The sixteenth-century Reformation was in many ways a prophetic act. Martin Luther's challenge in 1517 to the sale of indulgences, and his insistence on justification by faith and the authority of Scripture, was a call to bring the church under the word. John Calvin and other reformers developed ecclesiologies in which the marks of the true church were the faithful

preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments, with discipline often added. In this scheme, the prophetic task was bound closely to preaching and exposition.

At the same time, the reformers were wary of claims to direct revelation that bypassed Scripture. Luther opposed the so-called Zwickau prophets in 1521 and later conflicts with radical figures such as Thomas Müntzer, who appealed to the Spirit against the written word. The Radical Reformation, including the Anabaptists, gave more place to the Spirit and to the gathered congregation, though its movements varied widely in their character and conduct. In England, Puritan gatherings known as prophesyings, in which clergy practised and discussed biblical exposition, drew royal disapproval in the 1570s, and Archbishop Edmund Grindal was suspended for refusing to suppress them. In the following century, the Quakers, led by George Fox, stressed the inward light and the possibility of direct guidance by the Spirit.

The Reformation therefore left a complex legacy: a powerful reassertion of Scripture as the measure of the church, together with a continuing debate over the place of ongoing prophetic experience.

4.6 Pietism, Revival and the Birth of Pentecostalism

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought renewed emphasis on heartfelt faith. German Pietism sought a living church within the church. The Wesleys and George Whitefield in Britain, and Jonathan Edwards and others in North America, were leaders in the evangelical revivals now called the Great Awakenings. These movements stressed conversion, assurance and holiness, and often saw dramatic manifestations of the Spirit, which Edwards sought to evaluate carefully in his writings on religious affections.

In the nineteenth century, Edward Irving and the circle around him in London, which gave rise to the Catholic Apostolic Church, sought the restoration of apostles, prophets and the gifts of the Spirit as a full pattern of church life. Though short-lived as a movement, it anticipated themes that would become central to later renewal.

The twentieth century witnessed the explosion of Pentecostalism. Revival in Wales in 1904 and the Azusa Street meetings in Los Angeles from 1906, in which the African American preacher William Seymour played a central role, helped to ignite a global movement that emphasised baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy. Pentecostalism restored to many believers the expectation that the Spirit speaks and acts in ordinary congregations. The charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s carried similar emphases into older denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church.

4.7 Prophetic Movements in Africa

Africa has been one of the most vibrant theatres of the prophetic in modern Christian history. Early in the twentieth century, the Liberian preacher William Wadé Harris travelled along the coast of West Africa, calling for abandonment of idols and baptising multitudes. Simon Kimbangu in the Congo drew large crowds before colonial authorities imprisoned him in 1921, yet the church he inspired grew into a major body. In the Niger Delta, Garrick Braide led a movement of revival and renewal in the 1910s. In southern Africa, prophet-healing churches such as those associated with Isaiah Shembe and the Zionist movements developed distinctive forms of worship and community. Bengt Sundkler's study of these churches in South Africa helped bring them to scholarly notice.

In Nigeria, the Aladura movement, whose name derives from a Yoruba term associated with prayer, emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. Prayer groups formed in the aftermath of the 1918 influenza epidemic gave rise to bodies including the Christ Apostolic Church and its associated revival under Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1930, the Cherubim and Seraphim society associated with Moses Orimolade Tunolase, and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) under Josiah Ositelu. These churches emphasised prayer, visions, healing, prophecy and spiritual power, and they articulated a Christianity that spoke directly to felt African needs. John Peel's study of the Aladura remains a key reference.

Later waves followed. From the 1970s, campus revivals and new Pentecostal movements shaped Nigerian Christianity, and bodies such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which began in 1952, the Deeper Life Bible Church and Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel) grew to national and international prominence. Scholars such as Ogbu Kalu have studied this phenomenon and highlighted both its vitality and its complexity. It has produced courageous social witness and extraordinary missionary reach, but also prosperity teachings, celebrity prophets and abuses of spiritual authority that require critical reflection. Part VII and Part VIII of this book will return to these matters.

4.8 Women Prophets in the History of the Church

The contribution of women to the prophetic strand of church history deserves special mention, both because it has often been overlooked and because it illustrates the Spirit's freedom to use whom he will. Joel's promise that daughters would prophesy (Joel 2:28) was understood by the earliest believers as fulfilled in their midst, as the daughters of Philip and the women who prayed and prophesied in Corinth show.

In the early church, Perpetua, a young noblewoman martyred at Carthage in 203, left an account of her imprisonment that records visions she regarded as given by God, and her story circulated widely in the African church. The Montanist movement gave prominence to Priscilla and Maximilla, whose prominence was one reason for the hostility of their opponents. In the medieval period, Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena exercised public voices that were remarkable for their age, and Julian of Norwich, in England, recorded a series of visions of Christ's passion in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, reflecting at length on the love of God. In the seventeenth century, the Quaker Margaret Fell defended the right of women to speak in the church in her tract *Women's Speaking Justified*. In the nineteenth century, Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, wrote and preached in defence of women's ministry, and women preachers played a notable role in the holiness and Pentecostal movements.

In Africa, women occupied significant prophetic roles. In Nigeria, Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon, whose trance and visions in 1925 were part of the origins of the Cherubim and Seraphim movement, worked alongside Moses Orimolade Tunolase. In Zambia, Alice Lenshina, who reported visions in the early 1950s, founded the Lumpa Church, which attracted a large following; its later conflict with the colonial and then independent government ended in violence in 1964, in which hundreds died. In Zimbabwe, Mai Chaza became widely known in the 1950s as a healer and founder of the church called Guta Ra Jehova, the City of God. These stories show both the vitality and the vulnerability of movements led by charismatic women, who often attracted strong followings among the marginalised and strong opposition from established authorities.

The testimony of history therefore supports the point made in Chapter 3: the Spirit's gifts are not restricted by gender. How churches order the offices of leadership is a matter on which

Christians differ, and Chapter 18 will address it. But whatever the position taken on ordination, the church has repeatedly been enriched by prophetic women, and its failure to listen to them has frequently been a loss.

4.9 The Spirit in the Eastern and Medieval Traditions

The prophetic thread in church history is not confined to the Western church. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the experience of the Holy Spirit has always been central. Symeon the New Theologian, who lived from 949 to 1022, taught that the Christian life should involve a conscious experience of the Spirit, and he challenged those who thought that such experiences belonged only to the apostolic age. The hesychast tradition of prayer, defended in the fourteenth century by Gregory Palamas, emphasised the vision of divine light and the transforming presence of God. In Russia, the tradition of the spiritual elder, the staretz, gave wise and sometimes prophetic guidance to ordinary people. Another Eastern tradition is that of the holy fool, the person who adopts a posture of apparent folly in order to speak uncomfortable truths to the powerful, as in the Russian tradition of the yurodivy, a figure who could criticise rulers when others dared not.

In the medieval West, monastic reform movements such as that associated with Cluny and later the Cistercians, under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, sought to renew the church from within. The mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, the Franciscans and Dominicans, sent preachers to the cities and the poor. Lay movements such as the Waldensians and the Beguines sought lives of devotion outside the established structures. Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican preacher in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century, denounced corruption in church and city, predicted judgement and exercised enormous influence for a time, before he was condemned and executed in 1498. His case shows both the power of the prophetic preacher and the dangers of a ministry that fuses spiritual and political power.

4.10 The Reformation Era: Further Reflections

The Reformation was in many respects a recovery of the prophetic voice of Scripture over against the accumulated traditions of the church. Martin Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, set out in his 1520 appeal *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, argued that all baptised Christians share in spiritual ministry, a conviction with profound implications for a prophetic ecclesiology. At the same time, Luther was concerned about those who claimed direct revelations that bypassed the written word.

In Zurich, Huldrych Zwingli established in 1525 a gathering known as the *Prophezei*, a daily exercise in which Scripture was read in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and then expounded in the vernacular. The name itself reveals the way the Reformers understood the term prophecy: the interpretation and application of Scripture. This idea of prophecy as inspired exposition influenced the English Puritan prophesyings mentioned earlier and shaped the Reformed understanding of the preacher as a kind of prophet.

The Radical Reformation produced a spectrum of movements. The Anabaptists, whose Schleitheim Confession of 1527 stressed believers' baptism, separation from worldly power and nonviolence, suffered ruthless persecution; thousands were executed, and their stories were later gathered in the *Martyrs Mirror*. Other radicals took a different path. In the city of Münster in 1534 and 1535, a group claiming apocalyptic revelation, led by Jan Matthys and then Jan of Leiden, took over the city and established a regime marked by violence and coercion, which

ended in military defeat and brutal reprisal. The Münster episode became a standing warning, used by many opponents of the radicals, of the danger of apocalyptic prophecy combined with political and military power. The lesson is not that all radical movements were violent, since most Anabaptists were not, but that prophetic claims joined to coercion can have catastrophic results.

4.11 Pietism, the Evangelical Awakening and the Black Church

Philipp Jakob Spener's *Pia Desideria* of 1675 called for a renewal of the church through Bible study in small groups, the priesthood of all believers and a practical faith. The Moravian community at Herrnhut, founded in the 1720s under Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, experienced a remarkable spiritual renewal and sent missionaries across the world. John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman, described his experience at Aldersgate Street in 1738 as feeling his heart strangely warmed. He and his brother Charles travelled widely, often preaching in the open air to the poor, forming societies for mutual accountability, and sending lay preachers. Wesley was cautious about what he called enthusiasm, but he expected the Spirit to work. He also opposed the slave trade; his 1774 tract *Thoughts upon Slavery* was followed by a letter to William Wilberforce in 1791, written shortly before his death, encouraging him to continue the struggle.

In North America, the Great Awakening saw preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield draw large crowds. The revival also had a profound influence on African Americans, many of whom heard in the gospel a message of dignity and liberation. The Black church developed as a distinctive tradition, with institutions such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, formally organised in 1816 under Richard Allen, which arose in part from protest against racial discrimination in white-led congregations. The spirituals expressed hope and resistance, and the Black church became a centre of social and political leadership, culminating in the leaders of the civil rights movement. This tradition is a powerful example of a community that embodied prophetic ecclesiology in suffering and hope.

4.12 The Twentieth-Century Pentecostal and Charismatic Expansion

The modern Pentecostal movement is usually traced to revivals at the start of the twentieth century. Charles Parham's Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, in 1901 is often cited as the origin of the teaching that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of baptism in the Spirit. The Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, led by William Seymour from 1906, was marked by an interracial gathering, emotional worship, and spiritual gifts, and it became a fountainhead for the movement. The Welsh Revival of 1904, with figures such as Evan Roberts, also contributed to the spiritual climate.

The movement spread rapidly. Swedish missionaries Gunnar Vingren and Daniel Berg founded what became the Assemblies of God in Brazil in 1911. In Chile, a Methodist missionary named Willis Hoover was part of a revival in Valparaíso in 1909 that led to a distinctive Chilean Pentecostalism. In Korea, David Yonggi Cho began a ministry in 1958 that grew into one of the largest congregations in the world. In West Africa, Pentecostal missions and indigenous movements flourished. From the 1960s, the charismatic renewal brought similar experiences into mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches; Dennis Bennett's testimony in 1960 and the Duquesne weekend of 1967 are often cited as markers. In the 1980s, writers at Fuller Seminary, including John Wimber, spoke of a third wave of the Spirit's work emphasising signs and wonders in evangelical churches.

Pentecostalism's history also includes shadows. The early interracial character of Azusa Street gave way to racial segregation in many Pentecostal denominations in the following decades, a failure that later generations have sought to repent. Disputes over leadership, finances and doctrine have led to many divisions. In recent decades, some forms of the movement have embraced the prosperity teaching discussed in Chapter 30. A balanced account recognises both the movement's extraordinary missionary energy and its need for continuing reform.

4.13 African Prophetic Movements in Closer View

The prophetic movements of Africa deserve more detailed attention, since they are central to the story of this book.

- William Wadé Harris. A Liberian of the Grebo people, Harris claimed a vision in 1910 or 1913 in which the angel Gabriel commissioned him as a prophet. From 1913 to 1915, dressed in white and carrying a staff, a cross and a Bible, he travelled along the coasts of Ivory Coast and the Gold Coast, now Ghana, calling people to abandon fetishes, to be baptised and to keep the Sabbath. Tens of thousands responded. French colonial authorities eventually expelled him, but his converts formed the nucleus of churches, including the Methodist church in Ivory Coast and independent Harrist churches.
- Simon Kimbangu. A Baptist catechist in the Belgian Congo, Kimbangu was reported in 1921 to have healed the sick at Nkamba. Crowds gathered, and the colonial authorities, alarmed, arrested him within months. He was sentenced to death, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he died in prison in 1951. His followers continued, and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu was officially recognised in 1959 and later became a member of the World Council of Churches.
- Garrick Sokari Braide. An Anglican layman in the Niger Delta, Braide gained fame about 1915 as a healer and prophet, taking the name Elijah II. He challenged traditional practices and drew many to the church. The Anglican authorities and the colonial government grew suspicious, and he was arrested in 1916. He died in 1918.
- Isaiah Shembe. In South Africa, Shembe founded the Nazareth Baptist Church, or amaNazaretha, about 1910, combining Christian and Zulu elements in worship at the sacred mountain of Nhlankazi.
- The Aladura movement in Nigeria. As noted, the Aladura churches emerged from praying groups during the influenza epidemic of 1918. The Cherubim and Seraphim society began in Lagos in 1925. Joseph Ayo Babalola's ministry at Ilesa in 1930 sparked a revival that spread through Yorubaland and led to the formation of the Christ Apostolic Church. Josiah Olunowo Ositelu founded the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in the 1930s. These churches emphasised prayer, fasting, visions, healing and holy water and other symbols, and they often met resistance from missionary churches and colonial officials.

Several themes recur across these movements. They gave African people a gospel in their own idiom and with African leaders. They took seriously the world of spirits and the need for protection and healing. They emphasised the Bible, often in the vernacular. They were frequently suspected by colonial authorities, who feared that charismatic leaders would stir up political resistance. They produced vibrant worship and a distinctive spirituality. And they sometimes raised difficult questions about the use of symbols, the claims of leaders and the

relationship to traditional religion, questions that scholars and church leaders continue to discuss.

Bengt Sundkler, in his early study of southern Africa, distinguished Ethiopian-type churches, which separated from mission churches mostly over issues of leadership and control, from Zionist-type churches, which emphasised the Spirit, healing and prophetic leadership. Later scholars, such as Allan Anderson, have refined these categories. What matters for our purposes is that the African prophetic movements were creative responses to the gospel and to the colonial situation, and a prophetic ecclesiology must take them seriously as part of the story of the church.

4.14 A Note on Sources and Method in Church History

Writing about the history of prophecy requires care. Much of our evidence for movements deemed heretical comes from their enemies, whose descriptions may be distorted. Official church records often favour the perspective of those in authority. Accounts of the lives of saints and prophets may be shaped by the desire to edify, so that history merges with legend. In Africa, much of the early history of prophetic movements was recorded by missionaries and colonial officials, whose assumptions affected what they saw and reported, while the African participants' own accounts were largely oral. The recovery of those oral traditions, and the work of African historians and theologians, is correcting the record.

Readers should therefore treat the summaries in this chapter as introductions, to be tested against the primary sources and the specialist literature listed in the further reading. Historical humility is part of the discipline of discernment.

4.15 Patterns and Lessons

Looking across this history, several patterns emerge.

1. The tension between institution and charisma is permanent. The sociologist Max Weber described how charismatic movements tend to become routinised in institutions. The church history we have surveyed bears this out. Renewal comes, structures form, vitality fades and a new renewal erupts. Neither pure spontaneity nor pure structure is sufficient.
2. The prophetic voice often arises at the margins. Monks, women visionaries, lay preachers, the poor and the colonised have repeatedly carried prophetic burdens that central authorities ignored. A prophetic ecclesiology must listen to those at the edge.
3. Prophetic movements are vulnerable to error and excess. Heresy, authoritarianism, apocalyptic miscalculation and financial exploitation have accompanied some movements. History warns against uncritical enthusiasm.
4. Suppression of the prophetic is also a failure. Where the church has silenced or marginalised genuine prophetic voices, it has often impoverished itself and sometimes provoked schism. History warns equally against uncritical suspicion.
5. Authentic prophetic witness is anchored in Scripture and in Christ. The movements that have borne lasting fruit have generally kept faith with the apostolic message, even when they challenged the church's practices.
6. The prophetic involves public as well as private concerns. From Ambrose to Chrysostom to modern African prophets, witness has frequently addressed rulers, injustice and the welfare of the poor.

4.16 Implications for Prophetic Ecclesiology

These lessons suggest that a mature prophetic ecclesiology must hold several things together: openness to the Spirit and submission to Scripture; respect for order and readiness for renewal; a pastoral concern for individuals and a public concern for justice; a willingness to affirm the gifts of ordinary members and the discipline to test them. It must also be honest about the church's failures. The history surveyed here is not a record of uninterrupted faithfulness. It is the story of a people who repeatedly fall short and are repeatedly summoned back by the word of the Lord.

4.17 Chapter Summary

- The early church practised prophecy and developed tests for it; the Montanist controversy sharpened debate about new revelation.
- After Constantine, prophetic witness moved into monasticism and into courageous bishops who confronted power.
- Medieval visionaries and reformers carried the prophetic spirit within and against the institution.
- The Reformation placed the church under the word, while debates over the Spirit and direct revelation continued.
- Revival movements and Pentecostalism restored the expectation of the Spirit's gifts, and African prophetic movements have been profoundly influential.
- Recurring patterns include the tension between institution and charisma, the marginal origin of prophetic voices, and the dual dangers of excess and suppression.
- Women prophets, Eastern and medieval traditions, the Reformation and Radical Reformation, Pietism, the Black church, Pentecostalism and African prophetic movements each add to the story, and sources must be read with care.

4.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why did the church react so strongly against Montanism, and what can we learn from both the movement and its critics?
2. Who are some prophetic figures in your own tradition's history, and what did their witness cost them?
3. How has the Aladura or Pentecostal heritage shaped the way prophecy is understood in your community?
4. What is the difference between a prophetic voice within an institution and one outside it?
5. Which of the patterns in section 4.15 do you see operating in the church today?

4.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*.
- Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *Prophecy at Carthage*.
- Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion*.
- Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.
- J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*.

- Ogbu U. Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction.
- Allan Anderson, An Introduction to Pentecostalism.
- Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity.
- Allan Anderson, African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century.
- Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, A History of the Church in Africa.

Part II: The Old Testament Roots

Chapter 5: Israel as a Prophetic Community

You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:6, author's rendering)

5.1 Introduction

The church did not invent its prophetic identity. It inherited it. Before there was a church, there was Israel, the people whom God called out of slavery, bound to himself by covenant and sent to be a light among the nations. To understand the church as a prophetic community, we must begin where the Bible begins, with the story of Israel. This chapter argues that Israel was itself a prophetic community: a people formed by the word of God, entrusted with that word, and charged with embodying it before the watching world.

5.2 Election and Vocation

The story of Israel begins with a call. God summons Abraham to leave his country and promises to make of him a great nation, adding a purpose that reaches beyond Abraham's own family: in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). Election is not privilege for its own sake; it is vocation. Israel is chosen for the sake of the world.

This vocation is made explicit at Sinai. After delivering the people from Egypt, God declares that, if they obey his voice and keep his covenant, they shall be his treasured possession out of all the peoples, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). The phrase kingdom of priests suggests a people who mediate between God and the nations, standing before the nations on God's behalf. The prophet Isaiah later reinforces the idea in a courtroom image in which God says to Israel, you are my witnesses (Isaiah 43:10). A witness is one who testifies to what has been seen and heard. Israel's very existence is meant to testify to the character of the Lord.

The pattern is significant for ecclesiology. The New Testament will apply these same words to the church (1 Peter 2:9), and so the church's identity as a chosen, priestly and witnessing people is rooted in Israel's calling.

5.3 Moses, the Prototype Prophet

Moses stands at the head of the prophetic tradition. The book of Numbers records that God spoke with him face to face, plainly and not in riddles, in contrast to other prophets who received visions and dreams (Numbers 12:6-8). Deuteronomy ends with the verdict that no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10). Moses is the mediator of the covenant, the intercessor who pleads for the people after the golden calf, the lawgiver and the leader.

Yet Moses does not hoard the Spirit. When two men prophesy in the camp and Joshua urges Moses to stop them, Moses answers with the longing that gives this chapter its epigraph: would that all the Lord's people were prophets (Numbers 11:29). Here already is the hope that the prophetic gift will one day be given to the whole community. Deuteronomy 18:15 adds a promise: the Lord will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers. The New Testament will see this promise fulfilled in Jesus.

Women also appear among Israel's prophets. Miriam is called a prophetess (Exodus 15:20). Deborah judges Israel and is called a prophetess (Judges 4:4). Huldah is consulted by King Josiah's officials and confirms the authority of the rediscovered book of the law (2 Kings 22:14-20). The prophetic gift in Israel is not confined to one class or gender.

5.4 The Covenant Community as an Alternative Society

Israel's calling was not merely to hold correct beliefs but to live a distinctive common life. The law given at Sinai covers worship, family, economics, justice and care for the vulnerable. It is striking how often these laws address the weak. Israel is commanded not to oppress the foreigner, the widow or the orphan, because they themselves were once slaves in Egypt (Exodus 22:21-24). Landowners are to leave the edges of their fields for the poor and the stranger (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Loans to the poor are not to carry interest (Exodus 22:25). Every seventh day is a Sabbath, a rest for people, servants and animals alike. The year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year, envisions the return of land and the release of those enslaved by debt (Leviticus 25).

Whatever the historical extent to which these laws were practised, they present a vision of a society shaped by God's justice and mercy. Walter Brueggemann has described this as an alternative consciousness and an alternative community, formed in contrast to the economics of oppression that Israel had known in Egypt. The nations were meant to see in Israel what life looks like under the rule of the Lord. Moses tells the people that their keeping of the statutes will show their wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples (Deuteronomy 4:6-8). The community itself is a prophetic sign.

5.5 Prophetic Figures in the Life of Israel

After Moses, prophetic figures appear in successive stages of Israel's history. Samuel is a pivotal figure: he is both priest and prophet, anoints Israel's first kings and holds them to account. In his time we hear of companies of prophets who prophesy with music (1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20), a form of communal prophetic activity. Nathan confronts David over his sin with Bathsheba and the killing of Uriah through a parable and the piercing words, you are the man (2 Samuel 12). Gad advises David. Elijah and Elisha lead prophetic movements, associated with groups called the sons of the prophets, in the northern kingdom during periods of acute idolatry and injustice (1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 13).

From the eighth century before Christ, we encounter the writing prophets: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, followed by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many others. Their messages were preserved in books that would shape Israel's identity and that the New Testament church would receive as Scripture. These prophets belonged to the community, spoke to its condition and were remembered by it.

5.6 Prophet, Priest and King

Israel's institutions distributed religious and political authority among several offices. The priests presided over sacrifice, taught the law and maintained the sanctuary. The kings governed, administered justice and led in war. The prophets spoke the word of the Lord into the situation of both. Deuteronomy 16:18 through 18:22 offers a remarkable sketch of this distribution of power: judges and officers to administer justice, a king who is not to accumulate wealth, horses or wives and who is to read the law daily, priests who depend on offerings, and a

prophet through whom God speaks. The king is placed under the law, and the prophet's word stands as a check on every other office.

This is important for ecclesiology because it displays a theology of accountable authority. No office is absolute. The prophetic office does not eliminate priestly or royal functions, nor is it exempt from testing; Deuteronomy 13 and 18 give strict criteria for distinguishing true from false prophets. The healthy community requires all three functions: worship, governance and the living word. When one dominates, the community suffers.

5.7 Prophetic Worship

It would be a mistake to separate prophecy from worship. The Chronicler tells us that David set apart the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the service of prophesying with lyres, harps and cymbals (1 Chronicles 25:1-3). Several psalms contain oracles in which God himself speaks to the gathered worshippers, as in Psalms 50 and 81. Worship in Israel included hearing as well as singing. The people came before God not only to offer but also to listen. This pattern underlies later Christian understandings of worship as a dialogue between God and his people.

5.8 The Exodus and Sinai: The Making of a People

The story of the exodus is the founding event of Israel's identity. The book of Exodus opens with an enslaved people, groaning under Egyptian labour, and with a God who hears: I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8). The God of Israel is revealed as one who hears the cry of the oppressed, a theme that runs through the entire prophetic tradition and shapes the church's concern for justice.

The Passover, with its blood on the doorposts and its meal eaten in haste, is the memorial of deliverance and a pattern for the Lord's Supper. The crossing of the sea and the song of Moses and Miriam celebrate the victory of God. Then, at Sinai, God makes a covenant with the people he has redeemed. The order is significant: the law is given after the deliverance, not before. The Ten Commandments begin, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2). Obedience is the response of the redeemed, not the price of redemption. This pattern of grace before law underlies both the prophets' appeal and the apostolic gospel.

The wilderness story is also instructive. The people grumble, doubt and rebel. At Sinai itself, while Moses is on the mountain, they make a golden calf (Exodus 32). The failure is catastrophic, and Moses's intercession becomes the means by which the covenant is preserved. God's presence is symbolised by the tabernacle: let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst (Exodus 25:8). The pattern of covenant, failure, intercession and restoration becomes a template for the whole of Israel's story and for the church's understanding of itself as a community that lives by grace.

5.9 The Torah as Prophetic Instruction

The Hebrew word torah means instruction or teaching, and is wider than the English word law. The Torah is not only a code of regulations but a narrative and a way of life. For our purposes, three features of the Torah have prophetic significance.

5.9.1 Justice is built into the structure of society

The laws on justice in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are specific. Judges are to take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow (Deuteronomy 16:19-20). Courts are to be fair to rich and poor alike (Leviticus 19:15). Weights and measures are to be honest (Leviticus 19:35-36). Debts are to be released and slaves freed in the seventh year, with provision made for their start in freedom (Deuteronomy 15:1-15). The prophets, when they later condemned corrupt courts and dishonest scales, were not importing a foreign ethic but appealing to the covenant.

5.9.2 The Sabbath is a weekly protest against oppression

The Sabbath commandment links rest to creation (Exodus 20:8-11) and to liberation (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). A people who had been slaves, with no day of rest, were to give rest to all in the community, including servants, foreigners and animals. The Sabbath interrupts the relentless demands of economic production and declares that human beings are more than workers. Walter Brueggemann has argued that Sabbath is a form of resistance to the culture of endless production. For the prophetic church, Sabbath is both a gift and a witness, and the church's own habits of overwork and busyness may need to be re-examined.

5.9.3 The community is to remember

Again and again, the Torah tells Israel to remember: remember that you were a slave in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15; 15:15; 24:18, 22). Memory is the foundation of compassion. A people who remember their own oppression are expected to show mercy to the oppressed. The church's memory of its own story of grace has the same function. We forgive because we have been forgiven, and we care for the stranger because we were strangers.

5.10 The Judges: Charismatic Leadership and Its Limits

After the conquest, Israel was led by a series of figures called judges. The book of Judges reveals a recurring cycle: Israel does evil, is oppressed by a neighbouring power, cries to the Lord, and God raises up a deliverer, after which the land has rest, until the cycle begins again. Several of these leaders are described as empowered by the Spirit of the Lord: the Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel (Judges 3:10), the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon (6:34), and the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson (14:6). Deborah, a prophetess, judged Israel and summoned Barak to the battle (Judges 4 and 5).

The judges show how God gives his Spirit to equip leaders for particular tasks. But the book is also a sober warning. Some of these leaders, like Samson, were gifted but morally flawed, and the narrative offers little confidence in charisma without character. The book concludes with a sorry refrain: in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). Spiritual gifts alone are insufficient to sustain a community. They need to be joined to covenant faithfulness, communal accountability and sound structures. This theme will recur when we consider the order of the church in Part V.

5.11 Samuel, Nathan and the Prophetic Check on the Monarchy

When the elders of Israel asked Samuel for a king like the nations, the request was a sign of dissatisfaction with the Lord's own kingship (1 Samuel 8). Samuel warned them of what a king would take: sons for the army, daughters for the palace, the best of the fields and a tenth of the flocks. The people insisted, and God gave them a king, but within the structure of a prophetic

check. Samuel anointed Saul, but when Saul disobeyed, Samuel declared that the Lord had rejected him as king, with the famous words: to obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). Samuel then anointed David.

The pattern of prophetic oversight of the monarchy continued. Nathan delivered the promise of an enduring dynasty to David (2 Samuel 7), and also, in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah, confronted David with the parable of the ewe lamb and the words, you are the man (2 Samuel 12:7). David's response, I have sinned against the Lord, shows the possibility of repentance under prophetic rebuke. Later, the prophet Ahijah announced the division of the kingdom as a consequence of Solomon's idolatry (1 Kings 11:29-39). In this pattern, the prophets both legitimate and limit royal power. The king rules under the word of the Lord, and the prophet is the means by which the word reaches the throne.

The church's leaders are not kings, but the analogy is instructive. The structures of authority in the church should include some channel through which the word of God can challenge those at the top, and leaders should receive such challenge as David eventually did, with repentance.

5.12 Elijah and Elisha: Prophetic Movements in a Time of Crisis

The stories of Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings come from the ninth century before Christ, a time when the northern kingdom was ruled by the dynasty of Omri, whose most notorious king Ahab, under the influence of his wife Jezebel, promoted the worship of Baal. Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) is a dramatic test of who is truly God. He rebuked the people: how long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. The fire from heaven demonstrated the Lord's sovereignty and led to the people's confession, the Lord, he is God.

The aftermath shows the humanity of the prophet. Elijah fled in fear from Jezebel and prayed to die. God sent an angel with food and drink, let him sleep, and then met him at Horeb, not in the wind, earthquake or fire but in a low whisper (1 Kings 19:12, often rendered the still small voice). God recommissioned him, told him of seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed to Baal and gave him a successor in Elisha. Elijah also stood against injustice in the matter of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21).

Elisha's ministry has a different tone. He is surrounded by a community, the sons of the prophets, and many of his deeds are done for ordinary people: the widow whose jar of oil was multiplied to pay her debts (2 Kings 4:1-7), the Shunammite woman whose son was restored (4:8-37), the Syrian commander Naaman cleansed of leprosy (ch. 5) and the poor workers who lost a borrowed axe head (6:1-7). Elisha's ministry reveals the compassionate dimension of the prophetic office, concerned with the practical needs of the poor and the stranger. The two prophets together demonstrate that the prophetic task includes confrontation and care, the public crisis and the quiet kindness.

Prophetic movements do not always remain pure. The revolution of Jehu, set in motion through a prophet commissioned by Elisha (2 Kings 9 and 10), was extremely violent, and the prophet Hosea later condemned the bloodshed of Jezreel (Hosea 1:4). Prophetic involvement in politics is dangerous, and later prophets recognised that even movements begun at God's command can be corrupted by violence.

5.13 Israel in the Eyes of the Nations: Witness and Failure

Israel's vocation was to be a witness to the nations, and the Old Testament contains many glimpses of this calling. Moses told the people that the nations would hear of the statutes and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people (Deuteronomy 4:6). Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple asks that the Lord hear the foreigner who comes from a far country for his name's sake, so that all peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you (1 Kings 8:41-43). Psalm 67 prays that God's way may be known on earth, his saving power among all nations. Individuals from outside Israel, such as Rahab, Ruth and Naaman, came to confess the Lord.

Yet Israel's witness was frequently compromised. Ezekiel declared that when the people were scattered among the nations, they profaned the name of the Lord there, because it was said of them, these are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land (Ezekiel 36:20). Isaiah 52:5, quoted by Paul in Romans 2:24, says that the name of God is continually blasphemed among the nations on account of his people's behaviour. This theme is a sober reminder for the church. The credibility of the gospel is bound up with the conduct of those who profess it. The reputation of the name of the Lord is at stake when his people live unjustly.

God's response to this failure is surprising: he promises to act for the sake of his holy name, to cleanse his people, give them a new heart and put his Spirit within them (Ezekiel 36:22-27). The prophetic hope of restoration grows out of the divine commitment to make his name known. The church likewise depends on God's initiative.

5.14 Reading Israel's Story Responsibly Today

The use of the Old Testament in Christian ecclesiology requires care and humility. Three points may be made.

1. The church does not replace Israel in a way that despises Jewish people. Paul insists that God has not rejected his people (Romans 11:1-2) and that the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). The church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, is described as sharing in the blessings of the olive tree of Israel, and Gentile believers are warned not to be arrogant toward the natural branches (Romans 11:17-21). Sadly, the history of Christian anti-Judaism is a grievous failure, which has fuelled persecution and hatred. A prophetic ecclesiology repents of that history and honours the Jewish roots of the faith.
2. The church reads the story in the light of Christ. The New Testament affirms that the promises of God find their yes in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20), and that Gentile believers are included in the people of God. The church is thus a participant in Israel's story, not an outsider looking in, but it participates through Christ.
3. Contemporary nations are not Israel. Some Christians, in Africa and elsewhere, have applied the language of Israel directly to their own nation or ethnic group, claiming that their land is a promised land or that their leaders are a new Moses. While such language can reflect real experiences of oppression and hope, it can also become an instrument of nationalism and exclusion. The Old Testament teaches that all nations stand under the same justice of God, and that the church is a community that transcends ethnic boundaries.

Many African readers find the world of the Old Testament deeply familiar, with its emphasis on kinship, hospitality, oral tradition, elders, sacrifice, covenant and the spiritual world. This resonance is a gift, and scholars of African biblical interpretation have explored it

with great creativity. It also calls for discernment, since similarity is not identity, and the Bible must still judge the culture. The method of Chapter 2 applies here as everywhere.

5.15 Implications for Ecclesiology

Several lessons for the church follow from Israel's story.

1. Election is for mission. The church, like Israel, is chosen for the sake of the world, not for its own comfort.
2. The whole community bears the vocation. Moses's wish for a prophetic people anticipates Pentecost.
3. The community's common life is its witness. Justice, generosity and care for the vulnerable are part of the prophetic sign.
4. Authority is accountable. The distribution of offices and the check of the prophetic word offer a model for church governance.
5. Worship and prophecy belong together. Worship that shuts out the word of God is not the worship Israel was meant to offer.
6. Women and men, young and old, may be vessels of the word of God.

5.16 Chapter Summary

- Israel was chosen as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, witnesses to the Lord among the nations.
- Moses is the prototype prophet, and his hope was that all God's people would prophesy.
- The covenant law shaped an alternative community marked by justice and mercy.
- Prophets, priests and kings formed a system of distributed and accountable authority.
- Prophecy and worship were intertwined in Israel's life.
- The exodus and Sinai, the Torah, the judges, the monarchy and the prophetic movements of Elijah and Elisha show the grace-before-law pattern, the memory of oppression, the limits of charisma and the prophetic check on power.
- Israel's witness to the nations was compromised by failure, and the church must read Israel's story with humility, without despising Jewish people or confusing any modern nation with Israel.

5.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does election as vocation challenge the way your church thinks about itself?
2. Which of the covenant laws about the poor and the stranger could shape the common life of a modern congregation?
3. How does the example of Deborah, Miriam and Huldah inform the role of women in prophetic ministry?
4. What happens in a church when prophetic, priestly and governing functions are not held in balance?
5. How can worship in your setting be made more attentive to the word God speaks?

5.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.
- Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2: *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*.
- Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy (Interpretation Commentary)*.
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*.
- Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus (Interpretation)*.

Chapter 6: The Prophets and the Covenant

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8, author's rendering)

6.1 Introduction

To read the prophets rightly, one must read them as covenant people. The prophets did not introduce a new religion. They called Israel back to the one it had already received. Their language of judgement and hope is saturated with covenant vocabulary: faithfulness, steadfast love, righteousness, justice, idolatry, adultery, blessing and curse. This chapter considers the covenant as the framework of prophetic ministry and draws out what that means for a church that understands itself as a covenant community.

6.2 The Shape of the Covenant

The Old Testament presents several covenants, with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, but the Sinai covenant is the primary background to the prophets. Scholars have noted similarities between the structure of the book of Deuteronomy and ancient Near Eastern treaties between a great king and his subjects. Such treaties typically included a preamble, a historical prologue recalling the king's benefits, stipulations, provisions for the document's safekeeping and blessings and curses. Not every scholar agrees on the details of the comparison, but the broad idea is widely acknowledged: God is the great king who has redeemed Israel, and Israel is bound to love and obey him.

The blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27 and 28 establish the consequences of covenant faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Prosperity and peace follow obedience; drought, defeat and exile follow persistent rebellion. When the prophets announce judgement, they are not inventing a threat. They are reminding the people of what they had already agreed to.

6.3 The Prophet as Covenant Prosecutor and Pastor

The prophets often use a legal form known as the covenant lawsuit, in which God summons his people before a court, calls on the heavens and earth as witnesses, and presents the charges (Isaiah 1:2-3; Hosea 4:1-3; Micah 6:1-8). The prophet functions as God's prosecutor, laying out the evidence. Yet the same prophets are pastoral. They weep, plead, intercede and hold out hope. Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful wife becomes a living picture of God's faithful love for an unfaithful people (Hosea 1 to 3). Jeremiah mourns for the wounded daughter of his people. The prophetic role is never merely adversarial; it is the work of one who loves both God and the people.

6.4 The Great Charges

Across the prophetic books, four recurring charges are brought against Israel.

6.4.1 Idolatry

The first commandment is the heart of the covenant, and the prophets return to it constantly. Israel is accused of following Baal, of trusting in foreign alliances and of crafting gods with human hands. Isaiah mocks the idol-maker who burns half a tree for fuel and bows down to the other half. Idolatry in the prophets is not limited to statues. It includes any false trust, whether in military power, wealth or political deals.

6.4.2 Social injustice

Amos is the great champion of justice. He denounces those who sell the needy for a pair of sandals and trample the heads of the poor into the dust (Amos 2:6-7) and calls for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). Isaiah condemns those who join house to house and field to field until no room is left (Isaiah 5:8). Micah describes rulers who covet fields and seize them (Micah 2:1-2). For the prophets, injustice is not a regrettable social side effect; it is covenant violation and an offence against the God who hears the cry of the poor.

6.4.3 Empty religion

The prophets also confront ritual without righteousness. Religious observance that coexists with oppression is, in God's eyes, worthless. This theme is so significant that it will receive its own treatment in the next chapter.

6.4.4 False security

Israel was tempted to treat the covenant as an unconditional guarantee, as though God's promises meant that Jerusalem could never fall, whatever the people did. The prophets insisted that the covenant carried obligations as well as promises. Jeremiah, in particular, challenged the slogan that the temple of the Lord would protect the city (Jeremiah 7).

6.5 Prophets in Their Historical Settings

The prophetic books are historically situated. In the eighth century before Christ, Amos and Hosea spoke to the northern kingdom during a time of prosperity masking inequality and spiritual compromise, while Isaiah and Micah addressed Judah under the shadow of rising Assyrian power. In the late seventh and early sixth centuries, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Ezekiel confronted the final crises of Judah, leading to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 before Christ. After the exile, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi addressed a small returning community struggling with discouragement and renewal.

Understanding these settings keeps us from using the prophets as a source of detached slogans. Their words were spoken to concrete communities with concrete sins. The church today reads them not to find a ready-made formula but to learn the pattern of God's dealing with his people and to discern its own situation.

6.6 The Prophet as Covenant Mediator and Intercessor

Prophets did not only speak for God; they spoke to God for the people. Moses interceded after the golden calf, Samuel prayed for Israel, Amos pleaded that the Lord would forgive, and Jeremiah was told not to pray for the people because their sin had gone so far, a command that itself shows how normal intercession was. A prophetic church is a praying church. Its public word and its secret prayer belong together.

6.7 The Covenant Hope

The prophets' announcements of judgement were never the final word. They also promised that God would act to restore. Jeremiah foresaw a new covenant in which the law would be written on the heart and all would know the Lord (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Ezekiel promised a new heart and a new spirit, and the Spirit of God dwelling within the people (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Isaiah looked to a servant who would bear the sin of many (Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12) and to a new heavens and new earth. These promises set the stage for the New Testament. The church understands itself as the community of the new covenant, established in the blood of Christ and animated by the Spirit.

6.8 The Eighth-Century Prophets in Closer View

The prophets of the eighth century before Christ spoke in the shadow of the rising Assyrian empire. Under Tiglath-Pileser III, who reigned from 745 to 727 before Christ, Assyria expanded westward, and in 722 or 721 the northern kingdom's capital Samaria fell. Against that backdrop, four prophets delivered messages that shaped the whole prophetic tradition.

6.8.1 Amos

Amos came from Tekoa in Judah, a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs, yet was sent to prophesy in the northern kingdom at the royal sanctuary of Bethel. His book opens with oracles against the surrounding nations and then closes in on Israel itself. His visions of the locusts, the fire and the plumb line (Amos 7:1-9) show a God who tests the nation against a standard. The statement, you only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2), is the pivot of his message: election brings responsibility, not immunity. His call to seek good and not evil, that you may live (5:14), and his closing promise of the restoration of David's fallen booth (9:11-15) show that judgement is not the last word.

6.8.2 Hosea

Hosea, a northern prophet, was commanded to marry a woman who would be unfaithful, and his family life became an acted parable of the Lord's relationship with Israel. The central Hebrew word of his message is *hesed*, steadfast love or covenant loyalty, together with the knowledge of God. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land (Hosea 4:1). Chapter 11 is among the most tender passages in the Old Testament, depicting God as a parent who taught Ephraim to walk and who cannot give him up: how can I give you up, O Ephraim? (11:8). Hosea shows that the prophetic message is rooted in the heartbreak of a God who loves.

6.8.3 Isaiah of Jerusalem

Isaiah's call came in the year that King Uzziah died, when he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple (Isaiah 6). His ministry, extending over several decades, addressed kings of Judah during the Assyrian crisis. Two themes dominate: the holiness of God, whom Isaiah calls the Holy One of Israel, and the call to trust the Lord rather than political alliances. Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many (Isaiah 31:1). Alongside judgement, Isaiah offers visions of hope: the child called Immanuel (7:14), the child born to us on whom the government shall rest (9:6-7), the shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1-9) and the peaceful assembly of the nations on the mountain of the Lord (2:2-4).

6.8.4 Micah

Micah, from the village of Moresheth in Judah, was a prophet of the countryside who denounced the leaders of Jerusalem. He claimed to be filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression (Micah 3:8). His message includes the famous summary of what the Lord requires (6:8), the promise that a ruler would come from Bethlehem (5:2), and the vision, shared with Isaiah, of nations beating swords into ploughshares (4:3). Micah's voice from the margins is a reminder that prophetic critique often comes from those at some distance from the centres of power.

6.9 The Prophets of the Seventh and Sixth Centuries

As Assyria declined, Babylon rose. In the closing decades of the kingdom of Judah, a group of prophets addressed the final crisis.

- Zephaniah announced the day of the Lord against the complacent in Jerusalem, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill (Zephaniah 1:12), and called the humble of the land to seek the Lord.
- Nahum announced the downfall of Nineveh, a message of comfort for those who had suffered under Assyrian cruelty.
- Habakkuk questioned God. Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? (Habakkuk 1:3). God's answer includes the statement that the righteous shall live by his faith (2:4), later taken up by Paul. The book ends with a remarkable affirmation of joy in God even when the fig tree does not blossom and there is no fruit on the vines (3:17-18).
- Jeremiah, called as a young man in the reign of Josiah, prophesied for over forty years through the reforms of Josiah, the reigns of his unfaithful successors and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. He was a man of sorrows, rejected by his townsmen, beaten, imprisoned and finally taken to Egypt against his will. His book includes his confessions, personal laments in which he complains to God (Jeremiah 11 to 20), and the promise of the new covenant (31:31-34). On the eve of the siege, he bought a field at Anathoth as an act of faith that houses and fields would again be bought in the land (Jeremiah 32).
- Ezekiel was a priest taken to Babylon in the first deportation of 597. He saw the glory of God depart from the temple (Ezekiel 8 to 11) and, after the fall of Jerusalem, promised a new heart and Spirit, a valley of dry bones restored to life and a new temple. He was appointed as a watchman, accountable for warning the wicked, but not for their response (Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-9).
- Obadiah announced judgement on Edom for its cruelty to Judah in her day of disaster.

These prophets stood at the end of an era. Their word was largely rejected, until events vindicated it. The experience of Jeremiah, in particular, shows how costly it can be to proclaim an unwelcome message to a people in denial.

6.10 The Post-Exilic Prophets

After Cyrus of Persia issued a decree in about 538 before Christ allowing the exiles to return, a small band came back to Jerusalem. The reality was discouraging: the city was in ruins, the community was poor and the work of rebuilding the temple stalled. The prophets of this period sought to encourage and direct a struggling people.

- Haggai, in 520 before Christ, challenged the returned exiles who were busy with their own panelled houses while the house of the Lord lay in ruins (Haggai 1:4). The people responded, and work resumed.
- Zechariah, a contemporary, received a series of night visions and encouraged the builders with the word, not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts (Zechariah 4:6), and with the question, who has despised the day of small things? (4:10). He also called for truth and justice in the gates (8:16-17) and foretold the coming of the humble king on a donkey (9:9).
- Malachi, probably writing after the temple was rebuilt, rebuked priests for offering defective sacrifices, people for unfaithfulness and the community for withholding tithes. He promised the coming of the messenger who would prepare the way and the sun of righteousness who would rise with healing in its wings (Malachi 3:1; 4:2).
- The final chapters of Isaiah (56 to 66) address a community still struggling after the return. They include a remarkable vision of the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs in the worship of the Lord (Isaiah 56:3-8) and the declaration that God's house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

For the church, the post-exilic prophets speak to times of disappointment, smallness and slow progress. The initial euphoria of renewal gives way to the long work of rebuilding. God's Spirit is promised to the discouraged. The day of small things is not to be despised.

6.11 Hesed and Emet: Covenant Love and Faithfulness

Two Hebrew words capture much of the prophetic understanding of God and of what God requires. Hesed means steadfast love, loyalty or covenant kindness. Emet means truth, faithfulness or reliability. The two appear together in the self-revelation of God to Moses: the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). The prophets appeal to this character. Jeremiah 9:23-24 declares, let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practises steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.

Because God is characterised by hesed and emet, he requires the same from his people. Micah's summary, to do justice, to love kindness (hesed), and to walk humbly with your God, shows that covenant faithfulness is both vertical and horizontal. A church that wishes to be prophetic must be characterised by these qualities in its relationships: loyal love toward God and one another, reliability in keeping promises, and truthfulness in speech.

6.12 The Prophets and the Nations

The prophetic books contain extensive oracles against foreign nations (Amos 1 and 2; Isaiah 13 to 23; Jeremiah 46 to 51; Ezekiel 25 to 32). These oracles proclaim that the God of Israel is Lord of all nations, and that nations are accountable for their actions. Amos's opening oracles condemn Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab for atrocities of war, such as threshing Gilead with iron sledges and ripping open pregnant women (Amos 1:3, 13). The standard is not Israel's law but a universal moral order. Nations are judged for cruelty, slave trading, breaking treaties and arrogance.

At the same time, the prophets envisage a future in which the nations will turn to the Lord. Isaiah 19:24-25 contains a startling vision in which Egypt and Assyria, the great oppressors of Israel, are named alongside Israel as God's people: blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance. The book of Jonah dramatises God's concern for Nineveh, to the displeasure of the prophet.

These themes caution the church against nationalism and tribalism. The prophets did not simply cheer for their own people. They announced God's justice to all nations, including their own, and anticipated God's mercy to all. A prophetic church takes an international perspective, mourning the suffering of all peoples, and holding every government, including its own, to the standard of justice.

6.13 The Prophets on Land, Economy and Creation

The prophets were deeply concerned about the land. In the covenant, land is a gift from God, entrusted to families as an inheritance. Accumulating land at the expense of the poor was a violation: woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land (Isaiah 5:8). Micah 2:2 describes people who covet fields and seize them, and oppress a man and his house. The story of Naboth's vineyard shows a king abusing his power to seize ancestral land.

The prophets also saw a link between human sin and the condition of the natural world. Hosea says that because of the lack of faithfulness, the land mourns, and everything that dwells in it languishes (Hosea 4:1-3). Isaiah 24:4-6 depicts the earth as polluted under its inhabitants, who have transgressed the laws. Jeremiah 4:23-28 envisions a return to chaos. These passages suggest that creation itself suffers under human injustice and that the restoration promised by the prophets includes the renewal of the land (Isaiah 35; 65:17-25; Ezekiel 36:35). A prophetic ecclesiology therefore has an ecological dimension, as Chapter 25 will argue.

6.14 The Humanity of the Prophets

The prophets were not superhuman. Their books reveal anguish, doubt and weakness. Jeremiah cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14-18), accused God of deceiving him (20:7) and asked, why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable? (15:18). Ezekiel was told that his wife, the delight of his eyes, would die, and that he was not to mourn publicly as a sign to the people (Ezekiel 24:15-24). Hosea endured the heartbreak of an unfaithful spouse. Jonah was angry with God for showing mercy. Habakkuk questioned God's justice. Elijah wanted to die.

These stories matter for several reasons. They show that God does not require his servants to hide their feelings. The prayers of the prophets include protest and complaint, and God does not reject them. They remind us that prophetic ministry is costly to the person and can lead to exhaustion, isolation and despair. And they teach the church to care for those who carry heavy burdens, rather than to expect them to be tireless. A church that wants prophets must also build the kind of community that sustains them, with friendship, rest, pastoral care and honest support.

6.15 Implications for the Church

1. The church lives under covenant. Its life is a response to grace, with real obligations. Grace is never an excuse for lawlessness.

2. Idolatry remains a live danger. Modern forms include the worship of money, status, nationalism and personality.
3. Injustice is a theological issue. A church that ignores the poor and condones exploitation stands under the prophets' indictments.
4. Security is found in God, not in institutions, buildings or privileges.
5. Intercession and critique go together. The church speaks to the world as one that has prayed for it.
6. The covenant hope is the church's ground of confidence. Judgement is real, but the last word belongs to restoration.

6.16 Chapter Summary

- The prophets were covenant messengers, calling Israel back to commitments already made.
- They functioned as both prosecutors and pastors, combining warning with weeping.
- Four charges recur: idolatry, injustice, empty religion and false security.
- Prophets interceded for the people as well as spoke to them.
- The prophets promised a new covenant, which the New Testament sees fulfilled in Christ and the Spirit.
- The prophets of the eighth, seventh, sixth and fifth centuries addressed distinct crises, spoke also to the nations and the land, and were fully human in their struggles.

6.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What modern idols tempt believers in your community?
2. How should a church respond to the prophets' insistence that injustice is a covenant matter?
3. What does the image of Hosea's marriage teach about the heart of the prophetic message?
4. How does intercession shape the tone of prophetic speech?
5. Which promises of the new covenant do you see most clearly in the life of the church?

6.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.
- John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2: *Israel's Faith*.
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.
- Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*.
- Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*.
- Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos (Hermeneia)*.
- Derek Kidner, *The Message of Hosea*.
- J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*.

Chapter 7: Prophetic Critique of Worship, Temple and Power

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:21, 24, author's rendering)*

7.1 Introduction

Among the most striking features of the prophetic tradition is its willingness to criticise the very institutions that most obviously belong to the people of God: the temple, the sacrifices, the monarchy and the priesthood. Prophets were not outsiders attacking religion from without. They were insiders calling religion back to its purpose. This chapter examines three arenas of prophetic critique, worship, temple and power, together with the critique of false prophets, and then draws implications for the contemporary church.

7.2 The Critique of Worship

The prophets expressed scathing judgements on forms of worship that were detached from justice. Isaiah conveys God's words to the rulers and people of Judah: the multitude of your sacrifices means nothing to me; bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination; I cannot endure solemn assembly with iniquity. The remedy is not the abolition of worship but its renewal: wash yourselves, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:10-17). Amos delivers a similar message, as quoted in the epigraph. Hosea records God's desire for steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6). Micah asks what the Lord requires and answers not with thousands of rams but with justice, kindness and humility (Micah 6:6-8).

It is important to read these texts carefully. The prophets are not rejecting the sacrificial system that God himself had instituted. They are rejecting worship that has become a substitute for obedience, a way of managing God while continuing to wrong one's neighbour. The Psalms express the same insight: a broken and contrite heart is the sacrifice God desires (Psalm 51:16-17). The prophetic critique is a call for integrity, in which what happens in the sanctuary matches what happens in the marketplace.

7.3 The Critique of the Temple

The temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Israel's worship and a symbol of God's presence. Over time, some in Judah came to believe that the presence of the temple guaranteed the safety of the city. Jeremiah stood at the temple gate and challenged this confidence: do not trust in these deceptive words: this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. He called the people to amend their ways, to deal justly with one another, to stop oppressing the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow and to stop following other gods; only then would God dwell with them (Jeremiah 7:1-15). For this sermon, Jeremiah was nearly put to death (Jeremiah 26).

Ezekiel received a vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple because of the abominations practised there (Ezekiel 8 to 11). Isaiah 66:1-2 declares that heaven is God's

throne and earth his footstool, and asks what house could possibly contain him; the one to whom God looks is the humble and contrite person who trembles at his word. These texts relativise the building in favour of the God who is worshipped. The New Testament will deepen the theme by declaring Christ himself to be the true temple and the church the dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

7.4 The Critique of Kings and Power

From its beginning, the prophetic movement stood in a critical relation to political authority. Samuel warned Israel about the costs of kingship. Nathan rebuked David. Elijah confronted Ahab after the judicial murder of Naboth to seize his vineyard (1 Kings 21), and his words, have you killed and also taken possession, are a classic example of speaking truth to power. Isaiah challenged King Ahaz to trust in God rather than foreign alliances (Isaiah 7). Jeremiah condemned King Jehoiakim for building his palace by unrighteousness and contrasted him with his father Josiah, who judged the cause of the poor and needy, and asked, is not this to know me? (Jeremiah 22:13-17). Micah indicted the rulers who abhor justice, build Zion with blood and judge for a bribe, while priests teach for a price and prophets divine for money, and yet say, is not the Lord in the midst of us? (Micah 3:9-12).

The pattern is consistent. The prophets did not deny the legitimacy of governing authority, but they held it accountable to the standard of the covenant. Rulers who exploited the weak or ignored the word of God were rebuked, whatever their rank. The priest Amaziah at Bethel tried to silence Amos, calling the sanctuary the king's sanctuary, a temple of the kingdom (Amos 7:10-13). This reveals the danger when religious institutions become too closely bound up with political power. The prophetic voice is usually first to be muzzled.

7.5 The Critique of Economic Exploitation

Economic injustice is a constant theme. Amos condemns merchants who long for the Sabbath to end so they can sell grain, make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances (Amos 8:4-6). Isaiah 58 declares that true fasting is to loose the bonds of wickedness, share bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into the house and clothe the naked. For the prophets, how people earn and spend, buy and sell, borrow and lend is a matter of religious concern.

7.6 The Critique of False Prophets

The prophets also criticised other prophets. In 1 Kings 22, four hundred court prophets promise victory to King Ahab, while the lone Micaiah, son of Imlah, prophesies disaster; he is struck and imprisoned. Jeremiah condemned prophets who healed the wound of the people lightly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 23). He accused them of speaking visions from their own minds, of encouraging evildoers and of stealing words from one another. Ezekiel 13 compares false prophets to those who whitewash a flimsy wall. Micah 3:5 complains of prophets who lead the people astray, who cry peace when they have something to eat but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.

These passages supply an important diagnostic. False prophecy tends to be comfortable, to serve the interests of the powerful, to flatter and to be motivated by gain. True prophecy often disturbs, costs the speaker dearly and calls for repentance. The test is not the loudness or confidence of the speaker but fidelity to the revealed word of God.

7.7 The Manner and Cost of Prophetic Critique

It is worth noting how the prophets spoke. They used parables, sign-acts, poetry and lament. They often combined bluntness with deep grief. They did not speak to win applause. Jeremiah complained bitterly to God about the burden of his calling yet could not stop speaking, for the word was like a fire shut up in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9). They also paid a price: imprisonment, mockery, exile and death. Prophetic critique is costly because it threatens settled arrangements of comfort and power.

7.8 Case Study: Amos at Bethel

The confrontation between Amos and Amaziah in Amos 7:10-17 is among the most revealing scenes in the prophetic literature. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sends a message to King Jeroboam: Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. He then tells Amos to go back to Judah and earn his living there: never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.

Several features of the passage are instructive. First, the charge is political: the prophet is accused of conspiracy. The prophetic word is treated as a threat to public order. Second, the priest's language reveals the capture of religion by the state: it is the king's sanctuary. The sanctuary exists to support the regime. Third, Amos replies not by defending his credentials but by pointing to his call: I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, go, prophesy to my people Israel. His authority arises from God's commission, not from institutional approval. Fourth, Amos then delivers a word of judgement on Amaziah himself, announcing that his wife and children will suffer in the coming disaster.

The passage illustrates a recurring pattern: when religion is closely identified with power, the prophetic voice is expelled as foreign and dangerous. For the contemporary church, the question is whether it has any independence of voice. A church whose buildings, funding and standing depend on the favour of the powerful may find that it can say only what the king wants to hear. The remedy is to cultivate a measure of independence, through diversified and transparent funding, a clear theology of the church's own mission and leaders prepared to bear the cost of faithfulness.

7.9 Case Study: Jeremiah's Temple Sermon and Trial

Jeremiah 7 and 26 record the temple sermon and its aftermath. In the early years of Jehoiakim, Jeremiah stood in the court of the Lord's house and announced that, unless the people amended their ways, the Lord would make this house like Shiloh, the ruined sanctuary of the early days. The priests, prophets and people seized him, saying, you shall die! The officials of Judah came to hold a trial at the gate. The priests and prophets demanded the death penalty, on the ground that he had prophesied against the city.

Jeremiah's defence is calm and bold. The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God. But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves (Jeremiah 26:12-15). Some of the elders then recalled the precedent of the prophet Micah of Moresheth, who in the days of Hezekiah announced that Zion would be ploughed as a field, and whom the king did not put to death but rather feared the Lord

and entreated his favour. The memory of an earlier prophet saved the later one. Ahikam son of Shaphan also protected Jeremiah. By contrast, another prophet, Uriah son of Shemaiah, who prophesied similarly, was pursued to Egypt and killed by the king (Jeremiah 26:20-23).

This case study teaches us about the role of collective memory and of allies. The church preserves the memory of earlier prophetic witness, and uses it to protect those who speak today. It also shows that prophetic speakers are often saved, if they are saved at all, by the courage of a few officials or neighbours willing to stand with them. Every prophetic voice needs friends.

7.10 Case Study: Micaiah and the Four Hundred Prophets

First Kings 22 tells how Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah planned to attack Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat asked for a word from the Lord, and Ahab gathered about four hundred prophets, who unanimously said, go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king. Jehoshaphat was not satisfied and asked whether there was another prophet. Ahab replied that there was one, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. The messenger sent to fetch Micaiah urged him to agree with the others. Micaiah answered, as the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak (1 Kings 22:14).

Micaiah initially echoed the others, sarcastically, and then told what he had seen: Israel scattered on the mountains like sheep without a shepherd, and a vision of the heavenly council in which a spirit offered to be a lying spirit in the mouth of all the prophets. A passage of this kind is difficult to interpret. It appears to depict God allowing, or even using, a deceiving spirit in the mouths of the court prophets as a means of judgement on Ahab, who had already rejected the word of the Lord. Interpreters differ on how to understand this, but the main lesson is clear. Unanimity among prophets does not guarantee truth, and a lone voice may be the one that speaks for God. Micaiah was slapped by another prophet and put in prison on bread and water until the king returned in peace. The king did not return in peace.

This passage presses upon the church the question of how to handle the majority and the minority. When a large body of leaders is saying what the powerful want to hear, a church must be willing to ask whether there is a dissenting voice that has not been heard. At the same time, a dissenting voice is not automatically right. The test remains the word of the Lord, as discerned through Scripture, character and fruit. But a church that silences dissent in advance has no means of knowing.

7.11 Prophetic Critique and Social Structures

The prophets did not only condemn individual sins. They criticised structures and systems that made injustice routine. Isaiah pronounces woe on those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right (Isaiah 10:1-2). The psalmist speaks of rulers who frame injustice by statute (Psalm 94:20). Amos accuses the people of turning justice into poison, of afflicting the righteous, taking a bribe and pushing aside the needy in the gate (Amos 5:7, 12). The gate was the place where legal disputes were settled. The courts, in other words, had become instruments of oppression.

Contemporary theologians speak of structural sin or institutional evil, the idea that laws, markets, cultural norms and institutions can embody and perpetuate injustice even when individuals within them do not intend harm. Walter Wink, in *Naming the Powers* and later

works, explored the biblical language of principalities and powers as referring to the inner and outer aspects of the institutions and systems that shape human life. Whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions, he draws attention to a real biblical theme: Paul says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and authorities (Ephesians 6:12).

The prophetic church therefore pays attention to structures. It asks how policies affect the poor, how legal systems treat the vulnerable, how markets are regulated, and who benefits and who suffers. Such questions require study, humility and cooperation with others who have expertise. The church should not claim to have easy technical answers to complex questions of economics or governance, but it can insist that the dignity and welfare of the poor be a central criterion.

7.12 The Prophets' Vision of True Worship

The prophets did not only criticise worship; they envisaged its renewal. Three themes stand out.

1. Worship for all nations. Isaiah 56:7 declares that the Lord will bring foreigners to his holy mountain and make them joyful in his house of prayer, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Malachi 1:11 anticipates that from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name.
2. Worship from a humble heart. Isaiah 66:2 says, this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. Psalm 51:17 echoes the point: the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
3. Worship that expresses justice. Psalms 15 and 24 ask who may ascend the hill of the Lord and answer in terms of ethical integrity: he who has clean hands and a pure heart. The fast that God chooses in Isaiah 58 is the loosing of bonds of injustice. The offering that pleases God is accompanied by mercy.

These themes suggest practical guidelines for congregational worship. Churches might include in their regular liturgy times of confession, including confession of corporate and social sins; prayer for the poor, the persecuted and the imprisoned; teaching on the connection between faith and daily conduct; and offerings directed to the needs of the community. Worship leaders should ask whether the songs, prayers and sermons reflect the full range of biblical themes or only a narrow selection.

7.13 When Prophets Are Silenced: Examples from History

The cost of prophetic critique appears in later history. John the Baptist rebuked Herod Antipas for his marriage to Herodias and was imprisoned and beheaded (Mark 6:17-29). Stephen was stoned. In the fourth and fifth centuries, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, was exiled after criticising the luxury of the court, and died on the journey in 407. Under totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, many church leaders were imprisoned or killed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in April 1945 for his role in resistance to the Nazi regime.

Africa has its own martyrs. In Uganda, Archbishop Janani Luwum of the Church of Uganda confronted the regime of Idi Amin over its killings and human rights abuses. He died in February 1977 in circumstances that were officially described as a road accident but that most

believe were a murder by agents of the regime. His colleague Bishop Festo Kivengere fled the country and continued to speak, later writing a book on the lessons of forgiveness. Their witness has become a source of inspiration for the East African church.

These stories do not suggest that every church leader must seek martyrdom. They do show that fidelity to the word of God in the face of tyranny has been a mark of the church in every age. They also remind us that the powers are most threatened by those who combine courage with love and who speak without hatred.

7.14 Implications for the Church

What does this tradition imply for a church that follows the prophets?

1. Worship must be joined to obedience. Songs, offerings and services cannot compensate for neglect of justice. Churches should ask whether their gatherings produce the fruit of mercy and integrity.
2. No institution is immune from critique, including the church. Leaders should welcome the prophetic word directed at themselves rather than reserving it for outsiders.
3. Proximity to power requires vigilance. Churches may rightly engage with government and seek its good, but the prophetic tradition warns against becoming chaplains to injustice. The prophet's distance is not hostility but freedom.
4. Economic life is a spiritual matter. Fair dealing, honest weights, just wages and care for the poor are marks of a prophetic people. This has direct bearing on how churches handle money, how pastors are compensated and how members are taught about giving.
5. The prophetic voice must be tested against the word. Because false prophets existed in ancient Israel and exist today, the church needs both courage to speak and wisdom to discern.
6. The critique is offered in love. The prophets wept over those they warned. A prophetic church is characterised by compassion, not contempt.

7.15 Chapter Summary

- The prophets criticised worship divorced from justice, calling for integrity between sanctuary and society.
- They challenged false confidence in the temple and relativised sacred space in favour of the God who is worshipped.
- They confronted kings and rulers and exposed economic exploitation.
- They opposed false prophets who flattered power and served their own interests.
- Prophetic critique is costly and flows from love.
- Case studies of Amos, Jeremiah and Micaiah, the prophetic critique of structures, the vision of true worship and the witness of those silenced in history deepen the pattern.

7.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How might a church test whether its worship is joined to obedience?
2. What are the temptations for churches that become closely allied with political leaders?

3. How can believers distinguish between a prophet who disturbs for the sake of truth and one who merely criticises?
4. What are the marks of a leader who is open to prophetic critique?
5. How do the prophets' views on economic justice speak to modern questions of wealth and poverty in your society?

7.17 Suggested Further Reading

- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination and Truth Speaks to Power*.
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.
- John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2: *Israel's Faith*.
- Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.
- Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*.

Chapter 8: Remnant, Exile and the Hope of a New Covenant People

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7, author's rendering)

8.1 Introduction

The prophetic story of Israel reaches its climax and turning point in the experience of exile. The fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of its leading citizens to Babylon in 586 before Christ was a theological catastrophe. The temple was destroyed, the Davidic king was removed, and the land was lost. The prophets who had warned of this disaster now had to explain it and, more importantly, to speak hope into it. Out of exile came some of the Old Testament's most profound prophetic literature and the images that shaped the church's understanding of itself. This chapter explores the themes of remnant, exile and new covenant and what they mean for the identity of the church.

8.2 The Remnant

The idea of the remnant appears early. When Elijah despairs, believing himself the only faithful person left, God tells him that seven thousand in Israel have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Isaiah named one of his sons Shear-jashub, meaning a remnant shall return (Isaiah 7:3; 10:20-22). The idea carries two edges. On the one hand, it warns that judgement will be severe and that not all who bear the name Israel will be saved. On the other hand, it offers hope that God will preserve a faithful core from which renewal will come. Micah (2:12; 5:7-8), Zephaniah (3:12-13) and others develop the theme.

The remnant is not defined by ethnic descent alone but by faithfulness, humility and trust in the Lord. In this sense, it anticipates the New Testament teaching that not all who descend from Israel belong to Israel (Romans 9:6) and that God has preserved a remnant chosen by grace (Romans 11:5). It also gives the church a framework for understanding times of decline. Even when institutions fail, God preserves a people.

8.3 Exile as Judgement and as Formation

The prophets had warned that persistent covenant violation would lead to exile, in line with the curses of Deuteronomy 28. When the blow fell, Judah faced profound questions: had God abandoned his people, was he weaker than the gods of Babylon, was the covenant at an end? The prophets answered that exile was the righteous judgement of the Lord, not evidence of his defeat. Lamentations gave voice to the grief. Ezekiel, himself in exile, saw visions that God was present with his people in Babylon and that his glory had left Jerusalem on account of sin.

Exile also became a place of formation. Away from temple and land, the community learned to centre its life on the word of God, prayer, the observance of Sabbath and the shaping of identity through memory. It was probably in exile and afterwards that much of the Old Testament was gathered and edited. The experience produced a more portable and spiritual faith, rooted in Scripture and community rather than only in sacred space.

8.4 Faithful Presence in a Foreign Land

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 is of special value to the church. Contrary to the prophets who promised a quick return, Jeremiah told the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children and seek the welfare of the city. They were to pray for Babylon. They were not to assimilate nor to withdraw, but to live faithfully as God's people in a pagan land and to trust that God would restore them in his time (Jeremiah 29:4-14).

The book of Daniel dramatises this posture. Daniel and his friends serve in the court of Babylon, refuse to compromise their devotion to God, accept the consequences of the fiery furnace and the lions' den, and bear witness to the sovereignty of God before pagan kings. Esther similarly shows God's people exercising courage within a hostile empire. The New Testament picks up exile language to describe Christians as sojourners and exiles in the world (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11) and as citizens of a heavenly commonwealth (Philippians 3:20). For African Christians, whose history includes colonisation, displacement and diaspora, the exile theme can speak with particular depth.

8.5 The Prophets of Comfort and Restoration

Isaiah 40 to 55 opens with the words, comfort, comfort my people, says your God. These chapters announce a new exodus, in which God will bring his people home through the wilderness. They speak of the incomparable greatness of the Lord, who calls the stars by name and who is the only God, and they introduce the figure of the Servant of the Lord, who suffers on behalf of others and through whom God's salvation reaches the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13 to 53:12). The Servant is both identified with Israel and distinct from it, and the New Testament sees these songs fulfilled in Jesus.

Isaiah 61 proclaims a figure anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus read this passage in the synagogue at Nazareth and declared that it was fulfilled in his hearing (Luke 4:16-21). The prophetic hope is thereby gathered into the person and mission of Christ.

8.6 The New Covenant and the Gift of the Spirit

Of all the exilic promises, the most consequential is that of a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-34 announces that God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah, not like the covenant they broke. God will put his law within them and write it on their hearts. All shall know him, from the least to the greatest, and he will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. Ezekiel 36:25-27 speaks of cleansing, a new heart and a new spirit, and God's own Spirit placed within his people so that they walk in his statutes. The vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37) depicts the Spirit breathing life into a seemingly dead people. Joel 2:28-29 promises that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, so that sons and daughters shall prophesy, old men dream dreams and young men see visions, and that even servants will receive the Spirit.

These promises are the immediate background to the New Testament. They explain why the Lord's Supper is spoken of as the new covenant in his blood, why Pentecost is understood as the fulfilment of Joel and why the church is described as those on whose hearts the law is written (2 Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 8). In the new covenant, the prophetic gift becomes the inheritance of the whole people of God.

8.7 The Nations and the Wider Horizon

The prophets also looked beyond Israel to the nations. Isaiah 2:2-4 envisions all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord to learn his ways and to beat their swords into ploughshares. Isaiah 49:6 speaks of the Servant as a light to the nations. Jonah, though reluctant, is sent to Nineveh. Malachi anticipates that the name of the Lord will be great among the nations. The prophetic hope is thus universal. The mission of the church to all peoples fulfils a long-standing prophetic expectation.

8.8 The Silence and the Expectation

The Old Testament closes with Malachi's promise that God will send Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord and that a messenger will prepare the way. Between the testaments, there was no widely recognised prophet in Israel; the people lived in expectation. When John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, clothed like Elijah and announcing the coming one, the long silence is broken. The next part of this book turns to Christ, the Spirit and the birth of the church.

8.9 The Fall of Jerusalem and the Book of Lamentations

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 before Christ was met with a flood of grief, and the book of Lamentations is its poetic monument. Composed largely as acrostic poems, in which successive verses begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the book gives structured expression to unstructured pain. How lonely sits the city that was full of people! (Lamentations 1:1). The poems describe starvation, humiliation, the destruction of the temple and the silence of God. They do not flinch from asking whether the Lord has utterly rejected his people.

Yet at the centre of the book, in the midst of despair, there is a confession of hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22-23). The book teaches that grief and faith can coexist, that lament is a legitimate form of prayer and that hope may be affirmed in the dark. Psalm 137, with its raw cry by the rivers of Babylon, illustrates the same honesty, including its disturbing outburst of anger that must be read with care.

For the prophetic church, Lamentations models the discipline of communal lament. In the face of national tragedy, violence, injustice or loss, the church should not rush to explanations or slogans. It can give voice to grief on behalf of its people, lay the pain before God, and so keep alive the possibility of hope. Churches in contexts of persistent suffering, such as those affected by conflict, kidnapping or terror, may find this ancient book a valuable companion.

8.10 The Servant Songs

The four poems often called the Servant Songs in Isaiah 40 to 55 are among the most significant texts for the church's understanding of its mission.

- The first song (Isaiah 42:1-9) introduces the Servant on whom God has put his Spirit, who will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. His is a gentle but unfailing justice.
- The second song (49:1-6) shows the Servant called from the womb and commissioned to bring Jacob back to God, and also to be a light for the nations, that my salvation

may reach to the end of the earth. The Servant feels that he has laboured in vain, yet his work is with the Lord.

- The third song (50:4-9) depicts a disciple who is taught by God, gives his back to those who strike and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard, and sets his face like a flint, knowing that he will not be put to shame.
- The fourth song (52:13 to 53:12) portrays the suffering and exaltation of the Servant, who was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and by whose wounds we are healed.

The identity of the Servant is much discussed. In Isaiah 49:3 he is called Israel, yet he also has a mission to Israel. Some see him as the nation, others as an individual prophet, others as the future Messiah. The New Testament applies the songs to Jesus. Matthew quotes the first song in connection with his gentle ministry (Matthew 12:17-21), Philip explains the fourth song to the Ethiopian official as a reference to Jesus (Acts 8:26-35) and Peter draws on it in urging believers to follow Christ's example in suffering (1 Peter 2:21-25). Jesus himself said that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), echoing Isaiah 53.

For ecclesiology, the Servant Songs have two implications. First, they show that the mission of God's people is accomplished through suffering, humility and gentleness, not through domination. Second, the church, as the body of the Servant, is called to share in his mission. Paul and Barnabas applied the second song to themselves in Pisidian Antioch: I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:47). The church's witness to the nations is a participation in the Servant's work.

8.11 Daniel and the Prophetic Witness in Empire

The book of Daniel portrays faithful believers who served in the royal courts of Babylon and Persia. Its stories of the first six chapters present a series of tests.

- In Daniel 1, the young men are trained in the language and literature of Babylon, given new names and offered the king's food. Daniel resolves not to defile himself and negotiates an alternative diet. He shows that it is possible to learn from the surrounding culture while preserving one's distinct identity.
- In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to worship the golden statue and are thrown into the furnace. Their answer is memorable: our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods (Daniel 3:17-18). Faithfulness does not depend on guaranteed rescue.
- In Daniel 6, Daniel continues his habit of praying three times a day, even after the king's decree forbids it, and is thrown into the lions' den. God shuts the mouths of the lions.
- In Daniel 2 and 7, visions of successive kingdoms assure the believers that God is sovereign over human empires and that his kingdom will endure.
- In Daniel 9, Daniel studies the writings of Jeremiah and prays a prayer of confession and intercession on behalf of his people.

The book displays a posture that combines wisdom, courage and faithfulness. Daniel serves the empire competently and honestly but will not compromise his loyalty to God. He is respectful to rulers but unafraid to tell them the truth, as when he tells Nebuchadnezzar that he must break off his sins by practising righteousness and showing mercy to the oppressed (Daniel 4:27). For Christians who work in government, business, education or the military, whether in

Nigeria or elsewhere, Daniel is a model. Excellence in work and integrity in conscience go together, and the prophetic church supports such believers in their calling to serve in the structures of society as witnesses to Christ.

8.12 Ezra, Nehemiah and the Rebuilding Community

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Their account highlights the role of Scripture and leadership in the formation of the community.

Ezra was a priest and scribe who had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel (Ezra 7:10). The order of verbs is instructive: study, do, teach. In Nehemiah 8, he reads the law to the assembled people, while the Levites help the people to understand. The people weep, and are told to rejoice, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The scene is an early picture of a Bible-centred community in which the reading, interpretation and application of the word are central.

Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the Persian king, heard of the broken walls of Jerusalem and was moved to prayer, fasting and action. He combined prayer with planning, organised the rebuilding by families, resisted opposition and ridicule with steadfast resolve and prevented conflict by insisting on justice. When the poor protested that they were selling their children into slavery to pay debts to their wealthy compatriots, Nehemiah was very angry and demanded that the nobles restore the pledges and cancel the interest (Nehemiah 5). He sets an example of leadership that integrates piety, administration and social justice.

The books also contain a difficult episode. Ezra 9 and 10 and Nehemiah 13 record the community's dissolution of marriages to foreign women. This has been understood as a severe measure to protect the community's religious identity, and has been criticised by many as exclusionary, especially in light of the book of Ruth, which tells of a Moabite woman who became an ancestor of David, and of Isaiah 56, which welcomes the foreigner. Interpreters have struggled with this passage, and it should not be applied simply as a model. It illustrates the tension in the post-exilic community between preserving identity and welcoming outsiders, a tension the church also faces, and it reminds us that reforming movements can overreach.

8.13 Second Temple Judaism and the Prophetic Silence

Between the close of the Old Testament writings and the beginning of the New Testament lies a period of several centuries, usually called the Second Temple period. Jewish life was shaped by various powers: Persian, Greek and, eventually, Roman. After the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek culture spread across the region. In the second century before Christ, Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to suppress Jewish observance and desecrated the temple, provoking the Maccabean revolt, which began in 167 and led to a period of Jewish independence under the Hasmonean dynasty.

Religious life developed in several directions. The Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, begun in Alexandria in the third century before Christ, made the Scriptures available to the Greek-speaking world. Synagogues became centres of reading and teaching. Different movements emerged: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, and others. Apocalyptic literature flourished, expressing hope for God's decisive intervention.

The sense that prophecy had ceased was widespread. The first book of Maccabees refers to a time when prophets no longer appeared in Israel (1 Maccabees 9:27), and speaks of waiting until a prophet should arise to decide what to do with the stones of the defiled altar (4:46). The people lived in expectation of a new word from God, hoping for a prophet like Moses, for the return of Elijah and for the Messiah. It is against this background that the appearance of John the Baptist and of Jesus must be understood. The prophetic silence made the new voice all the more startling.

8.14 The Spirit in the Old Testament

A full understanding of Pentecost requires some grasp of the Old Testament's teaching about the Spirit of God. The Spirit is active from the first verses of Scripture, hovering over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit gives skill to craftsmen like Bezalel, who is filled with the Spirit of God, with ability, intelligence and knowledge in all craftsmanship, to construct the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5). The Spirit empowers leaders, including the seventy elders (Numbers 11), the judges (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 14:6), and kings such as Saul and David (1 Samuel 10:6; 16:13). The Spirit inspires the prophets: the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, says Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:2), and Micah claims to be filled with power by the Spirit of the Lord (Micah 3:8).

In many cases, the Spirit's coming is selective and temporary, resting on particular persons for particular tasks. David's prayer, do not take your Holy Spirit from me (Psalm 51:11), reflects the awareness that the gift could be withdrawn. The prophets look forward to a messianic figure on whom the Spirit would rest in fullness (Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 61:1) and to a day when the Spirit would be poured out on all God's people (Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 2:28-29). The Old Testament thus builds a longing that is satisfied at Pentecost.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Old Testament believers lived without the Spirit's work. Scripture portrays faithful people who walked with God, such as Abraham, Moses, Hannah and the psalmists. Yet the New Testament affirms a new and fuller era, in which the Spirit is given to all believers, permanently indwells them and is the pledge of the age to come. The relation between the Spirit's work in the two testaments remains a topic of theological discussion, and we do well to affirm continuity without erasing the newness of what Christ has accomplished.

8.15 Implications for the Church

1. The church often lives as a minority. Remnant language comforts small and struggling communities and challenges large ones not to assume that numbers equal faithfulness.
2. The church is an exile community. Like Israel in Babylon, believers live in a world that is not yet fully under God's reign. They are called to seek its good without surrendering their identity.
3. The church's hope is grounded in God's promises. Neither the failure of institutions nor the hostility of the world is the final word.
4. The new covenant gives the whole people of God the Spirit. Ministry belongs to the entire body, and the prophetic gift is not the possession of an elite.
5. The church's horizon is global. Its prophetic witness aims at the blessing of all nations.

8.16 Chapter Summary

- The remnant theme teaches that God preserves a faithful people even in the midst of judgement.
- Exile was both divine judgement and a school of faith, shaping a community centred on the word and on prayer.
- Jeremiah 29 and Daniel model faithful presence in a foreign land.
- The prophets of comfort and restoration promised a new exodus and a Servant whose suffering would bring salvation.
- The promise of a new covenant and the outpouring of the Spirit prepares for the church.
- Lamentations, the Servant Songs, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, the Second Temple period and the Old Testament witness to the Spirit round out the picture.

8.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does remnant theology shape how a small church understands its significance?
2. What might it mean for your congregation to seek the welfare of its city while maintaining its distinct identity?
3. How does the book of Daniel challenge believers who serve in secular or government settings?
4. Which new-covenant promise of Jeremiah and Ezekiel do you find most compelling, and why?
5. How can the church keep the global horizon of the prophets in view?

8.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*.
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*.
- Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament*.
- N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*.
- Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*.
- Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah (Old Testament Library)*.

Part III: Christ, the Spirit and the Church

Chapter 9: Christ the Prophet and the Prophetic Messiah

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Hebrews 1:1-2, author's rendering)

9.1 Introduction

Every Christian doctrine of the church rests on a doctrine of Christ, and a prophetic ecclesiology rests on a prophetic Christology. If the church is called to hear and speak the word of God, it is because the church belongs to the One in whom the word of God became flesh. This chapter asks in what sense Jesus was a prophet, how his ministry fulfilled and surpassed the prophetic tradition of Israel, and how his prophetic work becomes the foundation and pattern for the life of the church.

9.2 Jesus Recognised as a Prophet

The Gospels show that people naturally reached for the category of prophet when they tried to describe Jesus. After he raised the widow's son at Nain, the crowd glorified God, saying, a great prophet has arisen among us (Luke 7:16). When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds identified him as the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee (Matthew 21:11). The Samaritan woman perceived him to be a prophet (John 4:19), the man born blind said the same (John 9:17), and after the feeding of the five thousand the people said, this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world (John 6:14). The disciples on the road to Emmaus summarised their hopes by describing Jesus as a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people (Luke 24:19).

Jesus himself accepted the description, though never as a full account of his identity. At Nazareth he said that no prophet is acceptable in his hometown (Luke 4:24), and he spoke of his coming death in Jerusalem as the fate of a prophet: it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem (Luke 13:33). He placed himself in the line of those who had been rejected and killed, and he warned that the blood of the prophets would be required of his generation (Luke 11:49-51).

9.3 The Prophet Like Moses

Israel nursed a particular hope drawn from Deuteronomy 18:15: that God would raise up a prophet like Moses. By the time of Jesus, this promise carried strong expectations (John 1:21; 6:14). The early church applied it explicitly to Jesus. Peter, in his sermon in Solomon's portico, quotes the promise and declares that every soul who does not listen to that prophet will be cut off (Acts 3:22-23). Stephen echoes it before the council (Acts 7:37). On the mountain of transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, the voice from heaven commands, this is my beloved Son; listen to him (Mark 9:7), the very language of Deuteronomy 18. The point is that the word spoken in Jesus has the authority of the word spoken through Moses and the prophets, and more.

9.4 Anointed with the Spirit

The prophets of Israel were empowered by the Spirit of the Lord. Jesus' public ministry begins with an explicit anointing. At his baptism, the Spirit descends on him and the voice from heaven declares him the beloved Son (Luke 3:21-22). Immediately afterwards, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and returns in the power of the Spirit to Galilee. In the synagogue at Nazareth he reads from Isaiah 61: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. He then announces, today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:16-21). Peter later summarises his ministry as God anointing Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, so that he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil (Acts 10:38).

This anointing has ecclesiological consequences. The Spirit who rested on Jesus will be poured out by Jesus on his people. John the Baptist had said that the coming one would baptise with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16). The prophetic anointing of the Head becomes the anointing of the body.

9.5 The Prophetic Ministry of Word and Deed

9.5.1 *Proclamation*

Jesus came proclaiming that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15). His teaching carried an authority that astonished his hearers, for he did not appeal to the scribes but spoke in his own name: you have heard that it was said, but I say to you (Matthew 5). He interpreted the law, announced blessings on the poor and mournful and pronounced woes on the complacent. The woes of Matthew 23 and Luke 11 stand in the tradition of Isaiah and Amos, denouncing hypocrisy, exploitation of the vulnerable and the neglect of justice, mercy and faithfulness.

9.5.2 *Signs and wonders*

Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus performed mighty works. He raised the widow's son at Nain in a scene that deliberately recalls Elijah's miracle for the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17; Luke 7:11-17). He fed multitudes in echo of Elisha. But his miracles were more than parallels; they were signs that the kingdom was breaking in. If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, he said, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Luke 11:20).

9.5.3 *Prophetic sign-acts*

Jesus performed symbolic actions in the manner of the prophets. His entry into Jerusalem on a donkey enacted Zechariah's vision of the humble king (Zechariah 9:9). His cleansing of the temple combined the words of Isaiah 56:7, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, and Jeremiah 7:11, you have made it a den of robbers, and thus placed him squarely within the prophetic critique of the temple discussed in Chapter 7 (Mark 11:15-17). The cursing of the fig tree functioned as an acted parable of judgement. The Last Supper was a sign-act of the new covenant, in which the bread and the cup interpreted his approaching death in terms of Jeremiah's promise.

9.5.4 Lament and judgement

Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying that if only it had known the things that make for peace (Luke 19:41-44), and lamented that he had longed to gather her children as a hen gathers her brood (Matthew 23:37). His prophecy of the destruction of the temple (Mark 13) stands in the line of Jeremiah. Judgement and love are joined in him, as in the prophets before him.

9.6 More than a Prophet

Though Jesus is called a prophet, the New Testament insists that he is more. The letter to the Hebrews opens by contrasting the many and varied ways in which God spoke by the prophets with the final speech of God in a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things and through whom he created the world (Hebrews 1:1-3). The prologue of John's Gospel declares that the Word who was with God and was God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). The prophets received the word of God; Jesus is the Word. The prophets pointed to the covenant; Jesus is its mediator. The prophets spoke of the coming king and servant; Jesus is both.

Within the Reformed tradition, John Calvin helped to systematise this in the doctrine of the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king (Institutes 2.15). As prophet, Christ is the perfect teacher and revealer of the Father's will; as priest, he offers himself once for all and intercedes for his people; as king, he rules over his church and the world. Though this scheme has limitations, it reminds us that the offices separated in Israel are united in Christ. The church participates in his threefold ministry: it bears witness to him as prophet, offers spiritual sacrifices as a royal priesthood and shares in his reign by serving.

9.7 The Rejected and Vindicated Prophet

Jesus' prophetic ministry culminates in rejection and death. He was killed in Jerusalem, as the prophets before him had been. Yet the resurrection vindicated him, and the risen Lord opened the Scriptures to the disciples, showing them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to enter into his glory (Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). The cross and resurrection do not end the prophetic line; they transform it. They show that the way of God's word in the world is the way of suffering love, and that God's final answer to violence is not retaliation but resurrection.

9.8 The Parables as Prophetic Speech

A large part of the teaching of Jesus is in the form of parables, short stories drawn from everyday life that carry a challenging message. Parables have prophetic precedent. Nathan told David the story of the poor man's ewe lamb, which led David to condemn himself before he realised that the story was about him (2 Samuel 12). Isaiah sang the song of the vineyard, whose owner expected good grapes and found wild ones (Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus drew on this tradition. His parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12) deliberately echoes Isaiah's vineyard, and the chief priests and scribes perceived that he had told the parable against them.

Parables function in several ways. They invite listeners to enter a story and form a judgement before they realise they are being judged. They reveal the character of the kingdom through ordinary images: a sower, a mustard seed, leaven, a lost coin, a prodigal son. And they sift hearers. Jesus explained that to those outside, everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive (Mark 4:11-12), echoing Isaiah's commission to a people with dull ears. The parable thus both reveals and conceals, depending on the hearer's openness.

Some parables are particularly relevant to the prophetic church. The good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) redefines neighbour in a way that crosses ethnic and religious boundaries. The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) exposes the blindness of the wealthy to the poor at their gate and warns that those who do not listen to Moses and the Prophets will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead. The Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) unmasks self-righteousness. The sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) identifies Christ with the hungry, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner. Preachers who wish to speak prophetically can learn from the parables: tell the truth with stories that disarm and provoke.

9.9 Jesus, the Law, the Temple and Tradition

Jesus' relation to the institutions of Israel was complex. He said, do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). He affirmed the law, deepened its demands and summed it up in love of God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-34). At the same time, he challenged interpretations that evaded its heart. In disputes about the Sabbath, he declared that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27), and he healed on that day, asking whether it was lawful to do good or to do harm. In Mark 7, he criticised traditions that allowed people to evade the duty to care for their parents, and he taught that what defiles a person comes from within the heart.

Concerning the temple, he acted with prophetic authority. He drove out the traders, quoted Isaiah and Jeremiah and predicted its destruction (Mark 11:15-17; 13:1-2). In John's Gospel, he spoke of the temple of his body, which would be raised in three days (John 2:19-21). He told the Samaritan woman that the hour was coming, and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23). These statements and actions do not reject the Old Testament but point to its fulfilment. The temple's role as the place of God's presence is taken up by Jesus himself, and then by the community of those indwelt by his Spirit.

The ecclesiological consequence is that the church does not have a sacred geography. Wherever believers gather in his name, he is present. Yet the principle of holy space, the sense that God's presence is to be honoured with reverence, remains. The church must avoid both a superstitious attitude to buildings and a careless attitude to worship.

9.10 Jesus, Women, the Poor and the Outcast

The Gospels, particularly Luke, emphasise Jesus' engagement with persons on the margins. He touched lepers, whom society shunned. He ate with tax collectors, who were despised as collaborators. He allowed a woman with a bad reputation to anoint his feet and defended her against the criticism of his host (Luke 7:36-50). He spoke with a Samaritan woman at a well, crossing barriers of ethnicity, gender and morality, and she became a witness to her town (John 4). He received women among his disciples and supporters (Luke 8:1-3), and women were the first witnesses of his resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:11-18). He welcomed children and held them up as models of the kingdom (Mark 10:13-16). He praised the faith of a Roman centurion and of a Syrophenician woman, who persisted in her request until Jesus granted it (Mark 7:24-30).

The song of Mary at the beginning of Luke's Gospel sets the tone: he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1:52-53). Jesus' announcement in Nazareth

that he had come to preach good news to the poor, and the beatitudes that bless the poor, the hungry and those who weep (Luke 6:20-21), continue that note.

These patterns show that a prophetic church will be recognised by those it welcomes. A congregation that is open to the poor, the sick, the outcast and the foreigner is following its Lord. A congregation that favours the rich and the powerful, giving the best seats to those with fine clothes, falls under James's rebuke (James 2:1-9).

9.11 Jesus' Confrontation with Political Power

Jesus did not stand aloof from political power. When warned that Herod wanted to kill him, he replied, go and tell that fox, behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course (Luke 13:32). Asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, he asked for a coin and said, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's (Mark 12:13-17), a reply that affirmed a legitimate role for the state while implying that Caesar's claims are limited by God's. Before Pilate, he said that his kingdom was not of this world, so that his servants did not fight, and that Pilate would have no authority over him unless it had been given from above (John 18:36; 19:11). When Peter drew a sword in the garden, Jesus told him to put it back, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword (Matthew 26:52).

These episodes show a pattern of fearless truthfulness without violence. Jesus' kingdom is real and has implications for how rulers are to be judged, but it advances by a different method. The charge on which he was crucified, that he claimed to be king of the Jews, shows that he was understood to be a threat to the political order. The cross is therefore both a religious and a political event, in which the powers of the world did their worst, and God overturned their verdict.

9.12 The Cross and the Prophetic Pattern of Suffering

The death of Jesus is the climax of the prophetic pattern of rejection. Yet the New Testament insists that the cross is more than the fate of a prophet. It is the atoning sacrifice for sin, the means by which God reconciles the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus described his death as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) and at the Last Supper spoke of his blood of the covenant, poured out for many (Mark 14:24). The Servant of Isaiah 53 stands behind these words.

The cross also shapes how the church understands its prophetic witness. Jesus prayed on the cross, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34). The one who is wronged prays for his enemies. Paul calls the word of the cross the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), reversing human expectations of strength. The apostle Peter writes that Christ left an example, so that you might follow in his steps. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten (1 Peter 2:21-23). For the prophetic church, then, the cross implies that the way to speak truth is with love for enemies, that suffering endured for righteousness' sake is not defeat, and that violence and hatred are not weapons of the kingdom.

9.13 Resurrection, Ascension and the Continuing Prophetic Voice of Christ

The resurrection vindicated the crucified prophet and established him as Lord. After his resurrection, he walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened the Scriptures to

them, so that their hearts burned within them (Luke 24:32). He appeared to the eleven, breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). He commissioned them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations (Luke 24:47). Forty days later, he ascended into heaven, and the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11).

The ascension does not mean that Christ has ceased to speak. Hebrews 12:25 warns, see that you do not refuse him who is speaking. In John 10:27 he says, my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. In the farewell discourse, he promises that the Spirit of truth will guide the disciples into all the truth, declaring to them the things that are to come, and that the Spirit will take what is his and declare it (John 16:13-15). In Revelation, he addresses the churches directly. The living Christ speaks to his church through Scripture, through the Spirit and through the ministries he has given. The church's prophetic life is a response to the continuing voice of the risen Lord.

Revelation 1:5 calls Jesus the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of kings on earth. The faithful witness is also the ruler. The church's prophetic witness, offered in weakness, is backed by the authority of the One to whom all authority has been given.

9.14 Christ as the Foundation of the Church's Prophetic Identity

1. The church receives the word it speaks. Its message is not its own invention but the testimony of Jesus. The book of Revelation says that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10).
2. The church shares in Christ's anointing. John writes to believers that they have been anointed by the Holy One (1 John 2:20, 27). The anointing belongs to the community, not merely to its leaders.
3. The church follows the prophet's path. Jesus taught his disciples to expect opposition: blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11-12).
4. The church's speech must be measured by Christ. Every prophetic claim must be tested by whether it confesses Jesus and aligns with the gospel (1 John 4:1-3).
5. The church's prophetic work is wholly dependent on its Lord. It speaks by his Spirit and in his name, never as an independent authority.

9.15 Chapter Summary

- Jesus was widely recognised as a prophet and understood his own ministry in that tradition.
- He is the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy 18, anointed with the Spirit.
- His ministry combined authoritative proclamation, mighty works, prophetic sign-acts and lament.
- He is more than a prophet: the Son and Word through whom God speaks finally and fully.
- The church derives its prophetic identity from sharing in Christ's anointing and following his path.
- His parables, his stance toward law and temple, his welcome of the outcast, his confrontation with power, the cross and the resurrection all shape the prophetic church.

9.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which prophetic sign-act of Jesus speaks most powerfully to the church's life today?
2. What does it mean to say that Jesus is more than a prophet, and why does it matter for the way the church evaluates other prophetic claims?
3. How should the church's experience of opposition be understood in light of Matthew 5:11-12?
4. In what ways can a congregation share in Christ's threefold ministry as prophet, priest and king?
5. How does the Nazareth sermon (Luke 4) shape the church's mission to the poor?

9.17 Suggested Further Reading

- N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.
- James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*.
- Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament).
- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, chapter 15.
- Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*.
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.
- Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*.
- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*.

Chapter 10: The Kingdom of God and the Community of Jesus

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15, author's rendering)

10.1 Introduction

The central theme of the preaching of Jesus was not the church but the kingdom of God. Yet he did not announce the kingdom and leave his hearers as isolated individuals. He gathered a community, called disciples, formed a new family and sent them out. To understand the church's prophetic identity, we must grasp its relationship to the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. This chapter explores that kingdom, the community that formed around Jesus and the beginnings of the church.

10.2 The Kingdom Announced

The language of the kingdom of God has deep Old Testament roots. Israel confessed that the Lord is king, and the prophets looked for a day when his rule would be openly established. Isaiah speaks of the messenger who announces, your God reigns (Isaiah 52:7). Daniel sees the Ancient of Days giving dominion to one like a son of man (Daniel 7). When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is at hand, he is announcing that this long-awaited reign is breaking into history in his own person and ministry.

The kingdom in the teaching of Jesus has both a present and a future dimension. Scholars such as George Eldon Ladd described it as already present but not yet fully consummated: the kingdom has come in Jesus, yet awaits its final manifestation at his return. This tension shapes the church's life. The church lives between the times, enjoying the first fruits of the kingdom and longing for its fullness.

10.3 Kingdom Signs

Jesus accompanied his preaching with signs that displayed what the kingdom looks like. The sick were healed, the demonised were freed, the dead were raised and the hungry were fed. Social boundaries were crossed: he touched lepers, welcomed tax collectors and sinners, spoke with a Samaritan woman and received women among his followers. His table fellowship was itself a prophetic act, anticipating the messianic banquet and demonstrating that God's mercy reached the margins. The kingdom is good news especially to the poor (Luke 4:18; 6:20).

These signs belong to a prophetic pattern. They fulfilled the promises of Isaiah that the blind would see and the lame would leap (Isaiah 35:5-6), a connection Jesus drew explicitly when answering the questions of John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-23). They were also the practical expression of the church's later vocation to continue acts of mercy and healing as signs of the kingdom.

10.4 The Ethics of the Kingdom

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7) gives the clearest picture of the way of life of the kingdom. It begins with the beatitudes, blessings on the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful and the peacemakers. It deepens the law by looking at the heart, calls for love of enemies, warns against hypocrisy in giving, praying and fasting, and insists on seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. The community that lives by this ethic is a city on a hill and a light to the world (Matthew 5:14-16). The prophetic character of the church is thus bound to the quality of its life. The world will be persuaded, not only by what the church says, but by what it is.

10.5 The Gathering of a New Community

10.5.1 The Twelve

Jesus chose twelve disciples (Mark 3:13-19), a number that evokes the twelve tribes of Israel. In doing so, he enacted a prophetic sign: the restoration of Israel was beginning. The Twelve would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28). The new community was not a replacement of Israel but its renewal and extension, with Jesus as its centre.

10.5.2 A new family

When his mother and brothers came to speak with him, Jesus looked at those around him and said, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:31-35). Membership in the community of Jesus is defined by obedience to God, which relativises natural ties and creates a new kinship across tribe and class. For African contexts, where family and clan are of profound importance, this saying is both challenging and liberating. The church is a family that makes room for the stranger.

10.5.3 Servant leadership

When the disciples argued about greatness, Jesus contrasted the lordship of the rulers of the Gentiles with the pattern of his community: whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45). This principle is basic to church leadership and sharply critical of every form of domination, clericalism and personal aggrandisement.

10.5.4 A little flock

Jesus called his followers a little flock and told them not to fear, for it was the Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom (Luke 12:32). The community of Jesus was small and vulnerable, yet entrusted with a great promise. This pattern recurs through church history.

10.6 The Word Ekklesia on the Lips of Jesus

The word ekklesia appears on Jesus' lips twice in the Gospels, both in Matthew. After Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus says, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). He gives the disciples the keys of the kingdom and the authority of binding and loosing. In Matthew 18:15-20, he gives instructions for the discipline and reconciliation of the community, promising that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them. These texts show that the church belongs to Christ (my church), is built by him and has a concern for truth, discipline and reconciliation.

10.7 The Sending of the Disciples

The community of Jesus was always a missionary community. He sent out the Twelve and later the seventy-two to proclaim the kingdom, heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 9 and 10). The pattern of their mission, dependent, itinerant, welcoming and prepared to be rejected, offers a model of vulnerable witness. After his resurrection, he gave the great commission to make disciples of all nations, baptising and teaching them to observe all he had commanded, promising his presence to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20). Luke records that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, and that the disciples were to wait for power from on high (Luke 24:46-49), and Acts 1:8 declares that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth.

10.8 The Promise of the Spirit

In the upper room discourse, Jesus promised another Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, who would be with and in the disciples, teach them all things, bring to remembrance all that Jesus said, testify about him, convict the world and guide them into all the truth (John 14 to 16). The Spirit's work is thus closely connected to prophetic witness: the Spirit takes what belongs to Christ and declares it to the disciples. The church will not live by its own resources but by the presence of the Spirit. This prepares the way for Pentecost.

10.9 Kingdom and Church

What is the relationship between the kingdom and the church? The two are not identical. The kingdom is God's reign, which is broader than the church and will be fully revealed only at the end. The church is the community that lives under that reign, proclaims it and anticipates it. Lesslie Newbigin and others have described the church as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom. As a sign, it points beyond itself; as an instrument, it is used by God to advance his purposes; as a foretaste, it shows in its own life something of what is to come. A church that identifies itself too closely with the kingdom becomes triumphalist; a church that forgets the kingdom becomes self-serving. A prophetic church keeps its eyes on the coming reign.

10.10 The Parables of the Kingdom and the Surprise of Its Growth

Jesus' parables of the kingdom, especially in Matthew 13, teach that the kingdom comes in unexpected ways. The sower scatters seed on different kinds of soil, and only some yields a harvest. The mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, becomes a tree in which birds nest. The leaven, hidden in three measures of flour, works through the whole batch. The treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price are worth selling everything to obtain. The weeds among the wheat are to be left until the harvest.

These parables correct several misconceptions. The kingdom does not arrive with the pomp of earthly power but begins small and hidden. Its growth is mysterious and not under human control. It demands total commitment. And in the present age, the church will contain a mixture. The parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) warns against the impulse to purify the church by force, because the servants might uproot the wheat along with the weeds. The final separation belongs to God. This does not abolish church discipline, as Matthew 18 shows, but it cautions against self-righteous purges and against expectations of a perfect community in this age.

10.11 The Beatitudes as a Prophetic Charter

The beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) open the Sermon on the Mount and function as a charter for the community of the kingdom. They reverse worldly values.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit: those who recognise their spiritual poverty and depend wholly on God.
- Blessed are those who mourn: those who grieve over sin and suffering, including the sin of the world.
- Blessed are the meek: those who are gentle and do not grasp, who in the end will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: those who long for justice and right living.
- Blessed are the merciful: those who forgive and show compassion.
- Blessed are the pure in heart: those whose lives are undivided in devotion to God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers: those who work for reconciliation, who will be called sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: those who suffer for faithfulness.

In Luke's version, the blessings are followed by woes upon the rich, the full, the laughing and those of whom all speak well (Luke 6:24-26), a note that echoes the prophets. The community that lives by the beatitudes is a counter-community. Jesus then says that his disciples are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). These images imply both distinctiveness and engagement: salt must be in the food and light must shine in the darkness. A prophetic church does not retreat from the world or conform to it, but permeates it with a different way of life.

10.12 The Cost of Discipleship

Jesus did not conceal the cost of following him. He said to the crowds, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mark 8:34). He told prospective followers to count the cost, like a builder estimating the expense of a tower or a king calculating the strength of his army (Luke 14:25-33). He said that the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14). He told the rich young man to sell what he had and give to the poor (Mark 10:21).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, contrasted cheap grace, which is grace without repentance, without discipleship and without the cross, with costly grace, which is the grace of the call to follow Jesus. Cheap grace, he wrote, is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Written in the context of a German church that had too easily accommodated itself to National Socialism, the book remains a challenge to every church. In settings where the gospel is presented as a source of quick success, the call to take up the cross is the necessary corrective. Disciples are not promised ease but are assured of the presence of the Lord and a share in his resurrection.

10.13 The Lord's Supper, Table Fellowship and Community

The meal was central to the ministry of Jesus. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, fed the multitudes, was criticised as a glutton and a drunkard, and shared the Last Supper with his

disciples. At that supper, he said, I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:15-16), and he gave the bread and the cup as signs of the new covenant in his blood. The meal looks back to the cross, looks forward to the kingdom banquet and expresses present communion.

The early church celebrated the Lord's Supper in the context of shared meals (Acts 2:46). In Corinth, the practice became distorted: some ate and drank to excess while others went hungry, and Paul said that when you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat (1 Corinthians 11:20). The meal had become a mark of social division, in conflict with its meaning as proclamation of Christ's death and expression of the unity of the body. A prophetic ecclesiology insists that the Lord's table must be a place of equality and reconciliation. Churches should ask whether their practice of communion and their common meals include the poor, whether they cross social barriers and whether those who receive the bread are also ready to share bread with the hungry.

10.14 Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18

Matthew 18 contains Jesus' most extended teaching on relationships within the community of disciples. It begins with the call to become like children, warns against causing little ones to stumble, tells the parable of the lost sheep and then gives the procedure for dealing with a sinning brother (Matthew 18:15-20): go and tell him his fault between you and him alone; if he listens, you have gained your brother. If not, take one or two others; if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. The goal of the entire process is the restoration of the brother. The authority to bind and loose in this context is exercised in the setting of the community's prayer and the presence of Christ.

Peter's question about how often to forgive follows, and Jesus answers with the parable of the unforgiving servant, who, having been forgiven an enormous debt, refused to forgive a small one (Matthew 18:21-35). The point is that those who have received boundless forgiveness must forgive. The two halves of the chapter belong together. Discipline without forgiveness is harsh; forgiveness without honesty is shallow.

In some churches, the language of binding and loosing, or the warning against touching the Lord's anointed, has been used to silence people who raise concerns about leaders. This misreads the passage. Matthew 18 describes a process designed to protect the wronged and to restore the wrongdoer, and it applies to all members, including leaders. Chapter 20 will return to the question of discipline and accountability.

10.15 The Kingdom and Culture

How should the community of the kingdom relate to the surrounding culture? H. Richard Niebuhr's classic study *Christ and Culture*, published in 1951, identified five broad types in the history of Christian thought: Christ against culture, in which the church withdraws from the world; the Christ of culture, in which the church accommodates to the culture; Christ above culture, in which Christ fulfils and perfects culture; Christ and culture in paradox, in which the believer lives in tension between two realms; and Christ the transformer of culture, in which the church engages to convert and renew society. Critics have noted limitations in the typology, but it remains a useful tool.

The biblical witness does not fit neatly into any one type. The gospel judges every culture, since all are touched by sin, and it also affirms every culture, since all are the sphere of God's creation. The prophetic church is both counter-cultural and engaged. In the African setting, it will affirm the good in African culture, such as hospitality, respect for elders, communal solidarity and the sense of the sacred, and it will challenge what contradicts the gospel, such as oppression of women, tribalism, fear of witchcraft, corruption and exploitation. It will do the same in its criticisms of Western cultural influences, including consumerism and individualism. The goal is the transformation of culture under the lordship of Christ, with humility about the church's own cultural entanglements.

10.16 Implications for Prophetic Ecclesiology

1. The church's first loyalty is to the kingdom, not to institutions, denominations or leaders.
2. The church's life is a sign. Its inclusiveness, mercy, forgiveness and generosity preach before words are spoken.
3. Servant leadership is a test of authenticity. Prophetic ministry that seeks status or wealth betrays the pattern of Jesus.
4. The church lives in tension between the already and the not yet, and so is marked by both gratitude and hope.
5. The church is sent. A congregation that has stopped reaching beyond itself has lost its way.

10.17 Chapter Summary

- Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, present in his ministry and to be consummated in the future.
- Kingdom signs and kingdom ethics shaped the life of the community he gathered.
- The call of the Twelve, the new family and the pattern of servant leadership define the church's identity.
- The church belongs to Christ, is built by him and is sent in mission with the promise of the Spirit.
- The church is a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom, not its equivalent.
- The kingdom parables, beatitudes, cost of discipleship, table fellowship, Matthew 18 and the question of church and culture further define the community of Jesus.

10.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does the already-and-not-yet nature of the kingdom influence the church's expectations?
2. In what ways can your congregation become a clearer sign of the kingdom?
3. What does it mean in your context to be a family that crosses tribal and social lines?
4. How can servant leadership be taught and protected in church life?
5. What are the dangers of identifying the church too closely with the kingdom?

10.19 Suggested Further Reading

- George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*.

- Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God and The Open Secret*.
- N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.
- Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*.
- John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*.
- Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*.
- H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Chapter 11: Pentecost and the Spirit-Empowered Church

This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. (Acts 2:16-17, author's rendering)

11.1 Introduction

If the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ provide the foundation of the church, Pentecost is its birthday and its empowerment. On that day, the promised Spirit was poured out, and the disciples were transformed from a frightened group into a bold, speaking and serving community. For prophetic ecclesiology, Pentecost is pivotal. It is the fulfilment of Moses's longing in Numbers 11, of Joel's promise, of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's new covenant and of Jesus' own promise. This chapter examines the event, its meaning and its consequences for the church.

11.2 The Event of Pentecost

Luke's account in Acts 2 describes the gathering of the disciples in Jerusalem during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the harvest festival of weeks that also became associated with the giving of the law at Sinai. A sound like a mighty rushing wind filled the house, tongues as of fire rested on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Devout Jews from every nation under heaven, gathered in Jerusalem, heard them declaring the mighty works of God in their own languages (Acts 2:1-11).

Several features stand out. First, the Spirit is given to the whole community, not to a single leader. Second, the immediate result is speech, a witness that crosses linguistic boundaries. Third, the event is public and draws a crowd, creating an occasion for proclamation. Many interpreters see in Pentecost a reversal of Babel, where languages were confused and humanity scattered (Genesis 11). At Pentecost, the Spirit enables understanding across the languages without erasing them. The gospel is not tied to a single language or culture. This insight, emphasised by Lamin Sanneh, has profound significance for African Christianity, in which the gospel is received and expressed in mother tongues.

11.3 Peter's Sermon and the Joel Prophecy

Peter stands with the eleven and explains the phenomenon by appeal to the prophet Joel (Acts 2:14-21). The last days have arrived. God has poured out his Spirit on all flesh, regardless of age, sex or social standing: sons and daughters, young men and old men, even male and female servants. All will prophesy. Peter's use of Joel is unmistakable: the prophetic Spirit, once granted to a few, is now a gift to all who belong to Christ. He then proclaims Jesus crucified, risen and exalted as Lord and Christ, and calls for repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:36-39). The promise, he says, is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

Pentecost thus joins the Spirit of prophecy and the proclamation of Christ. The Spirit does not draw attention to himself but exalts Jesus, as Jesus had said (John 16:14).

11.4 The Spirit of Prophecy and Empowerment for Witness

A significant debate in modern scholarship concerns how Luke understands the gift of the Spirit. Some scholars, notably Roger Stronstad and Robert Menzies from a Pentecostal perspective, argue that in Luke-Acts the Spirit is primarily the Spirit of prophecy, empowering believers for witness and mission, in continuity with the Old Testament experience. Others, such as James Dunn, have stressed the role of the Spirit in conversion-initiation, while Max Turner has argued that Luke sees the Spirit as the source of both prophetic empowerment and the life of the restored people of God. This book does not seek to settle that debate. What is clear is that Acts 1:8 links the coming of the Spirit directly to witness: you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses. The Spirit empowers the church for prophetic testimony.

11.5 The Life of the Spirit-Filled Community

Acts 2:42-47 describes the first community as devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Awe came upon every soul, many wonders and signs were done, believers had all things in common and sold their possessions to give to any in need, and they praised God and had favour with all the people. The Lord added to their number day by day. Here the prophetic Spirit produces teaching, fellowship, worship, generosity and mission. The prophetic church is a community of word and deed.

Acts 4:31 records that, after the believers prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. The pattern of prayer, filling and bold speech recurs throughout Acts.

11.6 Pentecost Extended

The gift of the Spirit does not stop in Jerusalem. In Samaria, after Philip's preaching, Peter and John pray for the believers to receive the Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). In the house of Cornelius, the Spirit falls on Gentiles while Peter is still speaking, and Peter concludes that God has granted repentance and life even to the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18). At Ephesus, Paul finds disciples who have not heard of the Holy Spirit and, after baptism, they speak in tongues and prophesy (Acts 19:1-7). Each of these episodes marks a new frontier: Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, and disciples of John the Baptist all receive the Spirit. The story shows that the prophetic Spirit crosses ethnic and cultural boundaries.

There is variation in the way these stories unfold, and the New Testament does not offer a single mechanical pattern. Christians have debated whether Spirit baptism is simultaneous with conversion or a subsequent experience. Without ignoring such differences, we can affirm that every believer is called to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and that the Spirit's presence is to be earnestly sought, humbly received and evidenced in transformed life and witness.

11.7 The Spirit and the Gifts of the Church

From Pentecost flows a rich variety of gifts. In Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, Paul lists gifts of teaching, serving, encouraging, giving, leading, mercy, wisdom,

knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and interpretation. These are given to each for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). The church is a body with many members, each needed. The prophetic gift is one among many; it must not be elevated above love, which Paul calls a more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31 to 13:13). We will return to these gifts in Parts IV and V.

11.8 The Church as the Temple of the Spirit

In the Old Testament, God's presence dwelt in the temple. In the New Testament, the Spirit dwells in the community. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in them (1 Corinthians 3:16). Ephesians pictures believers as a holy temple in the Lord, built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22). This has two implications. The church is holy, set apart for God, and therefore must pursue purity. It is also the place where God's presence is encountered, and therefore must be marked by worship and openness to the Spirit.

11.9 Pentecost in Its Jewish Setting

Luke tells us that the Spirit came when the day of Pentecost arrived (Acts 2:1). The Greek word means fiftieth, since the festival fell fifty days after the Passover sabbath. In the Old Testament it is the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival at which the first fruits of the wheat harvest were offered to the Lord (Leviticus 23:15-21; Deuteronomy 16:9-12). By the time of the New Testament, some Jewish traditions also associated the feast with the giving of the law at Sinai, although the evidence for how widespread this association was in the first century is debated. Whether or not Luke has Sinai in mind, the parallels are suggestive. At Sinai there was fire, a sound and the descent of the Lord on the mountain (Exodus 19). At Pentecost there was a sound like wind, tongues of fire and the descent of the Spirit on the gathered believers. At Sinai, a people was constituted by covenant. At Pentecost, a people was constituted by the Spirit, in fulfilment of Jeremiah's promise of a law written on the heart.

The harvest imagery is also fitting. The church is described in the New Testament as the first fruits of a larger harvest. Paul speaks of the Spirit as the first fruits of the redemption to come (Romans 8:23), and James calls believers a kind of first fruits of God's creatures (James 1:18). The three thousand who were added on the day of Pentecost were the first sheaf of a harvest that would grow to include all nations.

Luke's list of the nations represented in Jerusalem is significant: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11). The list includes North Africans. Within a few years, the Ethiopian official would be baptised (Acts 8), and the church in Alexandria and Cyrene would be among the early centres of Christianity. African Christians can therefore recognise themselves in the story of Pentecost from its first day.

11.10 Tongues, Interpretation and the Question of Initial Evidence

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues appears in several places in the New Testament and has been a point of both unity and controversy in the modern church. In Acts 2, the disciples spoke in languages that the pilgrims recognised, so that each heard them in their own tongue. In Acts 10:46 and 19:6, tongues accompany the coming of the Spirit on Cornelius's household and

on the disciples at Ephesus, and Luke does not say whether these were known languages. In 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, tongues is a gift that needs interpretation if it is to edify the assembly. Paul also speaks of praying in the Spirit and of the Spirit's wordless groanings (Romans 8:26-27; Ephesians 6:18).

Christians hold several positions.

- Initial evidence. Many Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, teach that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit, a conviction based on the pattern of Acts.
- One gift among many. Many other evangelical and charismatic Christians affirm the gift of tongues but hold that it is not a necessary sign of the Spirit's fullness, appealing to Paul's question, do all speak with tongues? (1 Corinthians 12:30), which expects the answer no.
- Cessationist. Some hold that tongues, along with other miraculous gifts, ceased with the apostolic age.

This book does not seek to resolve the debate, but certain pastoral principles can be affirmed across the positions. No one should be made to feel a second-class Christian because they have not spoken in tongues, and no one should be pressed to produce the experience. Tongues are not a sign of superior spirituality; the Corinthians, who had them in abundance, were hardly mature. In public assembly, tongues require interpretation, and intelligible speech takes precedence. Whatever one's position, love remains the more excellent way.

11.11 Baptism, Filling, Indwelling and Sealing

The New Testament uses several expressions for the Spirit's work in believers, and Christians have debated their relationship. The expression baptised with the Holy Spirit appears in Acts 1:5 in anticipation of Pentecost, and in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul says that we were all baptised in one Spirit into one body. Being filled with the Spirit is mentioned at Pentecost and on other occasions (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17), and Ephesians 5:18 commands, be filled with the Spirit, in a verb form that suggests ongoing, repeated filling. Receiving the Spirit is the language of Acts 8:15 and 19:2. Believers are said to be sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13) and to have the Spirit dwelling in them (Romans 8:9-11).

Different traditions arrange these terms differently. Many evangelicals, following writers such as John Stott in *Baptism and Fullness*, hold that all believers are baptised in the Spirit at conversion and are thereafter commanded to be continually filled. Classical Pentecostals hold that baptism in the Spirit is a distinct experience following conversion, empowering for witness. Wesleyan holiness traditions have spoken of a second blessing of entire sanctification. Charismatics vary. A prophetic ecclesiology may point to what is common: every believer needs the Spirit, receives the Spirit and should continually seek the Spirit's fullness for holy living and effective witness. Gifts and fruit are both signs of the Spirit's work, and neither should be neglected.

11.12 The Spirit and the Missionary Expansion of the Church

The book of Acts is sometimes called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, since the Spirit is the principal actor in the missionary expansion of the church. The Spirit directs Philip to the chariot of the Ethiopian official (Acts 8:29) and carries him away afterwards (8:39). The Spirit tells Peter to go with the men from Cornelius (10:19-20). The Spirit calls Barnabas and Saul at

Antioch and sends them out (13:2-4). The Spirit forbids Paul and his companions to speak in Asia and does not allow them to enter Bithynia, leading them eventually to Macedonia (16:6-10). Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he is going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to him except that the Spirit testifies in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await him (20:22-23).

These passages reveal that the Spirit guides mission both by opening and by closing doors. They also show that the Spirit's guidance is not always a clear and comfortable path. Mission under the Spirit's leading is sometimes costly. The Spirit also empowers verbal witness: Stephen speaks with wisdom and the Spirit (Acts 6:10), and Peter, filled with the Spirit, addresses the council (4:8). A prophetic church is therefore a missionary church that seeks the Spirit's direction in its plans, strategies and sending of workers, while testing impressions in the community.

11.13 The Spirit and the Word

The Spirit and Scripture are not rivals. Peter says that no prophecy of Scripture ever came by the impulse of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Paul says that the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God, and that we have received the Spirit so that we may understand the gifts freely given to us (1 Corinthians 2:10-12). Jesus promised that the Spirit would teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that he had said (John 14:26) and would bear witness about him (John 15:26). The Spirit who inspired the word also illuminates it. John Calvin, in the Institutes, spoke of the internal testimony of the Spirit, by which believers are assured that Scripture is the word of God.

A familiar saying holds that the Spirit without the word leads to excess, while the word without the Spirit leads to dryness. Luther struggled with spiritualists who exalted the inner word against the written word, calling them enthusiasts. Pentecostal and charismatic movements have at their best joined a high view of Scripture with an expectation of the Spirit's power. The prophetic church seeks to keep them together: it reads the Bible in prayerful dependence on the Spirit and tests all spiritual impressions by the Bible.

11.14 Pentecost and the African Church

The theology of Pentecost has particular resonance for African Christianity. First, the multilingual character of Pentecost affirms the importance of mother-tongue worship, preaching and Scripture. In Nigeria, with hundreds of languages, the translation of the Bible and the use of local languages in worship are acts of Pentecostal faithfulness. Churches should ask whether those who do not speak the dominant language of the congregation hear the mighty works of God in their own tongue.

Second, the experience of the Spirit as power, healing and guidance matches the expectations of many African believers. Scholars such as Ogbu Kalu and Allan Anderson have observed that African Pentecostalism has taken root partly because it speaks to a worldview in which the spiritual realm is real and active. This connection is a gift to the global church, but also requires discernment. The language of power can drift toward a magical conception, as though the Spirit were a force to be manipulated by correct techniques. The Spirit in Scripture is a person, the Spirit of Christ, who cannot be bought or controlled, as Simon the magician discovered (Acts 8:18-24). Third, the community orientation of African societies provides a

good fit for the Pentecostal vision of the Spirit creating a body and sharing gifts for the common good. The church should resist individualistic and consumerist versions of the Spirit's work, in which the Spirit is a means for personal success.

11.15 Implications for Prophetic Ecclesiology

1. The church depends entirely on the Spirit. Programmes, buildings and personalities cannot replace the Spirit's presence and power.
2. The prophetic gift belongs to the whole people of God. Every member has something to contribute, and no elite owns the Spirit.
3. The Spirit crosses boundaries. Pentecost is a charter for a multiethnic, multilingual church that honours each culture.
4. The Spirit exalts Jesus. Any spirituality that magnifies a human personality or sensational experience at the expense of Christ has departed from Pentecost.
5. The Spirit produces both power and character. Gifts must be matched by fruit, and boldness by love.

11.16 Chapter Summary

- Pentecost is the fulfilment of the promises of Moses, Joel and the new covenant prophets.
- The Spirit was given to the whole community, enabling witness across languages and cultures.
- Acts links the Spirit directly to empowerment for witness.
- The Spirit-filled community is marked by teaching, fellowship, worship, generosity and mission.
- The Spirit was extended to Samaritans, Gentiles and others, and gives varied gifts to the one body.
- Pentecost has a Jewish setting, raises debates about tongues and Spirit baptism, and joins the Spirit to mission, to the word and, in the African church, to mother-tongue worship.

11.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Pentecost as a reversal of Babel inform the church's attitude toward languages and cultures?
2. What difference does it make to say the Spirit is given to all believers and not only to leaders?
3. How should a church seek the filling of the Spirit while remaining anchored in Scripture?
4. Which aspects of Acts 2:42-47 are most lacking in your community?
5. How can the church balance emphasis on gifts with emphasis on love and holiness?

11.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*.
- Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*.

- James D. G. Dunn, Baptism in the Holy Spirit.
- Max Turner, Power from on High.
- Gordon D. Fee, God's Empowering Presence.
- Lamin Sanneh, Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture.

Chapter 12: The Prophetic Community in Acts

We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29, author's rendering)

12.1 Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles is the church's first extended self-portrait. Luke narrates the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, and in doing so shows what a Spirit-filled, prophetic community looks like in practice. This chapter examines Acts as a source for prophetic ecclesiology, considering the prophets and prophetic experiences it records, the way guidance and decisions were reached, the community's witness before authorities, its economic and social life, and the structures it developed.

12.2 Prophets and Prophetic Experiences in Acts

Prophets appear at several points in Acts. At Antioch, there were in the church prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul (Acts 13:1). While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them (Acts 13:2). After further fasting and prayer, the church laid hands on them and sent them off. This is one of the clearest pictures of corporate prophetic guidance: a gathered, worshipping, fasting community hearing the Spirit and responding together.

Agabus is a prophet from Jerusalem who foretells a great famine, leading the disciples at Antioch to send relief to the believers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Later at Caesarea, he binds his own hands and feet with Paul's belt and declares that the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the owner of the belt and hand him over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10-11). In both instances, the prophecy is concrete, practical and tied to the community's decisions. Judas and Silas, described as prophets, encourage and strengthen the brothers in Antioch with many words (Acts 15:32). Philip's four unmarried daughters are described as prophesying (Acts 21:9), a quiet but significant reference to the role of women in prophetic ministry.

Beyond these named prophets, Acts is full of visions, dreams and angelic communications. Ananias is told in a vision to go to Saul (Acts 9:10-17). Cornelius and Peter receive complementary visions that bring them together (Acts 10). Paul sees a man of Macedonia pleading for help, and the missionary team concludes that God has called them to preach the gospel there (Acts 16:9-10). In each case, the vision is part of a larger movement of discernment, obedience and mission.

12.3 Guidance and Communal Discernment

Acts demonstrates that prophetic guidance is not an alternative to communal discernment but is bound up with it. The most important example is the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). When the church faced the question of whether Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, apostles and elders gathered. They heard testimony of what God had done among the Gentiles, they considered Scripture (Amos 9:11-12 was cited by James), and they reached a decision that they could describe as seeming good to the Holy Spirit and to us (Acts 15:28). The

Spirit's guidance did not bypass debate; it was mediated through testimony, Scripture, reasoned argument and shared decision. This is a model for every church facing difficult questions.

12.4 Prophetic Boldness before Authorities

The church in Acts follows the prophets in confronting power. Peter and John, arrested and brought before the council, declare that there is salvation in no one else but Jesus. When ordered to stop speaking in his name, they respond, whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20). When forbidden again, they affirm that we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Their refusal to be silenced echoes the prophets' freedom from fear of kings.

Stephen's long speech before the council (Acts 7) rehearses Israel's history with a prophetic edge, accusing his hearers of resisting the Holy Spirit, as their fathers did, and of killing the prophets who announced the coming of the Righteous One. He is stoned, praying that the Lord not hold the sin against his killers, echoing the words of Jesus. In Stephen, the pattern of the prophet who dies for the word is renewed. Paul similarly bears witness before governors and kings, in Philippi, Athens, Caesarea and Rome. He addresses the Areopagus philosophers in Athens not with abuse but with an engagement with their culture that culminates in a call to repentance (Acts 17:22-31). Prophetic speech can be culturally intelligent.

12.5 Economic Sharing and Integrity

The early church's economic life displayed the kingdom's concern for the poor. Acts records that believers held everything in common, sold property and possessions and distributed to all as any had need, so that there was not a needy person among them (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Barnabas is celebrated as an example of generosity (Acts 4:36-37). The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) shows the seriousness with which the community regarded integrity: their sin was not in withholding a portion of their property, which was theirs to keep, but in lying about it to gain a reputation for generosity. The Spirit exposes deceit in the community. The event produced great fear in the church and among those who heard of it.

The care of widows in Acts 6 shows how the church dealt with injustice within its own life. Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The apostles gathered the community and proposed that seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom be chosen to oversee the matter. The proposal pleased the whole community, who chose the seven, and the word of God continued to spread. Here a prophetic church corrects its own internal wrong and finds a structural remedy, while safeguarding the ministry of prayer and the word.

12.6 Structures of Leadership and Order

Acts also shows the gradual development of structures. The apostles lead at the beginning, with the Twelve restored to their number after Judas (Acts 1:15-26). The seven in Acts 6 take on specific responsibilities. James appears as a leader in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in every church with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23), and Paul later urges the Ephesian elders to shepherd the flock of God, over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:17, 28). Prophets and teachers are present at Antioch. The pattern is not rigid, but it shows that the Spirit works through order as well as spontaneity. Structures serve the mission, and the mission shapes the structures.

12.7 Mission Across Boundaries

The overwhelming concern of Acts is mission. The church is driven out by persecution, and as it scatters, it preaches the word (Acts 8:1-4). Philip evangelises Samaria and the Ethiopian official. Peter receives Cornelius. Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch where believers are first called Christians. The Antioch church sends out missionaries under the Spirit's direction. At each stage, the Spirit leads the community beyond what it had imagined, overcoming prejudice and extending the gospel to new peoples. A prophetic church is a church that is willing to be surprised by the Spirit and to cross barriers it once thought uncrossable.

12.8 Luke as Historian and Theologian

To use Acts well, we must understand what kind of book it is. Luke begins his Gospel by explaining that he has investigated everything carefully from the start in order to write an orderly account so that Theophilus may know the certainty of the things he has been taught (Luke 1:1-4). Acts is the sequel, and its opening verse refers back to the first book. Luke writes as a historian, drawing on eyewitness sources and, in the so-called we sections, on his own presence with Paul. He writes also as a theologian, shaping his narrative to display the work of God. The summary statements that punctuate the book mark stages in the growth of the church: the word of God continued to increase (Acts 6:7), the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up (9:31), the word of God increased and multiplied (12:24), the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily (16:5), the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily (19:20).

A question that has long divided interpreters is whether the narratives of Acts are descriptive or prescriptive. Do they merely record what happened, or do they also establish a pattern for the church in every age? Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have argued that narratives are not usually to be taken as normative unless the text indicates this, since the narrator often simply reports what occurred. Pentecostal scholars have responded that Luke intends his account to model the church's life and that the experiences it records are meant to be expected. A moderate course recognises that Acts displays patterns that are indeed instructive, such as devotion to prayer, the sharing of goods, bold witness and the guidance of the Spirit, while using other parts of Scripture, especially the letters, to interpret and qualify what the narrative shows. The ending of Acts is open: Paul is in Rome, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31). The story continues in the church today.

12.9 Peter and the Apostolic Preaching

Peter's speeches in Acts 2, 3, 4, 5 and 10 provide a pattern of early apostolic preaching, sometimes called the kerygma. Their shared elements include a reference to the fulfilment of Scripture, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth attested by God through mighty works, his crucifixion by human hands, his resurrection by God, his exaltation as Lord and Christ, the witness of the apostles and the call to repent and receive forgiveness and the Spirit. Peter speaks with directness: this Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). He addresses his hearers as responsible for their actions, yet always holds out the offer of forgiveness.

The members of the Jerusalem council noted that Peter and John were uneducated, common men and recognised that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). The Peter of Acts is the same

man who denied his Lord three times and later had to be corrected by Paul at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14). His growth is a reminder that prophetic ministers are often fallible people, transformed by grace. The preaching of the church today can learn from Peter's directness, his grounding in Scripture, his Christ-centredness and his readiness to call for a response.

12.10 Stephen, Philip and the Hellenist Witness

Stephen and Philip were among the seven chosen to administer the distribution of food in Jerusalem, but Luke portrays them primarily as Spirit-filled preachers. Stephen's speech before the council in Acts 7 is a long retelling of Israel's story, from Abraham to Solomon, that culminates in a charge that the leaders resist the Holy Spirit as their fathers did. His claim that the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, citing Isaiah 66:1-2, places him squarely in the line of the prophets' critique of the temple. As he is stoned, he sees the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, and prays for his killers. The scattering of the church after his death spreads the gospel.

Philip took the gospel to Samaria, where many believed and were baptised (Acts 8:4-25). Then, directed by an angel, he went to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza and met an Ethiopian official, treasurer to the Candace, the title of the queen of the Nubian kingdom to the south of Egypt, who was returning from worship in Jerusalem and reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip explained Isaiah 53 to him, announcing the good news about Jesus, and baptised him (Acts 8:26-40). The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Later tradition associates him with the evangelisation of his homeland, though the historical details are uncertain. The story nevertheless gives African Christians a place in the earliest expansion of the church, and illustrates the power of Scripture explained by a Spirit-led witness.

12.11 Paul's Missionary Method

From Acts 13 onward, the focus shifts to Paul and his companions. Several features of their method are noteworthy.

- Team ministry. Paul rarely worked alone; he travelled with Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Luke and others, and he cultivated co-workers.
- A strategy of cities. Paul planted churches in strategic urban centres such as Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus, from which the gospel spread to surrounding regions.
- Beginning with the synagogue. In many cities, Paul first preached in the Jewish synagogue, to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, and then turned to the wider population when opposed.
- Contextual preaching. At Lystra, speaking to pagans, he began with creation and God's provision of rain and crops (Acts 14:15-17). At Athens, he began with the altar to an unknown god and quoted Greek poets (Acts 17:22-31). To Jews, he argued from Scripture. The message was the same but the starting point differed.
- Appointing elders. On the return leg of the first journey, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23).
- Follow-up. Paul revisited churches, wrote letters, sent delegates and prayed continually.
- Self-support. At Corinth and Ephesus he worked as a tentmaker so as not to burden the churches (Acts 18:3; 20:33-35).

- Use of civil rights. Paul used his Roman citizenship when it helped the gospel, as at Philippi (Acts 16:37-39), and appealed to Caesar to secure a hearing (25:11), yet he did not demand privilege for himself.
- Perseverance. Beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and imprisoned, he kept going.

12.12 Women and Households in Acts

Acts records a number of women who played important roles. Lydia, a dealer in purple goods from Thyatira, was a worshipper of God whose heart the Lord opened to Paul's message; she and her household were baptised, and she urged Paul and his companions to stay in her home, which became the base of the church at Philippi (Acts 16:11-15, 40). Tabitha, also called Dorcas, was full of good works and acts of charity, and was raised from the dead by Peter (9:36-42). Mary, the mother of John Mark, hosted a gathering of believers praying for Peter's release (12:12). Priscilla and her husband Aquila taught Apollos more accurately (18:26). Philip's four daughters prophesied (21:9). Damaris was among the few who believed at Athens (17:34).

Households were the basic building blocks of early church life. The conversion of heads of households often brought whole households into the church (Acts 10:44-48; 16:15, 31-34; 18:8). The church met in homes, which provided space for teaching, meals and hospitality. This pattern has inspired modern small-group and house-church movements and is an important feature of African church life, where the extended family is a central social unit. A prophetic church should value the home as a place of worship, mutual care and mission, and should include women and men, parents and children in its life.

12.13 Suffering, Prayer and Perseverance

Acts does not present a church shielded from adversity. James, the brother of John, was killed with the sword by Herod Agrippa, and Peter was imprisoned, with the result that earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church (Acts 12:1-5). The angel freed him, and he came to the house where they were praying, only to find them astonished when the servant girl Rhoda told them he was at the door. The scene shows both the power of prayer and the human weakness of those who pray. In Philippi, Paul and Silas, beaten and in the inner prison, were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight, and the earthquake that followed led to the conversion of the jailer (16:22-34). Paul's voyage to Rome included a storm and shipwreck (Acts 27).

The prayer of the believers after the first threat in Acts 4:23-31 is a model. They quote Psalm 2 and recognise that the opposition of rulers fulfils Scripture. They do not ask for the removal of the threat but for boldness: grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. The place was shaken, and they were filled with the Spirit. A prophetic church that faces opposition may pray similarly, asking for courage rather than merely comfort.

12.14 Patterns for Prophetic Ecclesiology

1. Worship and fasting create the space in which the Spirit speaks. Prophetic guidance flows from a praying community.
2. Prophecy is practical and accountable. It informs decisions, but decisions are made in community with Scripture.

3. The church speaks to power with courage and without hatred. It is willing to obey God rather than men, and to suffer.
4. The common life of the church is part of its witness. Generosity, honesty and the care of the vulnerable matter.
5. The church repairs injustice within itself. Acts 6 shows an honest, structural response to an internal grievance.
6. Structure and Spirit cooperate. Leadership offices serve the Spirit's mission.
7. The church is open to crossing boundaries. The Spirit leads it to new peoples and places.

12.15 Chapter Summary

- Acts shows prophets, visions and Spirit-guided decisions in the life of the church.
- Guidance is mediated through worship, testimony, Scripture and communal discernment, as at Antioch and Jerusalem.
- The church bears bold witness before authorities and is willing to suffer for it.
- Its economic and social life, marked by generosity and integrity, expresses the kingdom.
- Leadership structures develop to serve the mission, and the Spirit leads the church across ethnic and cultural lines.
- Luke's method, the apostolic preaching, Stephen and Philip, Paul's missionary method, women and households, and the church in suffering enrich the picture.

12.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What can your church learn from the way the Antioch church heard the Spirit and sent Barnabas and Saul?
2. How does the Jerusalem council model the relationship between Spirit, Scripture and communal decision-making?
3. When is civil disobedience consistent with the pattern of Acts 4 and 5?
4. What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach about integrity in giving and ministry?
5. How could Acts 6 inform the way your church addresses internal injustice or neglect?

12.17 Suggested Further Reading

- John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*.
- Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*.
- Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles (Sacra Pagina)*.
- I. Howard Marshall, *Acts (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*.
- Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*.

Part IV: The Apostolic and Early Church

Chapter 13: Paul and Prophecy in the Corinthian Church

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:1, author's rendering)

13.1 Introduction

No New Testament writing says more about congregational prophecy than Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, especially chapters 12 to 14. These chapters were written to a gifted but disordered church in a prosperous Greek port city, a community enthusiastic for the Spirit's manifestations yet prone to rivalry, pride and confusion. Paul does not quench their enthusiasm; he directs it. His instructions provide the most important biblical guidance on how prophecy should function in the gathered church and are therefore central to a prophetic ecclesiology.

13.2 The Setting at Corinth

Corinth was a commercial city, culturally diverse, status-conscious and religiously plural. The church there was divided over leaders (1 Corinthians 1 to 4), troubled by moral failure (chapters 5 and 6), uncertain about marriage, food offered to idols and the Lord's Supper (chapters 7 to 11), and confused about spiritual gifts (chapters 12 to 14). In the assemblies, some seem to have prized dramatic speech, especially tongues, as a mark of spiritual superiority. Paul's response is to reorient their understanding of the Spirit's gifts around three principles: confession of Jesus as Lord, the common good and love.

13.3 The Test of Confession and the Unity of the Spirit (12:1-11)

Paul begins with the criterion that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, Jesus be cursed, and no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). The foundational test of any spiritual utterance is its relation to Christ. Paul then affirms that there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, varieties of service, but the same Lord, varieties of activities, but the same God who empowers them all in everyone (12:4-6). The Trinitarian pattern is notable. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (12:7). Prophecy appears in a list including wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment of spirits, tongues and interpretation (12:8-10). It is one gift among many and is given for the benefit of the community, not for private status.

The metaphor of the body then dominates (12:12-31). The foot cannot say it has no need of the hand. The less honourable members are treated with greater honour. If one member suffers, all suffer together. Paul places prophets second in his list of those appointed in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers (12:28). The ordering signals the significance of the gift, but the stress falls on mutual dependence.

13.4 Love as the Context of Prophecy (Chapter 13)

The famous chapter on love is not an interruption but the heart of Paul's argument. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (13:2). Gifts without love are noise. Love is

patient, kind, not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way. In the middle of this chapter, Paul adds an important reminder about the nature of prophecy: our knowledge is partial and our prophecy is partial (13:9), and the day is coming when the partial will pass away and we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. Prophecy in the present age is genuine but incomplete, a glimpse through a mirror dimly. This humility is essential to any right use of the gift.

13.5 Prophecy Preferred over Tongues (Chapter 14)

In chapter 14, Paul urges the Corinthians to pursue love and desire the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. His reasoning is that the one who speaks in a tongue speaks to God, but the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation (14:2-3). The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church (14:4). Paul does not despise tongues; he thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than they all (14:18), and wishes that all spoke in tongues. But in the assembly, he would rather speak five words with his mind in order to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue (14:19). Intelligible speech edifies. The principle that governs everything is: let all things be done for building up (14:26).

Paul also notes the evangelistic potential of prophecy. If an unbeliever or outsider enters and all prophesy, he is convicted by all and called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you (14:24-25). Prophecy that speaks intelligibly into the heart can lead to worship and conversion.

13.6 Order and Testing (14:26-33, 37-40)

The practical instructions of 1 Corinthians 14 are of great value for contemporary practice.

- Prophecy is to be orderly. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said (14:29). The Greek word for weigh implies careful distinguishing or evaluation. Prophecy is not to be accepted uncritically, nor rejected wholesale, but assessed.
- Prophecy is shared. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent (14:30). Paul says that you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged (14:31). The gift is distributed and requires turn-taking and mutual respect.
- Prophets retain self-control. The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets (14:32). Paul rejects the notion that the Spirit overrides the speaker's will. No one may claim that an uncontrollable impulse excuses disorderly speech.
- God is a God of peace. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace (14:33). Peace and order are marks of the Spirit's work.
- Prophets accept apostolic authority. If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord (14:37). Prophetic claims are subject to the authoritative apostolic teaching, which for us is the Scripture.
- Neither forbid nor neglect. Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order (14:39-40).

Paul's counsel to the Thessalonians is complementary: do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good; abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22). The balance is crucial. The church must avoid two errors: gullibility that accepts every claim, and suspicion that despises prophecy altogether.

13.7 The Standard of Faith (Romans 12:6)

In Romans 12:6, Paul says that we have gifts that differ according to the grace given us, and that if prophecy, let us use it in proportion to our faith. Interpreters differ on whether faith here means the individual's measure of trust or the body of Christian belief, the faith. Either reading underlines that prophecy must remain tied to what God has revealed and to the believer's confident dependence on him. A prophet speaks in accord with the faith once delivered.

13.8 Women and Prophecy

In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, Paul assumes that both men and women pray and prophesy in the assembly, giving instruction on the manner but presupposing the practice. Acts records the prophesying daughters of Philip and Joel's promise that sons and daughters would prophesy. The later instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 that women should be silent in the churches has been interpreted in many ways: as a restriction on a particular disruptive practice such as interrupting questions during the weighing of prophecies, as a local instruction, or, by some textual scholars, as a later addition. Whatever the resolution, it should not be read in contradiction to chapter 11 or to the wider witness of Scripture. The prophetic gift is given to women as well as men.

13.9 Debates about the Nature of Congregational Prophecy

Scholars debate the status of New Testament prophecy. Wayne Grudem has argued that congregational prophecy in 1 Corinthians involves a human report of a divine revelation that is not infallible and that, unlike the speech of an Old Testament prophet or an apostle, is subject to evaluation and may contain mixture. Other scholars hold that the prophecy of the New Testament is closer to Spirit-inspired preaching and teaching than to fresh revelation. Still others, in the cessationist tradition, argue that the gift of prophecy belonged to the foundational period of the church, referring to Ephesians 2:20, which describes the household of God as built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Anthony Thiselton and D. A. Carson, among others, have offered careful treatments that acknowledge the complexity of the evidence.

It is not necessary to resolve every dispute to draw practical conclusions. On any reading, Paul teaches that prophecy is to build up the church, is to be tested, is subordinate to apostolic teaching and is practised in love and in order.

13.10 The City and Church of Corinth

Understanding Paul's instructions requires understanding Corinth. The old Greek city had been destroyed by Rome in 146 before Christ and was refounded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar in 44. By Paul's day, it was a prosperous commercial centre, strategically located on the isthmus between the Aegean and the Adriatic, with harbours at Lechaenum and Cenchreae. It hosted the Isthmian Games, a major athletic festival, and attracted merchants, artisans, soldiers and travellers. A wide range of religious cults flourished, including those of Apollo, Asclepius

and the imperial cult. The city was marked by social competition and a culture of status and patronage.

Paul visited Corinth on his second journey, staying about eighteen months (Acts 18:1-18). The proconsul Gallio, mentioned in Acts 18:12, is known from an inscription at Delphi, which helps to date Paul's visit to about the years 50 to 52 of the Christian era. The church that emerged was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, a few wealthy and many of lower status (1 Corinthians 1:26). It included people such as Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and Gaius, who hosted the church, and likely Erastus, who is called the city treasurer in Romans 16:23. Its members brought into the church the values of their surroundings: pride in eloquence and wisdom, competition among leaders, litigiousness and a preoccupation with status.

Against this background, the Corinthians' enthusiasm for spiritual gifts becomes more intelligible. Gifts such as tongues carried prestige, and members used them to establish status. Paul's insistence that gifts are for the common good, that the less honourable members are indispensable and that love is more important than any gift directly addresses the culture of competition. His approach is a model for pastors seeking to correct enthusiasm: affirm what is good, redirect it toward the purposes of Christ and reform the attitudes that distort it.

13.11 Prophecy and Tongues Compared

A review of Paul's comparison in chapter 14 may clarify his reasoning.

- Direction. Tongues are speech directed to God, in mysteries by the Spirit (14:2); prophecy is directed to people for edification, encouragement and comfort (14:3).
- Intelligibility. Without interpretation, tongues are unintelligible to the hearers; prophecy is intelligible.
- Benefit. Tongues benefit the speaker unless interpreted; prophecy builds up the church (14:4-5).
- Public value. In the assembly, five intelligible words are better than ten thousand in a tongue (14:19).
- Effect on outsiders. Uninterpreted tongues may lead outsiders to think the Christians are mad (14:23); prophecy may lead them to worship (14:24-25).

Verse 22 has puzzled interpreters: tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. Paul seems to say that tongues function as a sign of judgement on unbelievers, as in Isaiah 28:11-12, which he quotes, whereas prophecy builds up believers. Yet the following verses present prophecy as effective in convicting unbelievers. Interpreters have offered various solutions, including that the term sign is used in different senses, or that Paul refers to the different results of the two gifts. The overall thrust of the chapter is clear, even if the details are debated: the assembly should favour what is intelligible and edifying.

13.12 Prophecy, the Apostles and the Foundation: Reading Ephesians and Acts Alongside Corinthians

The status of New Testament prophecy is discussed in relation to other texts. Ephesians 2:20 says that the household of God is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. Ephesians 3:5 says that the mystery of Christ was not made known to previous generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Some scholars argue that these prophets are a special group alongside the

apostles, whose revelatory ministry was foundational. Others see them as the same kind of prophets whose ministry continues, noting that Ephesians 4:11 lists prophets among the gifts that Christ gives to build up the church until it reaches maturity.

Acts supplies material for the discussion of the fallibility of prophecy. In Acts 21:4, disciples at Tyre are said to have told Paul through the Spirit not to go on to Jerusalem, yet Paul went. In Acts 21:10-11, Agabus prophesied that the Jews at Jerusalem would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. In the event, the Jews seized Paul and the Roman tribune bound him (21:30-33). Wayne Grudem and others have argued that these passages show New Testament prophecy as a human report of a divine revelation, open to imprecision. Others reply that the substance of Agabus's prophecy was fulfilled and that the details are not inaccurate in a way that discredits him, and that the disciples at Tyre may have been warning Paul of danger and not forbidding him. The debate shows how difficult it is to build a large doctrine on a few passages, and it supports the cautious approach of this book: treat prophecy as valuable but always to be weighed.

13.13 The Practice of Weighing

The Greek verb translated weigh in 1 Corinthians 14:29 is *diakrino*, which means to distinguish, to evaluate or to judge. The word is related to the discernment of spirits (*diakrisis pneumatou*) in 12:10. Paul says, let the others weigh what is said. The identity of the others is debated; it may refer to the other prophets, or to the whole congregation, or to those with the gift of discernment. In practice, a combination is wise: those with experience and gifts take the lead, and the community participates.

What is to be weighed? At least the following.

1. The content. Does it agree with Scripture and the gospel?
2. The source. Is it from the Spirit of God, from the speaker's own mind or emotions, or from some other source?
3. The application. Even if a statement is true, is it appropriate and edifying for this time and these people?
4. The spirit in which it was delivered. Was it with love, humility and respect?

A simple weighing sheet might ask: What was said? Does it accord with Scripture? Does it build up? Is it clear and not confusing? Is the speaker known and trusted? Does it require action, and if so, by whom and when? Is there anything we are unsure of that we should set aside for now? Such a tool can help a congregation develop the habit of testing without making the process cold or suspicious.

13.14 Love, Maturity and the Use of Gifts

Paul's argument is directed toward the maturity of the Corinthians. He had called them infants in Christ, unable to receive solid food because of jealousy and quarrelling (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). He tells them to be infants in evil but in thinking to be mature (14:20). In chapter 13, he declares that when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways (13:11).

Maturity shows itself in how gifts are used. A mature person uses gifts to serve others, not to display status. A mature person is patient with the weaker and the less gifted. A mature person accepts correction. A mature person values unity and order more than self-expression. The

qualities that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 can be read as a description of how to prophesy: patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, not irritable or resentful, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things. Prophecy given without these qualities may contain truth but fails to reflect the Spirit who gives it.

13.15 Applying 1 Corinthians 14 in Contemporary African Churches

Paul's principles carry practical implications for African churches, where worship is often lively and participatory.

- **Intelligibility and language.** In a multilingual setting, such as many Nigerian congregations, Paul's concern for intelligibility has direct application. A sermon or prophecy in a language not understood by part of the congregation fails to edify them. Interpretation, understood here as translation, is a ministry of the Spirit and a service to the body. The principle of 14:27-28, that interpretation must accompany speech in tongues and that without an interpreter one should be silent in church, applies by extension to ordinary languages.
- **Simultaneous prayer.** It is common in many churches for the whole congregation to pray aloud at once, sometimes in tongues. Corporate prayer of this kind has a place, and may be understood as a form of shared worship, but leaders should consider the principle of 14:23, that outsiders entering and hearing everyone speaking in tongues may think the Christians mad, and should teach newcomers what is happening and ensure that the gathering also includes intelligible, edifying speech.
- **Order and volume.** Order in Paul's sense does not require quiet or formality. It means that what is done contributes to the building up of the body, that people take turns and that confusion is avoided. Churches should evaluate practices such as extended loud music, microphones and multiple speakers in light of this principle.
- **Time limits.** Paul's instruction that two or three prophets speak (14:29) suggests moderation. A meeting in which prophetic utterances crowd out the reading and teaching of Scripture is imbalanced.
- **Training.** Members need teaching on what prophecy is, how to share it and how to weigh it. Many problems arise from ignorance rather than ill will.
- **Culture.** Cultural expectations about spiritual authority, such as the idea that a prophet's word cannot be questioned, may conflict with Paul's command to weigh. Teaching and example are needed to create a culture in which testing is a sign of respect for the Spirit, not a challenge to the speaker.

13.16 Practical Guidelines for Churches

1. Receive the gift with expectancy. Do not despise prophecy.
2. Test every word. Establish a clear process through which prophetic words are weighed by mature leaders and members.
3. Prefer intelligible, edifying speech. The goal is the building up of the body.
4. Maintain order. Allow time for others, avoid domination by one speaker and keep the meeting peaceful.
5. Ground everything in love. A prophetic ministry without love is empty.
6. Hold fast to Scripture. No prophetic word can override the apostolic teaching.

7. Include women and men, young and old.
8. Cultivate humility. Prophecy is partial, and the prophet remains a learner.

13.17 Chapter Summary

- 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 gives the fullest New Testament teaching on congregational prophecy.
- Spiritual utterance is tested by confession of Jesus as Lord, and gifts are given for the common good.
- Love is the necessary context, and prophecy in this age is partial.
- Prophecy edifies, encourages and consoles, and can lead outsiders to worship.
- Prophets speak in turn, others weigh what is said, prophets control themselves and everything is done decently and in order.
- The Corinthian context, the comparison of prophecy and tongues, the debate about the status of prophecy, the practice of weighing and the call to maturity all inform how the chapter is applied in African churches.

13.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does your church currently weigh prophetic words, and how might the process be improved?
2. Why does Paul rank intelligible prophecy above uninterpreted tongues in the assembly?
3. What are some practical expressions of the principle that the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets?
4. How do the different views on the nature of congregational prophecy affect how a church practises the gift?
5. In what ways might the church demonstrate that love is the greatest gift?

13.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Greek Testament Commentary).
- Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament).
- D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*.
- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*.
- Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*.
- Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary).

Chapter 14: Ephesians 4 and the Five-fold Ministry

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12, author's rendering)

14.1 Introduction

Ephesians 4:11 is one of the most discussed verses in contemporary discussions of church leadership. It lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers as gifts of the ascended Christ to his church. In many circles, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic movements, this list is described as the five-fold ministry, and questions abound concerning whether all five offices remain, how they relate to one another and how they should function. This chapter considers the text, its context and the current debates, and it explores what it contributes to prophetic ecclesiology.

14.2 The Context of Ephesians 4

Ephesians divides broadly into two halves: chapters 1 to 3 explain what God has done in Christ, including the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body, and chapters 4 to 6 explain how the church should live accordingly. Chapter 4 begins with an exhortation to walk worthily of the calling, with humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love and eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:1-3). There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:4-6). Unity is the starting point.

Out of this unity arises diversity: grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift (4:7). Paul cites Psalm 68:18 to describe Christ ascending on high, leading a host of captives and giving gifts to men. The imagery is of a victorious king distributing spoils to his people. The gifts that follow are therefore not human achievements but the gifts of the exalted Christ.

14.3 The Five Gifts

The text lists five categories, though the grammar of the final phrase, shepherds and teachers, may describe one group with two functions or two groups closely related. The terms are as follows.

- Apostles. Those sent with a commission. In the New Testament, the term applies to the Twelve, to Paul and to others such as Barnabas, Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7), indicating a wider group of commissioned messengers. The specific apostolic witness of the Twelve and Paul to the resurrection is foundational and unrepeatable, but the term may also describe pioneering church planters and missionaries.
- Prophets. Those who speak the word of God by the Spirit for the building up of the church. Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 refer to apostles and prophets as foundational, which suggests a close link between the two.
- Evangelists. Those who announce the good news. Philip is called an evangelist (Acts 21:8), and Timothy is told to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

- Shepherds. Those who care for, guide and protect the flock. The term is related to the pastoral image that applies to elders (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).
- Teachers. Those who explain and apply the word, preserving sound doctrine and guiding believers in understanding.

14.4 The Purpose of the Gifts

The purpose clause is the most important part of the passage. The gifts are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (4:12). The Greek can be punctuated in different ways, but the broad sense is clear: leaders equip, and the whole body ministers. The ministry belongs to all the saints, not to the five alone. The leader's role is to prepare God's people for their service.

The goal is that we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (4:13). The church is meant to grow up, no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine (4:14). Instead, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (4:15-16).

This passage corrects any notion that the five-fold ministries exist to exalt individuals. Their purpose is the maturity, unity and doctrinal stability of the whole church. The protection against deceptive teaching, in particular, is a prophetic concern.

14.5 Interpreting the Passage: Three Views

1. The foundational view. Some interpreters, especially in the cessationist tradition, argue that apostles and prophets were foundational offices that ceased once the foundation was laid (Ephesians 2:20), while evangelists, shepherds and teachers continue. On this view, the ongoing ministry of the church is carried out by those latter three.
2. The continuationist view. Others hold that all five gifts continue, on the grounds that the passage does not state that any will cease before the church attains maturity, which has clearly not yet occurred. Some in this camp take apostle and prophet in a functional sense, referring to those who pioneer new work and those who speak by the Spirit's inspiration.
3. The mediating view. A third view acknowledges that apostles in the narrow sense, as eyewitnesses commissioned by the risen Lord, are unrepeatable, but that the New Testament uses the term apostle more broadly. Prophets continue as those who speak the Spirit's edifying word, though always subordinate to Scripture.

In recent decades, writers such as Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost have popularised the idea of apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding and teaching functions (often called APEST) as necessary to a balanced, missional church. They argue that most churches have overemphasised shepherd and teacher at the expense of the others. The New Apostolic Reformation movement associated with C. Peter Wagner has gone further, advocating the restoration of the offices of apostle and prophet as governing authorities over networks of churches. This development has drawn both enthusiastic support and sharp criticism, particularly concerning accountability and the claims made for the authority of such leaders.

14.6 Titles, Status and the African Context

In many African contexts, including Nigeria, the use of the titles apostle and prophet has become widespread. Some bear these titles as recognition of genuine ministry; others use them as marks of status or marketing. The words of Jesus are relevant: you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. The greatest among you shall be your servant (Matthew 23:8-12). Titles are not in themselves wrong. Paul used the title apostle of himself. But when titles become a means of claiming unchallengeable authority, exacting honour or generating income, they are contrary to the spirit of the passage.

A prophetic ecclesiology should help churches recognise function rather than status. An apostle is known by sending, planting and faithful teaching of the gospel. A prophet is known by words that build, challenge and align with Scripture, and by a life consistent with those words. An evangelist is known by fruitful proclamation, a shepherd by care, and a teacher by clarity and fidelity to the word. Each is accountable to the body and to Scripture. The title is less important than the fruit.

14.7 The Meaning of Apostle in the New Testament

The Greek word *apostolos* means one who is sent. In the Jewish background, there was an institution of the *shaliach*, an agent commissioned to act on behalf of another with the other's authority. A rabbinic saying in the Mishnah expresses the idea: the one sent by a person is like the person himself. Jesus took up this idea in sending his disciples: whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me (Matthew 10:40).

The New Testament uses the word with several senses.

- The Twelve, whom Jesus chose and named apostles (Luke 6:13). The qualifications for replacing Judas were that the person had accompanied them throughout the ministry of Jesus and was a witness of the resurrection (Acts 1:21-22).
- Paul, who insisted that he was an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Galatians 1:1), having seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8-9).
- Other commissioned messengers, including Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), and probably Andronicus and Junia, who are described as well known among the apostles (Romans 16:7), as well as Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:6), and perhaps James the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19).
- Messengers of the churches. Paul calls the brothers who accompany Titus apostles of the churches (2 Corinthians 8:23), and Epaphroditus is the apostle, translated messenger, of the Philippians (Philippians 2:25).

The Twelve and Paul occupy a unique place as eyewitnesses and foundational authorities, and their writings constitute the apostolic witness. The wider use of the term for commissioned missionaries and church planters suggests that apostolic functions, pioneering, planting and establishing churches, can continue. Care is needed in applying the title today. The apostle's marks, as Paul describes them, include signs and wonders (2 Corinthians 12:12), suffering (1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28), fidelity to the gospel and fruit in the form of changed lives and established churches (1 Corinthians 9:2). A person who claims the title but displays none of these marks has little claim to it.

14.8 Evangelists, Shepherds and Teachers

The three remaining ministries of Ephesians 4:11 deserve closer examination.

14.8.1 Evangelists

The word evangelist (euangelistes) occurs only three times in the New Testament: in Acts 21:8, where Philip is called the evangelist; in Ephesians 4:11; and in 2 Timothy 4:5, where Timothy is told to do the work of an evangelist. The root means to announce good news. The evangelist's task is to proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard or believed, to call for repentance and faith and to bring people into the church. Evangelists often travel and often work with churches planted by others. A healthy church will not only have evangelists but will equip all its members to share their faith.

14.8.2 Shepherds

The word pastor in English translates the Greek poimen, shepherd. The pastoral office is closely related to that of the elder and overseer (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). The task of the shepherd is to know, feed, lead and protect the sheep. The shepherd is an under-shepherd, serving the Chief Shepherd. This ministry requires patience, wisdom, compassion and a willingness to lay down one's life for the sheep (John 10:11).

14.8.3 Teachers

Teachers (didaskaloi) explain and apply the word of God. They preserve the apostolic teaching and guard against distortion. James warns that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1), and the writer to the Hebrews laments that some, who ought to be teachers by now, need someone to teach them the basics again (Hebrews 5:12). Teaching ministry demands careful study, clarity and humility. In churches where the prophetic is emphasised, strong teaching is especially important, to provide a framework within which prophetic words can be weighed.

14.9 Gifts Beyond the Five

Ephesians 4:11 does not exhaust the gifts. Romans 12:6-8 lists prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and mercy. First Corinthians 12 includes wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment, tongues and interpretation, and, in verse 28, helpers and administrators. First Peter 4:10-11 summarises the gifts in two categories: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies. Every believer has a gift, and all gifts are to be used for the benefit of others as faithful stewards of God's varied grace.

Discovering one's gifts is part of discipleship. Several approaches are helpful: prayer for guidance; honest assessment of what one enjoys and finds fruitful; opportunities to serve in different areas; the feedback of mature believers; and the evidence of fruit in the lives of others. Gift inventories can be useful but should not be absolutised. Gifts may develop and change over time, and the church should avoid ranking them. In the Corinthian church, the more visible gifts were over-valued, and Paul reminded them that those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:22).

14.10 Equipping the Saints: The Meaning and Methods

The Greek word translated equip in Ephesians 4:12 is *katartismos*. A related verb, *katartizo*, is used in Mark 1:19 of James and John mending their nets. The idea is of making something fit for use, repairing, restoring and preparing. The task of leaders is therefore to prepare the saints for service, repairing what is broken and training what is raw.

This vision calls for a particular culture in the church. Several practices serve it.

- Teaching the whole counsel of God, so that believers understand the faith and can articulate it.
- Mentoring and apprenticeship. Jesus trained the Twelve by living with them, and Paul invested in Timothy. Equipping often happens best through close relationships.
- Opportunities to serve. People grow as they are given real responsibilities, with support and feedback.
- Small groups where believers can share their lives, study the Bible, pray for one another and practise gifts.
- Training for the marketplace. Most believers serve God primarily in their jobs, families and communities. A church that equips the saints will help them think and act as Christians in business, education, government, agriculture, the arts and the professions.
- Theological education. Bible schools, seminaries and extension programmes serve the church. Africa has a growing network of institutions, and churches should support and engage them, and should make training accessible to those who cannot attend residential programmes.

14.11 Winds of Doctrine and the Marks of Maturity

Paul says that the goal of the ministries is that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes (Ephesians 4:14). The image is of a small boat helplessly pushed by changing weather. The remedy is knowledge of the Son of God and growth in truth and love.

Contemporary winds of doctrine include the prosperity gospel, various forms of legalism, claims to secret knowledge, moralistic therapeutic versions of Christianity, nationalist and ethnic theologies, and confidence in methods and techniques as substitutes for the work of the Spirit. A church that is doctrinally mature will be able to recognise these and respond with grace and clarity. The following may be signs of such maturity: familiarity with the main storyline of Scripture; the ability to explain the gospel; familiarity with the creeds; a love for the truth that is not combative; humility to learn from others; and a commitment to unity in the essentials, freedom in non-essentials and charity in all things.

14.12 Women and the Ministries of Ephesians 4

Where do women stand in relation to apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers? Christians differ. Some hold that the New Testament restricts the offices of elder and teacher over men to males, pointing to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 3:1-7. Others hold that these passages address specific situations and that the New Testament elsewhere shows women in roles of leadership and teaching. They point to Deborah, Huldah, Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia and

Philip's daughters, and to Galatians 3:28, which declares that in Christ there is neither male nor female.

These disagreements, which are discussed further in Chapter 18, should not obscure what is agreed. Women have prophetic gifts, as Acts and 1 Corinthians show; women can evangelise, teach other women and children, and share in prayer and pastoral care; and the church's history includes remarkable women of faith. Churches should discuss these matters with respect for Scripture and for one another, avoid caricature of those who differ, and create space for the full range of gifts that God has given to women.

14.13 The Five Ministries and the Prophetic Church

Whichever interpretative view one adopts, the Ephesians passage contributes important insights to a prophetic ecclesiology.

1. Leadership gifts are Christ's gifts. They are not conferred by human ambition, and they remain accountable to the one who gave them.
2. Their purpose is equipping. A prophetic church is one in which all members are being prepared and released to serve.
3. The prophet and the other gifts belong together. Prophets without teachers can drift into subjectivity; teachers without prophets can become dry. Evangelists without shepherds see people converted but not nurtured; shepherds without evangelists become inward-looking. Apostles without the others can become domineering.
4. Maturity and unity are the goals. A church that is divided or doctrinally unstable is falling short of the purpose of the gifts.
5. Truth and love belong together. Speaking the truth in love is a succinct description of the prophetic style.

14.14 Chapter Summary

- Ephesians 4 presents apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers as gifts of the ascended Christ.
- Their purpose is to equip all the saints for ministry, leading to unity, maturity and stability.
- Interpreters differ over whether apostles and prophets continue, and in what sense.
- Titles must not overshadow function, accountability and servanthood.
- The five gifts need one another for the church to be balanced and missional.
- The word apostle has several senses; evangelists, shepherds and teachers have distinct tasks; gifts extend beyond the five; equipping is the key purpose; and women's gifts are to be honoured within whatever order a church adopts.

14.15 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does the purpose clause of Ephesians 4:12 challenge a model of ministry in which one leader does most of the work?
2. Which of the five ministries is most neglected in your church, and what difference would it make to recover it?
3. What are the risks and benefits of the titles apostle and prophet in your setting?

4. How can a church ensure that those who exercise apostolic or prophetic functions remain accountable?
5. What does the phrase speaking the truth in love mean for the way prophetic words are delivered?

14.16 Suggested Further Reading

- Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*.
- Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians (Pillar New Testament Commentary)*.
- Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*.
- Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*.
- Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians (Word Biblical Commentary)*.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapters on gifts and church government.

Chapter 15: Revelation and the Letters to the Seven Churches

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:7, author's rendering)

15.1 Introduction

The book of Revelation is the New Testament's great prophetic book, and it is concerned throughout with the church. It opens with a vision of the risen Christ walking among seven golden lampstands, which represent the churches, and it closes with the vision of the bride, the new Jerusalem. Between these, it addresses seven real congregations in Asia Minor with messages of encouragement, warning and promise, and it describes the church's conflict with the beast and Babylon. For a prophetic ecclesiology, Revelation is invaluable. It shows Christ's own evaluation of his churches, depicts the church as a witnessing community in the face of imperial power and gives a vision of the church's final destiny.

15.2 Revelation as Prophecy

John describes his book as a prophecy: blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it (Revelation 1:3). It combines three literary forms: apocalypse, which unveils heavenly realities through symbol; prophecy, which speaks God's word to a historical situation; and letter, addressed to specific churches. John writes from the island of Patmos, where he was exiled on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (1:9). He was in the Spirit on the Lord's day when he received the vision (1:10).

Revelation is not primarily a timetable of future events. For its first readers, it was a pastoral and political document, interpreting their situation of pressure, persecution and temptation to compromise in the light of the sovereignty of God and the victory of the Lamb. Its imagery draws heavily on the Old Testament prophets, especially Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Zechariah.

15.3 Christ Among the Lampstands

The vision of Christ in Revelation 1:12-20 is overwhelming. One like a son of man stands among seven golden lampstands, clothed with a long robe, his eyes like a flame of fire, his voice like the roar of many waters, holding seven stars in his right hand, with a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. He declares that he was dead and is alive for evermore and holds the keys of death and Hades. The lampstands are the seven churches and the stars their angels. The church is thus pictured as a source of light, standing before the Lord who walks among them, examining and sustaining them.

Each of the seven letters begins with a self-description of Christ drawn from this vision, includes the phrase I know your works, offers commendation or rebuke, calls for repentance or perseverance, and ends with the refrain: he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, with a promise to the one who conquers. The refrain is striking. The letters are from Christ, yet the Spirit speaks. Prophetic speech in the church is the Spirit declaring the mind of the exalted Christ.

15.4 The Seven Churches

- Ephesus (2:1-7). Commended for hard work, patient endurance and refusal to tolerate false apostles, yet rebuked for having abandoned the love they had at first. Doctrinal vigilance without love is deficient.
- Smyrna (2:8-11). A poor but spiritually rich church facing suffering and imprisonment. Christ has no rebuke for them and urges faithfulness unto death, promising the crown of life.
- Pergamum (2:12-17). Living where Satan's throne is, they have held fast his name, yet some tolerate the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The danger here is compromise with idolatry and immorality.
- Thyatira (2:18-29). Commended for love, faith, service and growing works, yet rebuked for tolerating the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and seduces Christ's servants to practise immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols. This is a direct example of false prophecy within the church.
- Sardis (3:1-6). Having a reputation for being alive but being dead, they are urged to wake up and strengthen what remains. Reputation and reality are different.
- Philadelphia (3:7-13). With little power, yet having kept Christ's word and not denied his name, they are given an open door that no one can shut. Faithfulness matters more than strength.
- Laodicea (3:14-22). Neither hot nor cold, self-satisfied in their wealth, yet in truth wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Christ stands at the door and knocks, inviting them to open to him. Material prosperity can mask spiritual poverty.

These letters function as prophetic diagnosis. They reveal that the Lord sees his churches as they truly are, beyond reputation and appearance. They also show a variety of conditions, so no single formula suits every church. Several of the problems, such as loss of first love, compromise with surrounding culture, false teaching, spiritual deadness and complacent wealth, remain recognisable today.

15.5 The Witnessing Church

Revelation presents the church as a witnessing community. The martyrs under the altar are those who have been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne (6:9). The two witnesses in Revelation 11, who prophesy for 1,260 days, are clothed in sackcloth and described as the two olive trees and the two lampstands, imagery connecting them to the church's prophetic mission. They are killed by the beast, yet God raises them, and the nations see their vindication. Many interpreters understand these figures to represent the witnessing church as a whole. The pattern repeats that of Jesus: faithful witness, rejection, death, vindication.

Revelation 12:11 gives the formula for the church's victory: they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Victory comes not by force but by faithful testimony grounded in the cross. Revelation 19:10 declares that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. All genuine prophecy centres on Jesus.

15.6 The Church and the Empire

Revelation is a book of political resistance, written to a church under the shadow of Rome. The beast from the sea, to whom the dragon gives authority, demands worship and persecutes the saints (13:1-10). The beast from the land, a deceiver with signs, enforces the system through economic control (13:11-18). Babylon the Great, which most interpreters read as Rome, is portrayed as a prostitute riding the beast, drunk with the blood of the saints (17). Her fall is lamented by the merchants and kings of the earth, whose wealth was built on her luxury, including trade in bodies and human souls (18:11-13). The prophetic critique of economic exploitation and idolatrous power that we traced in the Old Testament comes to its climax here.

The call to the church is to come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins (18:4). The church is to refuse the idolatry and injustice of the dominant system while continuing to witness within the world. The temptation to accommodate is as real today as in the first century, and every age has its own beast and its own Babylon.

15.7 The Church's Destiny

The book ends with vision of the new heaven and new earth, the holy city coming down from God out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (21:1-2). God dwells with his people, wipes away every tear and makes all things new. The river of the water of life flows from the throne, and the tree of life bears fruit for the healing of the nations (22:1-2). The final invitation is: the Spirit and the Bride say, come (22:17). The church's prophetic hope is not escape from the world but the renewal of creation and the dwelling of God with humanity.

15.8 The Setting of Revelation

The seven churches to which John wrote were located in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey. Rome ruled the region, and the emperor was honoured as a divine figure in cities across Asia. Pergamum had a temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus as early as 29 before Christ, and several of the cities competed for the honour of having imperial temples. Participation in the imperial cult was a way of showing loyalty to Rome. Christians, who confessed Jesus alone as Lord, were vulnerable to suspicion and accusation. A later letter from the Roman governor Pliny to the emperor Trajan, written about the year 112, shows that Christians in Bithynia could be brought to trial and required to offer worship to the emperor's image as a test.

Many scholars date Revelation to the reign of Domitian, who ruled from 81 to 96, following the testimony of Irenaeus, though some argue for an earlier date under Nero. The extent of organised persecution under Domitian is debated; the book itself speaks of the death of Antipas at Pergamum (Revelation 2:13) and of John's exile, and anticipates widespread suffering. Economic pressures were also real. Trade guilds, which had their own patron deities and feasts, were a feature of the commercial cities of Asia, such as Thyatira, and refusal to participate could carry economic costs. Against this background, the letters' warnings about eating food sacrificed to idols and about compromise take on concrete meaning.

15.9 The Structure and Symbols of Revelation

The book of Revelation is organised around a series of sevens: seven letters (chapters 2 and 3), seven seals (6:1 to 8:1), seven trumpets (8:2 to 11:19) and seven bowls (15:1 to 16:21). Between the sixth and seventh of each series there are interludes (for example, chapter 7 and

10:1 to 11:13). Other visions, including the woman and the dragon (12), the two beasts (13), the fall of Babylon (17 and 18) and the new heaven and new earth (21 and 22), complete the book. Scholars debate whether the series are sequential or whether they recapitulate the same period from different angles.

Interpreters have taken four main approaches. Preterists see most of the book as fulfilled in the first century. Historicists see it as an outline of church history from the apostolic age to the end. Futurists see most of it as describing events immediately before the return of Christ. Idealists see it as a symbolic portrayal of the perennial conflict between God and evil. Many contemporary scholars combine elements: the book was addressed to first-century churches, makes use of symbols that apply to every age and points to a final consummation.

Whatever approach is chosen, several principles of reading are important. The book draws on the Old Testament, especially Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Isaiah, and it cannot be understood without them. Numbers are symbolic more than arithmetical: seven suggests completeness, twelve the people of God, the 144,000 (7:4; 14:1) the full number of the redeemed, 1,260 days or forty-two months (11:2-3; 12:6; 13:5) a period of limited trial. The number of the beast, 666 (13:18), has been connected to the name of Nero Caesar through the Hebrew practice of assigning numbers to letters, though other proposals exist, and some manuscripts read 616. The Lamb who was slain (5:6) stands at the centre of the book. As Richard Bauckham has written, the Lamb conquers by sacrifice, and his followers conquer in the same way.

15.10 Worship in Revelation

Worship is one of the main themes of Revelation. John is invited through an open door into the heavenly throne room, where the four living creatures cry day and night, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come (Revelation 4:8), and the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne. In chapter 5, the Lamb takes the scroll, and the heavenly host sings a new song: worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (5:9). Worship expands to include every creature in heaven and on earth. Later passages feature the multitude from every nation (7:9-12), the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:3-4) and the great hallelujah at the fall of Babylon and the marriage of the Lamb (19:1-8).

The book also corrects false worship. Twice John falls at the feet of an angel, and twice he is told, you must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you; worship God (19:10; 22:8-9). The beast is worshipped by the earth-dwellers, a counterfeit of the worship due to God and the Lamb (13:4, 8). These contrasts clarify the meaning of true worship for the church. It is directed to God and the Lamb alone, it is global, it celebrates the redemption won by Christ's blood, and it is bound up with justice: the cry of the martyrs, how long, O Lord? (6:10), is answered by the downfall of the oppressor. The church's worship on earth echoes and anticipates the worship of heaven.

15.11 The Two Witnesses

Revelation 11:1-14 is one of the most intriguing passages for prophetic ecclesiology. John is told to measure the temple of God, but not the outer court, which is given over to the nations for forty-two months. God then says, I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will

prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth (11:3). They are identified as the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth, an allusion to the vision of Zechariah 4. They have power to shut the sky so that no rain falls, recalling Elijah, and to turn the waters into blood and strike the earth with plagues, recalling Moses. When they have finished their testimony, the beast from the bottomless pit makes war on them and kills them, and their bodies lie in the street of the great city for three and a half days while the earth rejoices. Then the breath of life from God enters them, they stand on their feet, and they ascend to heaven in a cloud. A great earthquake follows, and the survivors give glory to the God of heaven.

Interpretations vary. Some see two individual prophets who will appear in the last days. Others see the witnesses as representing the Law and the Prophets, or Moses and Elijah, or the church as a witnessing community. The mention of lampstands, which in chapter 1 represent the churches, strongly supports the view that the witnesses symbolise the faithful church. The period of 1,260 days corresponds to the forty-two months of the nations' trampling of the outer court, a symbolic period of limited trial.

The passage offers several lessons. The church's prophetic witness is divinely authorised and protected until it is complete. It involves both word and sign. It meets violent opposition and may end in martyrdom. It is vindicated by God, and its vindication leads to the conversion of some. The pattern is the pattern of Christ, who was killed and raised. The passage thus gives the church courage to bear witness in hostile environments.

15.12 Revelation and the Problem of Suffering

Revelation was written for people who suffered. The martyrs under the altar cry, how long, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (6:10). They are told to rest a little longer. This cry is not suppressed; it is recorded as part of the heavenly scene. The book acknowledges that the righteous suffer and that God's justice is sometimes delayed. Yet it assures its readers that the Lamb who was slain is on the throne, and that the sufferings of the saints are not the last word.

The repeated promise to the one who conquers (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) shapes the church's response. To conquer in Revelation is not to defeat enemies by force but to remain faithful. The saints conquered the accuser by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (12:11). Perseverance is the great virtue: here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints (13:10; 14:12). For African Christians who have experienced war, famine, disease and oppression, Revelation offers a vision of a God who sees, who will wipe away every tear and who will make all things new. It is not a book of escapism but of resistance and hope.

15.13 Revelation and Economic Faithfulness

Revelation also speaks to economic life. The second beast compels all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on the right hand or forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark (13:16-17). Economic participation is made conditional on loyalty to the beast. Babylon's fall in chapter 18 is mourned by the merchants of the earth, who have grown rich from her luxury, and the cargo they lament includes gold, silver, jewels, fine linen, spices, wine, grain, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls (18:11-13). The list unmasks an economy built on consumption and the commodification of

human beings. The call to God's people is to come out of her, lest you take part in her sins (18:4).

The letter to Laodicea addresses a church that said, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, and did not realise that it was wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked (3:17). The church at Smyrna, by contrast, was poor in material terms but rich in God's sight (2:9). These contrasts challenge the assumption that prosperity is a sign of God's favour.

Applying these texts requires care. Revelation is not a handbook of economics, and it does not condemn all trade or wealth. Its concern is with idolatry and injustice, with systems that demand ultimate loyalty or that exploit the vulnerable. The church should ask where such patterns exist today and how its members can resist them in their own economic lives, through honest dealing, contentment, generosity and refusal to participate in oppression. It should also warn against the seduction of wealth within the church itself.

15.14 Implications for Prophetic Ecclesiology

1. Christ examines his churches. A prophetic church welcomes the Lord's scrutiny and does not rest on its reputation, size or past.
2. The Spirit speaks to the churches. The letters teach the church to listen to what the Spirit is saying, recognising that the Spirit's voice is consistent with the voice of Christ in Scripture.
3. False prophecy within the church must be confronted. The rebuke of Jezebel in Thyatira shows that tolerance of deceptive prophecy is a serious failing.
4. The church witnesses at cost. Revelation prepares believers for opposition and affirms that faithfulness unto death is a form of victory.
5. The church must resist idolatrous systems. Economic and political systems that demand ultimate loyalty or exploit the vulnerable stand under judgement.
6. The church lives in hope. The final word is not Babylon's but the Lamb's.

15.15 Chapter Summary

- Revelation is a prophetic book addressed to real churches under pressure.
- The risen Christ walks among his churches, and the Spirit speaks his word to them.
- The seven letters diagnose a variety of conditions: lost love, compromise, false prophecy, deadness, faithfulness in weakness and complacent wealth.
- The church is portrayed as a witnessing community whose victory is by the blood of the Lamb and the word of its testimony.
- The book critiques idolatrous power and economic exploitation and ends with the hope of the new creation.
- Revelation's setting, structure and symbols, its theology of worship, the two witnesses, its response to suffering and its critique of economic idolatry deepen the reading.

15.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which of the seven churches most closely resembles your own, and what might Christ say to you?

2. What does the rebuke of Thyatira teach about the need to confront false prophecy in the church?
3. How can the church today resist the pressures of idolatrous power and consumerism?
4. In what ways does the image of the two witnesses inform the church's mission?
5. How does the vision of the new creation shape the church's hope and ethics?

15.17 Suggested Further Reading

- Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*.
- Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*.
- G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary).
- Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.
- Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*.
- Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (NIV Application Commentary).

Chapter 16: The Didache, the Church Fathers and Montanism

Not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only if he has the ways of the Lord. (Didache 11:8, author's paraphrase)

16.1 Introduction

What happened to prophecy in the generations after the apostles? The sources for the second and third centuries are fragmentary, but they allow us to trace several threads: continuing prophetic activity, growing concern about false prophecy, the rise of the monarchical bishop, the formation of the canon of Scripture and the controversy surrounding Montanism. Chapter 4 offered a brief overview of this period as part of a wider history. This chapter looks more closely at key texts and figures and draws out the lessons for the church's ongoing task of discerning the prophetic.

16.2 The Didache: A Church Manual on Prophets

The Didache, also called The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, is a short Christian manual probably compiled in Syria or Palestine in the late first or early second century. After sections on the two ways of life and death, baptism, fasting, prayer and the Eucharist, it turns in chapters 11 to 13 to the reception of itinerant teachers, apostles and prophets. Several points are noteworthy.

- Teachers who instruct in the right way are to be received as the Lord, but a teacher who turns aside and teaches another doctrine is not to be listened to.
- An apostle should stay no more than a day or two; if he stays three days, he is a false prophet, and if he asks for money when leaving, he is a false prophet.
- Prophets who speak in the Spirit are not to be tested or judged, a striking instruction that seems to reflect reverence for the prophetic gift. Yet the Didache immediately adds that not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only if he has the ways of the Lord. By their ways the false prophet and the prophet will be known.
- A prophet who orders a meal in the Spirit must not eat of it, and a prophet who teaches the truth but does not practise what he teaches is a false prophet. Anyone who says in the Spirit, give me money, is not to be listened to.
- Genuine prophets who wish to settle are worthy of support, and the firstfruits of produce are to be given to them, for they are your high priests.

The Didache therefore shows a community that honours prophets yet is wary of exploitation. Its tests are practical: duration of stay, financial motives, consistency between teaching and behaviour. These criteria resonate with the later biblical commentary on false prophets and with Paul's emphasis on character. The Didache also reveals the transition from itinerant to local ministry. Chapter 15 instructs the community to appoint bishops and deacons, for they too minister the service of the prophets and teachers, and are not to be despised. The local offices are taking on the functions once performed by travelling charismatic figures.

16.3 The Shepherd of Hermas

The Shepherd of Hermas, a Roman work of the early or mid second century, includes in its eleventh Mandate a lengthy test of the true and false prophet. The true prophet, it says, is meek, quiet, humble, abstains from every evil and vain desire, makes himself poorer than others, does not answer when asked, does not speak privately, and does not speak when a person wishes him to speak, but only when God wishes. He does not pursue the front seats. The false prophet, on the other hand, exalts himself, seeks seats of honour, is bold, shameless and talkative, lives in luxury and takes pay for prophesying, and answers whatever he is asked in order to be paid. The test is the life, and it is notable how consistently the early sources emphasise humility and freedom from financial motive.

16.4 Ignatius, Justin and Irenaeus

Ignatius of Antioch, writing on the way to martyrdom in the early second century, affirms the role of the bishop but also claims a prophetic Spirit. In his letter to the Philadelphians, he says that while he was among them, he cried out with a loud voice, the voice of God, urging them to heed the bishop, the presbytery and the deacons. He also speaks of the prophets of the Old Testament as having lived according to Christ Jesus. In Ignatius, the offices of bishop and prophet coexist.

Justin Martyr, in his Dialogue with Trypho in the mid second century, states that prophetic gifts remain among Christians to the present day, using this as an argument that the gifts have passed from the Jewish people to the church. Irenaeus of Lyon, in the later second century, mentions that in the church there are brothers who have prophetic gifts, who foresee things to come, who have visions and utter prophetic expressions. He criticises those who reject the Spirit's prophetic gift because of the misuse of it by heretics, warning against throwing out the gift together with the abuse. His observation is of lasting relevance: the answer to false prophecy is not the abolition of prophecy but its right discernment.

16.5 The Montanist Controversy Revisited

The New Prophecy associated with Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla arose in Phrygia in the later second century. Our principal accounts come from hostile writers preserved in the fourth-century historian Eusebius, so the picture is filtered. According to these sources, Montanus prophesied in a state of ecstasy, speaking in the first person as if the Spirit or the Paraclete were speaking directly. The movement stressed the imminent return of Christ, rigorous fasting, sexual abstinence and readiness for martyrdom. It also gave a prominent role to the women prophets.

Opponents raised several objections. First, the manner of prophesying, which they described as ecstatic and uncontrolled, seemed to them contrary to the way of true prophets. One anti-Montanist writer cited by Eusebius insisted that a prophet should not speak in ecstasy. Second, the claim that the Paraclete was speaking in Montanus seemed to threaten the sufficiency of the apostolic revelation. Third, the movement's rigour and its tendency to separate from the wider church caused division. Fourth, there were allegations about the conduct of the leaders, some of which may be exaggerated.

Montanists, for their part, appear to have believed they were restoring an authentic prophetic life that the institutionalising church was neglecting. The most famous convert was Tertullian, who in his later writings defended the New Prophecy against what he called the

psychics, those who rejected the ongoing work of the Spirit. His treatise *On the Soul*, for example, reports a sister in the church who received revelations during worship and whose reports were examined afterwards.

The church eventually rejected Montanism. In the process, it clarified that revelation which adds to or supersedes the apostolic teaching is not acceptable, that the prophetic must be tested against the rule of faith and that the church's unity is not to be sacrificed to new revelations. At the same time, it is reasonable to ask whether the reaction contributed to an overcautious attitude to the prophetic gift in subsequent centuries.

16.6 Canon, Creed and Bishop

Several developments in the second to fourth centuries shaped the context for prophecy. The church was identifying the writings of the New Testament as Scripture, a process that culminated in lists such as that of Athanasius in his festal letter of 367. The rule of faith, a summary of apostolic teaching later expressed in the creeds, provided a standard for orthodoxy. The office of bishop, who was successor to the apostles in teaching and oversight, gained prominence as a guardian of tradition. These developments were responses to threats such as Gnosticism and Marcionism, which appealed to secret revelations or private authority.

These structures did not abolish prophecy but placed it within a framework. A prophetic word was to be tested against the rule of faith, the canon of Scripture and the judgement of the church. This is a mature and biblical insight. However, as the importance of the institutional structure grew, the space for charismatic ministries often narrowed, and later writers such as Chrysostom spoke of the extraordinary gifts as a thing of the past. Augustine's views developed over time. In his early writings he thought the miraculous gifts had largely ceased, but in his late work *The City of God* he catalogued numerous miracles occurring in his own day.

16.7 The Apostolic Fathers and the Spirit

The writings of the generation after the apostles, commonly called the Apostolic Fathers, give glimpses of a church living with both the memory of the apostles and the continuing work of the Spirit. The letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthian church, written about the year 96, addresses a dispute in which some members had removed their appointed leaders. Clement appeals for order, humility and love, and argues that the apostles appointed overseers and deacons and made provision for succession (1 Clement 42 to 44). His letter shows how quickly the issues of 1 Corinthians re-emerged in the same city, and it reflects an early concern to protect the stability of the community. At the same time, Clement writes of a rich outpouring of the Spirit on the Corinthians in their earlier days.

Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote seven letters on his way to martyrdom in Rome in the early second century, stresses the unity of the church around the bishop, the presbyters and the deacons, and urges believers to do nothing apart from them. Yet his letters also display a sense of prophetic inspiration, as in the claim, noted earlier, that he cried out with the voice of God. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, an account of the death of the bishop of Smyrna in the middle of the second century, reports that Polycarp had a vision some days before his arrest, in which he saw his pillow on fire and told those with him that he would be burned alive. When the time came, he faced death with serenity, praying and giving thanks. The account blends the ordinary and the extraordinary, as many early Christian narratives do.

These writings show that in the early second century, there was no sharp opposition between charismatic and institutional leadership. The same persons who exercised oversight might also have visions or prophetic insights. The tension grew when claimants outside the recognised structures asserted authority on the basis of revelation, as in the case of Montanism.

16.8 The Fathers on Prophetic Gifts

Several of the second- and third-century writers comment on the continuing gifts of the Spirit.

- Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, says that the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time, and argues that the gifts once among the Jews have passed to the Christians.
- Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, refers to Christians who foresee things to come, have visions and utter prophetic words, and who heal the sick by laying on hands. He criticises those who reject the gift of the Spirit because of misuse by heretics, and he defends the church's unity in the apostolic tradition.
- Tertullian, who became a Montanist, defended the New Prophecy but also reflects earlier North African Christian practice, as when he reports the revelations of a sister in his congregation who experienced visions during worship, and whose reports were examined by the leaders after the meeting.
- Origen, writing in the first half of the third century, claimed in his reply to the critic Celsus that traces of the Holy Spirit were still visible among Christians, including healings and the casting out of demons, though he judged them fewer than in the apostolic age.

These authors do not agree on every point, but together they show a church for which the Spirit's gifts were a living reality, which sought to hold them within the apostolic faith. The testimony is valuable for those who wish to defend the possibility of continuing gifts today. It also shows that some Christians already felt that the extraordinary gifts were becoming less common.

16.9 Prophecy and Martyrdom

The age of persecution was an age of prophecy in a particular sense. The martyrs bore witness with their lives, and early Christians often believed that the Spirit was present in a special way with those who faced death. Jesus had said that when his followers were brought before rulers, they should not worry how to answer, for the Spirit of your Father speaks through you (Matthew 10:19-20). The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, an early third-century account of martyrs in Carthage, includes Perpetua's own diary with visions of a ladder to heaven and of her dead brother, and the narrator remarks that the same Spirit who worked in the apostles continues to work in these martyrs.

The authority of those who had suffered for the faith, known as confessors, created tension with the authority of bishops, especially after the persecution under the emperor Decius in 250 and 251. Many Christians lapsed, offering sacrifices or obtaining certificates stating that they had done so. When the persecution eased, a debate arose about whether and how the lapsed could be restored. Some confessors issued letters of peace, claiming to forgive the lapsed on their own authority, and Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, insisted that the bishop and the church must decide. Cyprian himself refers in his letters to visions and dreams that guided him. The

controversy illustrates the conflict between charismatic and institutional authority, and the difficulty of resolving it. It also shows that the African church of the third century was deeply engaged with the question of how the Spirit's gifts relate to the order of the church, a question that remains alive today.

16.10 The Formation of the Canon of Scripture

The relationship between prophecy and Scripture was bound up with the process by which the church recognised the books of the New Testament. In the middle of the second century, Marcion of Sinope, who rejected the Old Testament and produced a truncated version of Luke's Gospel and Paul's letters as his Scripture, forced the church to reflect on what should be included. Irenaeus defended the fourfold Gospel. A list known as the Muratorian Fragment, commonly dated to the late second century though some scholars argue for a later date, names most of the books of our New Testament. Eusebius, in the fourth century, classified writings as recognised, disputed or spurious. Athanasius of Alexandria, in his Festal Letter of 367, listed the twenty-seven books of our New Testament, and regional councils at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 did the same.

Criteria that guided the church included apostolic origin, orthodoxy or consistency with the rule of faith, and widespread acceptance in the churches. The church did not create the canon in the sense of conferring authority on the books; it recognised the authority that they already carried as the word of God through apostolic witness. For our subject, the process had a double significance. It identified a body of foundational prophetic and apostolic testimony that would serve as the permanent standard. And it implied that later prophetic utterances, however genuine, are of a different order, being subject to the canon rather than additions to it.

16.11 After Nicaea: Monks, Discernment and the Fading of Prophecy

After Christianity gained legal status in the fourth century, the character of the church changed. Large numbers joined, the clergy gained status and the church became entangled with the empire. In response, many sought a more serious Christian life in the desert. Antony of Egypt, whose life was written by Athanasius, became the model of the monk. The desert fathers and mothers were sought for spiritual guidance, and many were credited with the ability to discern hearts and with wisdom. Discernment (*diakrisis*) became a central virtue of monastic spirituality. John Cassian, in his *Conferences*, recorded a famous discourse of Abba Moses on discretion as the mother of all virtues, and Evagrius of Pontus wrote on the discernment of thoughts. The monks thus preserved a charismatic dimension of Christianity, expressed in spiritual fatherhood and in the testing of spirits.

At the same time, statements by theologians suggest that some regarded the extraordinary gifts as having largely ceased. John Chrysostom, commenting on 1 Corinthians 12, said that the whole passage was obscure because of ignorance of the facts and their cessation, since such events used to happen but no longer did. Augustine, in an early work, thought that miracles were no longer necessary now that the church had spread, but in his later *City of God*, he catalogued numerous healings and miraculous events occurring in his own day and in his own church, and urged that they be recorded. The witness of the fathers, therefore, is mixed, and it reflects a variety of experience in different places and times.

16.12 What the Early Church Can and Cannot Teach Us

It is tempting to romanticise the early church as a golden age of purity or, conversely, to dismiss it as a period of decline into institutionalism. Both pictures are inaccurate. The early Christians were a diverse group facing real problems, including heresy, persecution, moral failure and internal conflict. Their sources are limited and often one-sided. They made mistakes as well as profound contributions. Several cautions follow.

1. We should not assume that early practice settles contemporary questions. The early church did not have the same circumstances, and its practice sometimes developed in response to specific challenges.
2. We should take seriously the fathers' concern for apostolic faith, unity and holiness, while recognising that their concern for order sometimes led to the neglect of charismatic gifts.
3. We should honour the testimony of the martyrs and confessors, whose faithfulness remains an inspiration.
4. We should recognise that questions we face, such as how to discern false prophecy, how to relate gifts and offices and how to handle financial abuse, were also faced by them.
5. We should read the evidence with humility, remembering that most of our information comes from the literate and the powerful, and that many voices, including those of women and the poor, are muted.

16.13 Lessons from the Post-Apostolic Period

1. Honour and test belong together. The Didache and Hermas show that early Christians revered prophecy yet developed practical criteria to protect themselves against exploitation.
2. Character is a primary test. Humility, absence of greed and consistency between word and life are repeatedly emphasised.
3. The abuse of a gift does not cancel the gift. Irenaeus's warning against rejecting prophecy because of its counterfeit is wise.
4. New revelation cannot supplant apostolic teaching. The church's response to Montanism rightly protected the sufficiency of the gospel.
5. Structure and Spirit need each other. When one dominates, the church suffers.
6. Hostile sources deserve caution. Our knowledge of movements judged heretical comes largely from opponents, and fairness requires humility about our conclusions.

16.14 Chapter Summary

- The Didache honours prophets but supplies practical tests of behaviour and motive.
- The Shepherd of Hermas describes the true prophet as humble, quiet and free of financial motive.
- Ignatius, Justin and Irenaeus testify to prophetic gifts in the church and warn against rejecting them because of abuse.
- Montanism raised questions about new revelation, ecstasy and authority, and the church's response clarified the primacy of apostolic teaching.

- The development of canon, creed and episcopal oversight placed prophecy within a framework while sometimes narrowing the space for charismatic ministries.
- The Apostolic Fathers, the testimony of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen, the link between prophecy and martyrdom, the formation of the canon and the monastic practice of discernment fill out the picture.

16.15 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which of the Didache's tests for prophets might help a church today, and which might need adaptation?
2. What does Irenaeus's warning teach about the response to abuse of spiritual gifts?
3. How might the church have responded to Montanism in a way that preserved its concerns while correcting its errors?
4. How do canon, creed and bishop help to protect the church, and what are the risks of an overly institutional approach?
5. Where do you see modern parallels to the issues raised by the Montanist controversy?

16.16 Suggested Further Reading

- Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life of the Earliest Christian Communities*.
- Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*.
- William Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments*.
- Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *Prophecy at Carthage*.
- Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*.
- Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*.

Part V: Offices, Order and Discernment

Chapter 17: The Gift and Office of the Prophet

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. (1 Timothy 4:14, author's rendering)

17.1 Introduction

Having traced the biblical and historical foundations, we now turn to the practical shape of prophetic ministry in the church. Who is a prophet? How does the gift of prophecy differ from the office or ministry of a prophet? How is such a person called, recognised, formed and supported? How should prophets relate to pastors, elders and the congregation? This chapter addresses these questions, with particular concern for the dangers and safeguards that attend this ministry.

17.2 Gift, Function and Office

It is helpful to distinguish three related things. The first is the gift of prophecy, a spiritual capacity given by the Spirit to a believer to speak a word for the building up of the church. Paul encourages all to desire this gift (1 Corinthians 14:1, 5, 31). The second is the function of prophesying, the act of exercising that gift on a given occasion. The third is the office or ministry of a prophet, a recognised, ongoing role in which a person is regularly used in prophetic speech and is acknowledged by the church as called and gifted in this way (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11).

The New Testament does not make these distinctions in technical language, and some scholars doubt that a formal office existed. Yet there is evidence that certain persons were known as prophets: Agabus, Judas and Silas, the prophets and teachers at Antioch. A person may prophesy occasionally without being a prophet in this sense, much as a person may teach a children's class without being a teacher in the sense of Ephesians 4. Churches that fail to make the distinction either exalt every prophetic word to the level of a prophetic office or deny the continuing existence of any recognised prophetic ministry.

17.3 The Call of a Prophet

In Scripture, the call of a prophet is a divine initiative. Samuel hears his name called in the night and must learn to respond (1 Samuel 3). Isaiah sees the Lord in the temple and volunteers after being cleansed (Isaiah 6). Jeremiah is told that before he was formed in the womb, God knew him and appointed him a prophet to the nations, and he protests that he is only a youth (Jeremiah 1). Amos insists that he was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs when the Lord took him (Amos 7:14-15). In the New Testament, the Spirit speaks to the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2). The pattern combines inner conviction with external confirmation.

Three elements typically accompany an authentic call. First, a personal awareness of God's summons, often marked by reluctance and humility. Second, giftedness that others can recognise. Third, recognition and sending by the community. Timothy's gift was recognised through prophetic utterances and the laying on of hands by elders (1 Timothy 1:18; 4:14). No

one should appoint themselves a prophet and demand a hearing on their own testimony. The church has a responsibility to test and recognise.

17.4 Formation of the Prophet

Prophets are formed, not merely gifted. The Old Testament speaks of schools or companies of prophets under figures such as Samuel and Elisha, where younger prophets were apprenticed. Samuel himself grew up serving Eli and learned to say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears (1 Samuel 3:9-10). Moses spent forty years in the wilderness before his commission. Paul spent years in Arabia and Tarsus before being sent out from Antioch. Formation includes the following.

- Immersion in Scripture. The prophet's words must be shaped by the written word. A person who does not know the Bible deeply is vulnerable to error and self-deception.
- A life of prayer and solitude. The prophets of Scripture were people who stood in the council of the Lord (Jeremiah 23:18, 22). Listening precedes speaking.
- Character development. The fruit of the Spirit must grow alongside the gift. Integrity, humility, patience, self-control and faithfulness are essential.
- Submission to mentoring and correction. A prophet needs older, wiser voices who can speak into his or her life.
- Training in discernment. The prophet must learn to distinguish between the Spirit's prompting, personal opinion, emotional impulse and cultural assumption.

17.5 Prophets and the Local Church

In Acts, prophets operate within and between churches. The prophets at Antioch are part of the leadership team of the local church. Agabus and others travel from Jerusalem to Antioch and Caesarea. Judas and Silas are sent from Jerusalem with a letter and encourage the believers. The Didache envisages itinerant prophets who may settle. The relationship between prophets, elders and teachers is one of cooperation. The prophet does not stand above the church's leadership; neither is the prophet subordinate in a manner that silences the word. A healthy arrangement allows the prophet to speak and the leaders to weigh.

Some principles may be offered.

1. A prophet should be known by the church's leadership and should be in good standing in a local congregation. Anonymity and isolation are warning signs.
2. Prophetic words intended for the congregation should be brought to the leadership to be weighed before or as they are shared.
3. Prophets should not undermine pastoral authority by speaking critically of leaders in public or encouraging division.
4. Pastors should not suppress prophetic gifts through fear or control. They must create a safe and orderly space for them.
5. Prophetic words of correction directed to leaders should be delivered respectfully, privately where possible, and in keeping with the pattern of Matthew 18 and 1 Timothy 5:19-20.

17.6 Support and Remuneration

The New Testament affirms that those who labour in the word are worthy of support. Paul cites the principle that the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14) and that elders who rule well, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching, are worthy of double honour (1 Timothy 5:17-18). The Didache likewise instructs that firstfruits be given to prophets. Yet the same sources warn sharply against making ministry a pretext for gain. Peter exhorts elders to shepherd not for shameful gain but eagerly (1 Peter 5:2). Paul himself often refused support so as not to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:12; Acts 20:33-35). The Didache and Hermas identify demanding payment for prophecy as a mark of the false prophet.

The line is drawn between receiving support and trading in prophecy. A prophet may receive free-will offerings and be supported by a church, but must never price a prophetic word, sell anointing oil or spiritual favour, or manipulate hearers by implying that blessing depends on giving to the prophet. Transparent, accountable financial arrangements guard both prophet and church.

17.7 Prophecy and Traditional Divination

In African and many other cultural contexts, the prophet can easily be mistaken for the diviner, the traditional spiritual specialist who is consulted for fees to discover hidden things, determine causes of misfortune and provide protection. The Old Testament firmly distinguishes prophecy from divination, sorcery and consulting mediums (Deuteronomy 18:9-14). The biblical prophet does not operate by technique or fee, does not sell results, and does not exploit fear. Prophetic ministry in the church should be clearly distinguished from the practices of divination, and congregants should be taught the difference. The temptation to assimilate the prophet to the diviner is strong when people come with real suffering and seek quick answers. The Christian prophet leads people to God, not to a dependence on the prophet.

17.8 Dangers and Safeguards

The prophetic ministry is particularly susceptible to certain distortions.

- Pride and the desire for fame. The prophet is tempted to build a name or a platform. Safeguard: a lifestyle of service and hiddenness, and a culture that rewards faithfulness over visibility.
- Isolation and unaccountability. The prophet may become answerable to no one. Safeguard: membership in a local church, an eldership or team to whom he or she is accountable.
- Sensationalism. The pursuit of dramatic words, specific names, dates and numbers can lead to deception. Safeguard: a commitment to edifying, Christ-centred speech and humility about the limits of one's knowledge.
- Financial exploitation. See above. Safeguard: transparency and external oversight.
- Moral failure. Sexual immorality and abuse of power have devastated many ministries. Safeguard: accountability, boundaries, safe practices in counselling and prayer ministry, and a culture of honesty.
- Burnout and despair. Elijah collapsed under the weight of his calling (1 Kings 19). Safeguard: rest, community, friendship, spiritual direction and care for physical and emotional health.

- Control. The prophet may use words to manage the lives of others. Safeguard: a strong doctrine of personal responsibility and the freedom of believers to test every word.

17.9 Biblical Portraits of Prophets in Ministry

Scripture offers more than rules about prophetic ministry; it offers portraits of prophets at work. A few of these deserve consideration.

- Samuel was a listener who learned to say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears. At the end of his public ministry he could challenge the people to testify that he had not taken anyone's ox or donkey, defrauded or oppressed anyone, or accepted a bribe (1 Samuel 12:1-5). His integrity gave his words weight.
- Nathan combined courage and tact. He approached David with a parable that allowed the king to condemn himself, then declared, you are the man. He also brought the word of promise about David's house. A prophet must know when to console and when to confront.
- Elijah shows both zeal and fragility. He confronted kings and Baal's prophets and then fell into despair. God ministered to him with food, rest and a gentle whisper, then gave him a companion and successor.
- Isaiah was a prophet who saw the holiness of God, confessed his own uncleanness and responded to the call, here am I! Send me. His ministry shows that a prophet's preparation is a deepening acquaintance with the holiness of God.
- Jeremiah was the weeping prophet, who identified with the people's pain even as he announced their judgement, and who kept speaking despite rejection.
- Agabus was a practical prophet whose words led the church at Antioch to send relief, and who warned Paul of dangers to come. His ministry was timely, specific and in the service of the community.
- Judas and Silas, prophets, encouraged and strengthened the believers at Antioch with many words (Acts 15:32). Their prophetic ministry was marked by encouragement.
- Anna, a widow of great age, never left the temple but worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day, and spoke about the child Jesus to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). Her prophetic ministry flowed from a life of devotion.

These portraits suggest several types of prophetic ministry: the listener and counsellor, the confronter of rulers, the intercessor, the encourager, the practical forewarner and the person of devotion. Different people will be gifted in different ways, and the church should welcome the variety.

17.10 A Prophetic Ministry Team in the Local Church

Many churches find it helpful to form a team of mature persons who have prophetic gifts or interest, and who serve the congregation under the oversight of the eldership. A team of this kind can provide a safe context for the exercise of the gift. A possible structure follows.

- Composition. A small group of mature, tested members, including men and women of different ages, chosen by the leadership after prayer and consultation. Members should be known for integrity, humility, love of Scripture and a teachable spirit.

- **Covenant.** Members agree in writing to a statement of faith, a code of conduct, the church's policy on prophetic ministry and submission to the oversight of the leaders. They agree not to publicise their ministry or to seek private followers.
- **Meetings.** The team meets regularly for prayer, study of Scripture, training, sharing of impressions and review of how words have been received and weighed.
- **Roles.** The team may contribute words in services under the direction of the service leader; pray for individuals in appointed settings, in pairs; and serve as a resource for the pastor in seeking God's guidance for the church.
- **Supervision.** One elder is assigned to oversee the team, receive reports and provide pastoral care for team members.
- **Review.** The leadership reviews the team's ministry periodically and renews, adjusts or ends participation.

A written covenant might include statements such as: I will speak only what I believe the Lord has given and will say so with humility. I will not use my gift to make demands or to predict harm. I will not receive money for prophetic words. I will submit my words to the weighing of the leaders and accept correction. I will treat what I hear in confidence. I will seek to be holy, to love the church and to honour the Scripture.

17.11 Training in Prophetic Ministry

Training for prophetic ministry should combine biblical teaching, practical experience and mentoring. A possible twelve-session course might address the following themes.

1. The God who speaks: revelation and Scripture.
2. The Spirit and the gifts: Pentecost and 1 Corinthians 12 to 14.
3. The prophets of the Old Testament: call, message and cost.
4. Prophecy in the New Testament: forms and purposes.
5. Hearing God: prayer, silence and attentiveness.
6. Giving a word: wording, timing and humility.
7. Testing: the six questions and the process of weighing.
8. Counterfeits and abuses: false prophecy, manipulation and money.
9. Prophecy and pastoral care: working with leaders and in crisis.
10. Prophecy and justice: the social dimension.
11. Character: the fruit of the Spirit and the dangers of pride.
12. Practicum and evaluation: supervised practice and feedback.

Such a course can be supplemented with reading, mentoring relationships and opportunities to participate in prayer ministry teams under supervision. Participants should also be introduced to Church history, so that they understand the tradition they stand in, and to the basics of ethics, safeguarding and pastoral care.

17.12 Visiting and Itinerant Ministers

Congregations often invite visiting preachers and prophets. The Didache's concerns about itinerant ministers remain relevant. Churches should adopt policies to protect their members, including the following.

1. Check references. Contact the visitor's home church or accountability body to confirm good standing, doctrine and conduct.
2. Agree on expectations in advance. Discuss the purpose of the visit, the content of the ministry, the use of any prophetic or healing ministry, and the arrangements for finances.
3. Provide hospitality and fair remuneration openly. Avoid secret payments or demands for offerings in the meeting.
4. Review the content. Ask the visitor to share what he or she plans to teach, and ensure that it is consistent with the church's faith.
5. Maintain oversight. A leader should be present throughout, and any prophetic words directed at individuals should be handled according to the church's policy.
6. Prohibit sales of spiritual goods during the visit unless these are ordinary books or resources sold transparently.
7. Debrief afterwards. Evaluate what happened, listen to members' reactions and address any concerns.

This does not suggest suspicion of all visitors; many visiting ministers are a great blessing. It means that hospitality is combined with responsibility for the flock.

17.13 Prophetic Ministry to Individuals

One of the most common settings for prophetic ministry is prayer for individuals after a service or in a prayer ministry session. Several guidelines are helpful.

What to do

- Pray in twos or threes, preferably with a male and a female member where appropriate, and in view of others.
- Ask the person what they would like prayer for before offering any impression.
- Offer impressions tentatively: I sense the Lord may be saying this; does it mean anything to you?
- Focus on encouragement, comfort and the person's relationship with God.
- Write down or record the word, with permission, so that the person can reflect on it.
- Refer the person to the pastoral team for follow-up where needed.

What not to do

- Do not give directive instructions about marriage, employment, finances or health decisions.
- Do not predict death, divorce, failure or disaster.
- Do not expose private sins or secrets publicly.
- Do not touch inappropriately or invade personal space.
- Do not claim certainty about what is uncertain.
- Do not pressure the person to respond or to give.
- Do not suggest that failure to be healed or helped is due to lack of faith.

17.14 Sensitive Situations: Grief, Illness, Mental Health and Crisis

Prophetic ministry must be especially careful when people are vulnerable. The bereaved are not helped by confident statements about why someone died or whether they are in a particular state. The best response is presence, prayer and the comfort of Scripture. Those facing serious illness need compassionate support, practical help and respect for their medical care; prophetic statements that a person will certainly be healed or that someone has sinned and brought illness upon themselves can do great harm. People with mental health conditions need competent professional support; they are not helped by prophetic words that suggest demonic influence or lack of faith, and the church should avoid ministry that increases confusion or shame.

In a crisis, such as a threat of suicide, violence or abuse, the church's response should be practical and prompt: ensure the person's safety, involve appropriate professionals and authorities and continue to offer pastoral care. A prophetic gift is no substitute for these responsibilities. A church that understands this will earn the trust of its community and will protect the credibility of the gift.

17.15 Chapter Summary

- A distinction exists between the gift, the function and the office of prophecy.
- A genuine call involves personal conviction, recognisable gifting and communal recognition.
- Prophets are formed through Scripture, prayer, character development, mentoring and training in discernment.
- Prophets work within and alongside church leadership and must be accountable.
- Support is legitimate, but prophecy must never be priced, and prophets must be clearly distinguished from diviners.
- Biblical portraits, ministry teams, training, visiting ministers, ministry to individuals and care in sensitive situations give practical shape to the prophetic office.

17.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How should a church recognise and test someone who claims a prophetic calling?
2. What practical steps help integrate prophets into the local church without suppressing or exalting them?
3. How can congregants be taught to distinguish between a prophet and a diviner?
4. What accountability structures protect a prophet from the dangers of isolation and pride?
5. How should a church handle financial support for prophetic ministry in a way that is transparent and honourable?

17.17 Suggested Further Reading

- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.
- David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*.
- Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*.
- Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.

- Craig S. Keener, Gift and Giver.

Chapter 18: Apostles, Elders and Prophetic Order

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2-3, author's rendering)

18.1 Introduction

A church that hears the Spirit also needs order. Prophetic ecclesiology insists that these are not rivals. The Spirit who gives gifts also gives gifts of leadership and administration, and the church that is open to prophecy must still be governed wisely and accountably. This chapter examines the New Testament pattern of church leadership, surveys the major forms of church government, and draws out principles for a prophetic order in which authority is shared, tested and exercised for the good of the whole body.

18.2 New Testament Patterns of Leadership

18.2.1 Apostles

The apostles were the first leaders of the church, commissioned by the risen Lord. After the death of the original Twelve and Paul, their unique role as eyewitnesses and foundational teachers passed into the apostolic writings. Paul's relationship to the churches he planted shows apostolic oversight exercised through teaching, correction, visiting and sending delegates such as Timothy and Titus. He appealed to his authority but consistently qualified it: not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). He spoke of his authority as given for building up and not for tearing down (2 Corinthians 13:10).

18.2.2 Elders and overseers

In the churches Paul planted, he appointed elders in every town (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The terms elder (presbyteros) and overseer (episkopos) appear to refer to the same persons: in Acts 20, Paul calls together the elders of Ephesus and tells them that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers, to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:17, 28). Titus 1:5-7 moves from elders to overseer in the same passage. The leadership is plural. There is no clear New Testament example of a single ruling pastor over a local church without a team of fellow elders, though some individuals, such as James in Jerusalem, held a prominent position.

Qualifications for elders and overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are overwhelmingly matters of character: above reproach, faithful in marriage, sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, not violent, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, managing his household well, not a recent convert, and well thought of by outsiders. Skill in teaching is required, but the emphasis falls on integrity.

18.2.3 Deacons and other servants

Deacons (diakonoi) serve alongside overseers (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). The seven chosen in Acts 6 foreshadow this ministry of practical service. Phoebe is described as a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Romans 16:1). Women and men served in various capacities, including Priscilla, who taught Apollos with her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26), and

Junia, who is described as outstanding among the apostles (Romans 16:7). Scholars discuss the precise meaning of these terms, but the evidence shows women playing significant roles.

18.2.4 The nature of pastoral authority

Jesus' words in Mark 10:42-45 and Peter's exhortation in 1 Peter 5:1-4 set the tone. Leaders are shepherds who serve, not rulers who dominate. They lead by example. The one passage in the New Testament that names a domineering leader, Diotrephes, who loved to be first, does not acknowledge apostolic authority and expels people from the church (3 John 9-10), is clearly condemned. Hebrews 13:17 calls the people to obey and submit to leaders who watch over their souls as those who will give an account. The text assumes leaders who are themselves accountable to God. Obedience in the New Testament is never blind or unlimited; it is conditioned by faithfulness to Christ and to Scripture.

18.3 Forms of Church Government

Christians have developed several forms of church order, each claiming support from the New Testament.

- Episcopal. Authority rests chiefly in bishops, regarded as successors to the apostles, who oversee priests and congregations. This model values continuity, unity and oversight. Its risk is distance between bishop and congregation and the possibility of clerical dominance.
- Presbyterian. Authority is exercised through councils of elders, both within local congregations and in wider assemblies. It values shared leadership and accountability beyond the local level. Its risk is bureaucracy.
- Congregational. Authority rests in the gathered congregation, which makes decisions collectively, often with pastors and deacons. It values the participation of all members. Its risk is instability, fragmentation and weak accountability to the wider church.
- Hybrid and apostolic networks. Many Pentecostal and charismatic movements organise around a founding leader, often designated General Overseer, Apostle or Senior Pastor, with local pastors accountable to him or her. This model offers decisive leadership and rapid growth. Its risks include concentrated power, weak checks and succession crises.

No single model is clearly prescribed in the New Testament, and each has been used by God. The decisive question is not the label but whether the structure fosters a plurality of voices, accountability, transparency and fidelity to Scripture. A prophetic church must be able to challenge its own leadership. Whatever the form, it must provide means by which concerns can be raised, leaders can be corrected and abuses can be addressed.

18.4 Prophets and Elders: Complementary Roles

In the New Testament, prophets and elders do not appear as rival institutions. The Antioch church had prophets and teachers who together heard the Spirit's direction. The Jerusalem council involved apostles and elders in discernment. Elders teach, shepherd and guard the doctrine; prophets bring the Spirit's timely word. When elders despise prophecy, the church becomes dry and mechanical. When prophets despise elders, the church becomes unstable and vulnerable to manipulation. The healthy pattern is mutual respect, shared accountability and a commitment to test everything by Scripture.

18.5 Principles of Prophetic Order

1. Plurality. Leadership is shared among a team, not concentrated in one person. This protects against error, sin and burnout.
2. Accountability. Every leader, including founders and senior leaders, is answerable to a body able to question, correct and, if necessary, remove them. This body should include persons not financially dependent on the leader.
3. Transparency. Church finances, decisions and discipline processes are handled with openness appropriate to the situation. Paul was careful to avoid any suspicion in handling the collection (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).
4. Servanthood. Authority is exercised for the benefit of others, not for personal gain or glory.
5. Qualifications and character. Leaders are appointed on the basis of integrity and demonstrated fruit, not merely charisma, wealth or family ties.
6. Safeguarding. Policies protect children and vulnerable adults from abuse, in obedience to the warning of Jesus about those who cause little ones to stumble (Matthew 18:6).
7. Discipline and restoration. Leaders who fall are dealt with justly, with accusations received on the testimony of two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19), public rebuke where sin is public (5:20) and restoration in a spirit of gentleness where there is genuine repentance (Galatians 6:1).
8. Succession. Leadership transitions are planned and prayerfully handled, so that the church's mission does not depend on one person and does not become the inheritance of a family by default.
9. Legal and civic responsibility. Churches should comply with applicable laws on registration, governance and finances. In Nigeria, for example, many churches are registered as incorporated trustees, which brings specific duties; leaders should seek proper legal guidance.

18.6 The Challenge of Founder-Centred Structures

Many vibrant churches in Africa and elsewhere grow around the vision and personality of a single founder. This is not wrong in itself, since God often raises up individuals to begin new works. But the Bible's pattern is that the founding apostle appoints elders and prepares the church to continue under shared leadership (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). A church that remains permanently dependent on one personality is fragile. When that person falls, becomes ill, dies or errs, the church may fracture or be harmed. Prophetic ecclesiology encourages founders to build teams, delegate real authority, submit to external accountability and plan for their own succession as an act of faithful stewardship.

18.7 Leadership in the Pastoral Letters

The letters to Timothy and Titus, called the Pastoral Epistles, provide the most detailed New Testament guidance on the order of local churches. Paul writes to two apostolic delegates, Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete, instructing them on how to guard the faith, appoint leaders and teach the household of God, which he calls the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15).

Several themes stand out. First, the emphasis on sound teaching. Timothy is told to guard the good deposit entrusted to him (2 Timothy 1:14), to entrust what he has heard to faithful men who will teach others (2:2) and to preach the word (4:2). The church is threatened by false teachers, who are described as lovers of money, proud and controlling, and the antidote is sound doctrine and godly example. Second, the emphasis on character. The qualifications of overseers and deacons are chiefly moral, and the lists of vices in the false teachers contrast with them. Third, the emphasis on care for the household. Specific instructions are given for older men, older women, younger women, younger men, slaves, widows and the wealthy (1 Timothy 5 and 6; Titus 2). The church is to be an extended family in which everyone has a place. Fourth, the discipline of elders. An accusation against an elder is not to be admitted except on the evidence of two or three witnesses; those who persist in sin are to be rebuked in the presence of all, and Timothy is to act without prejudice or partiality (1 Timothy 5:19-21). He is also warned not to be hasty in the laying on of hands (5:22), a caution against rapid appointment of leaders. Fifth, the elders who rule well are worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching (5:17), a reference to proper financial support.

These letters make clear that the church's structures are not an optional extra but means of guarding the gospel and caring for the flock. They are also sober about the danger of leaders who exploit their positions.

18.8 Apostolic Succession and the Historic Episcopate

Christian traditions differ over the doctrine of apostolic succession. Roman Catholic, Orthodox and some Anglican traditions hold that the bishops of the church are successors of the apostles in an unbroken line, and that this succession is a sign and guarantee of continuity in the church's faith and ministry. The roots of the idea are found in Clement and Irenaeus, who pointed to the continuity of bishops in the major sees as a guarantee against heresy. Ignatius, as noted, emphasised the role of the bishop as a centre of unity.

Protestant traditions generally understand apostolic succession primarily as a succession of apostolic doctrine: the church is apostolic when it teaches what the apostles taught, whatever the form of its ministry. Many Pentecostal and charismatic churches speak of a succession of charismatic gifts and of anointing passed through the laying on of hands, and some network leaders claim apostolic authority on the basis of their church-planting work. Ecumenical dialogue has made progress in understanding these differences. The 1982 Faith and Order document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, produced by the World Council of Churches, suggested that churches might recognise the essential continuity of the church's apostolic tradition in a variety of forms, including the succession of faith, worship and mission.

The prophetic church should treat these matters with humility. It can affirm that continuity with the apostles is essential, that faithfulness to apostolic doctrine is the primary measure, and that structures of oversight, whether episcopal, presbyteral or otherwise, should be shaped by the aim of preserving and transmitting the gospel.

18.9 Ordination, Commissioning and the Laying on of Hands

The New Testament speaks of the laying on of hands in connection with the commissioning of ministers. The seven in Acts 6 were set before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:6). The church at Antioch, after fasting and prayer, laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off (13:3). Timothy received a gift through prophecy with the laying on of

hands of the council of elders (1 Timothy 4:14), and Paul reminds him to fan into flame the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands (2 Timothy 1:6). Hebrews lists the laying on of hands among the elementary teachings (Hebrews 6:2). The practice conveys blessing, recognition, identification and prayer for the Spirit's empowerment.

Churches have developed procedures for ordination or commissioning. A prophetic church will ensure that these include several elements: evidence of calling, in the person's sense of vocation and the church's recognition; training in Scripture, theology and ministry; examination of character and conduct, including references; a period of probation; the public prayer of the community; and accountability after ordination. Paul's warning to Timothy about haste is important (1 Timothy 5:22). In some contexts, there is a tendency to ordain or confer titles on persons very quickly, sometimes on the basis of a prophetic word or a gift of money. This undermines the integrity of the ministry and exposes the flock to risk. Each church should set a clear standard and keep to it.

18.10 Councils, Networks and Wider Accountability

The Jerusalem council of Acts 15 is the model of wider consultation in the church. The apostles and elders met, heard testimony and Scripture, deliberated and sent a letter to the churches. Since then, the church has used councils, synods, assemblies and associations to settle doctrine, resolve disputes and support one another. Within African Christianity, numerous associations of churches exist, including councils of churches, fellowships of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and denominational structures. These bodies can play a vital role in accountability.

For wider accountability to be real, certain features are helpful: elected representation; clear constitutions defining the powers of the central body; term limits for leaders; transparent finances; mechanisms for hearing complaints against member churches or leaders; and willingness to discipline. The danger is that associations become clubs of mutual protection in which no one is ever held to account. Another danger is the creation of hierarchies in which a senior leader exercises control over affiliated churches without accountability to them. The principle of plurality applies at every level, and no one should be above scrutiny.

18.11 Church Planting, Multiplication and Structure

A church that is sent will plant new churches. The Antioch model is instructive: the church that had been planted by scattered believers became a base for sending Barnabas and Saul. Churches today can plant by sending teams, supporting new works and releasing leaders. Growth raises structural questions. Jethro advised Moses to appoint capable men as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, so that he would not be overwhelmed (Exodus 18:13-27). The apostles in Jerusalem likewise delegated administration to the seven so that they could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:1-6). A growing church needs leaders at multiple levels, small groups for pastoral care, teams for various ministries and systems for training and communication.

Structures should serve mission. They should not be created for their own sake, nor should they be rigid. In many African contexts, congregations are led by bi-vocational pastors who support themselves through other work, and this has strengths: such pastors are close to the people and are not dependent on the offerings. Denominational structures should recognise and

support this reality, providing training and encouragement, and avoid imposing models designed for wealthier contexts.

18.12 Gender, Age and Leadership

Chapter 14 noted differences among Christians concerning the leadership of women. The two main positions may be summarised fairly. Complementarians hold that men and women are equal in worth and dignity but have different roles in marriage and in church leadership, and they generally argue that the office of elder or pastor, with its authority to teach and govern, is restricted to men, appealing to 1 Timothy 2:12 and 3:2. Egalitarians hold that all offices are open to women and men according to gifting and calling, and they point to women's roles in the New Testament, to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 as addressing a local issue, and to Galatians 3:28. Many Christians hold positions between these, for example, allowing women to serve as deacons, pastors or church planters while reserving certain roles. Each group appeals to Scripture and seeks to be faithful.

This book takes no position on ordination, but urges that churches treat the question with prayer, study and charity. Whatever position is adopted, it is important that women's gifts, including prophetic gifts, are recognised, that women are included in decision-making bodies in appropriate ways, that abuse of women is not tolerated and that churches are not blinded by culture in either direction.

Age is also a matter of concern. Cultural norms may give automatic authority to the elderly, which can be valuable, since the elders of the community are rightly respected, but can also exclude younger voices. Paul told Timothy not to let anyone despise his youth. The church needs both the wisdom of experience and the energy and insight of the young, and structures should enable intergenerational partnership.

18.13 Chapter Summary

- The New Testament shows plural leadership under apostles, with elders or overseers and deacons serving the churches.
- Leadership is defined by character and servanthood, not by domination.
- Episcopal, presbyterian, congregational and apostolic network models each have strengths and risks.
- Prophets and elders are complementary and must respect one another.
- Principles of prophetic order include plurality, accountability, transparency, safeguarding, discipline, restoration and planned succession.
- The Pastoral Letters, apostolic succession, ordination, councils and networks, church planting structures and questions of gender and age shape the practical order of the church.

18.14 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which form of church government is practised in your tradition, and how does it guard against abuse of power?
2. What difference would it make if every church leader, including founders, had an external accountability body?
3. How might elders and prophets in your church work together more effectively?

4. What steps could a church take to make the transition between leaders healthy?
5. How can the roles of women in leadership be understood in light of Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia?

18.15 Suggested Further Reading

- Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership.
- Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.
- Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*.
- Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*.
- Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*
- Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.

Chapter 19: Testing and Discerning Prophecy

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1, author's rendering)

19.1 Introduction

If prophecy is real, so are counterfeits. Scripture does not merely permit testing; it commands it. This chapter develops a biblical framework for discernment that church members and leaders can apply. It draws together the criteria introduced in Chapter 2 and expands them with biblical texts, practical procedures and warning signs. The goal is neither to quench the Spirit nor to open the door to every claimant, but to cultivate a church that is both receptive and discerning.

19.2 The Old Testament Tests

Deuteronomy gives two classic tests. The first (Deuteronomy 13:1-5) concerns a prophet or dreamer who gives a sign or wonder that comes to pass but who says, let us go after other gods. Such a prophet is not to be heeded, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love him with all your heart. A sign alone is therefore never sufficient proof; the message must be consistent with the revealed nature and commands of God. The second test (Deuteronomy 18:20-22) concerns a prophet who presumes to speak in the name of the Lord a word that the Lord has not commanded. If what he speaks does not come to pass or come true, it is a word the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken presumptuously. Fulfilment is therefore a necessary check on predictive claims, though as noted in Chapter 3, conditional prophecies complicate its application.

Jeremiah adds a profound diagnostic. The false prophets speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord (Jeremiah 23:16). They say to those who despise the word of the Lord, it shall be well with you. Their words heal the wound lightly. The true prophet has stood in the council of the Lord and has heard his word (23:18, 22). The text implies that a true prophet's message, over time, will turn people from their evil ways. In Jeremiah 28, the prophet Hananiah prophesies peace and the swift return of the exiles, while Jeremiah wishes it were so but says that the prophets of old who prophesied war, famine and pestilence were vindicated only when their words came to pass. Jeremiah did not have an instant proof; he waited. Discernment sometimes requires patience.

19.3 The New Testament Tests

- Confession of Christ. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God (1 John 4:2). No one speaking in the Spirit of God says, Jesus is accursed (1 Corinthians 12:3).
- Fidelity to apostolic teaching. Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8). The Bereans examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was so (Acts 17:11).

- Fruit of character and life. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognise them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-16). Jesus adds that not everyone who says to him, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of his Father, and that some who prophesied in his name will be told, I never knew you (Matthew 7:21-23). Gifts without obedience are no guarantee of acceptance.
- Edification. Prophecy is for upbuilding, encouragement and consolation (1 Corinthians 14:3). A word that tears down, humiliates or terrorises without leading to repentance and hope is suspect.
- Communal weighing. Let the others weigh what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29). Test everything; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- Motive. False teachers are described in 2 Peter and Jude as greedy, exploiting people with false words, and following sensual ways. Titus 1:11 warns of those who teach for shameful gain. A love of money, status or control is a major warning sign.

19.4 A Framework of Six Questions

Drawing these texts together, a congregation can use the following questions as a practical framework when evaluating a prophetic word, a teaching or a prophetic person.

1. Does it agree with Scripture and the gospel? Nothing that contradicts the written word can come from the Spirit who inspired it.
2. Does it exalt Jesus Christ? The Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14). A word that glorifies the speaker, a place, an object or a technique should be questioned.
3. What is the character and motive of the speaker? Does the life match the message? Is there humility, integrity and freedom from greed or sexual immorality?
4. Does it build up? Does it encourage, comfort and strengthen, or does it manipulate through fear, guilt or flattery? Even a word of warning should aim at restoration.
5. Is it confirmed by the community? Do mature believers and leaders witness to it? Is it offered openly and with willingness to be tested, or secretly and with pressure to obey?
6. What are the fruits and the outcome over time? Do predictions come to pass? Does the message lead people to greater love for God and neighbour, or to dependence, division and loss?

No single question is decisive. A word may pass some tests and fail others. The questions work together as a framework for prayerful and honest judgement.

19.5 Practical Procedures for Weighing a Word

1. Receive graciously, but do not act immediately. Treat a word as something to be considered, not as a command. Avoid hasty decisions.
2. Write the word down. Recording what was said guards against distortion and allows later evaluation.
3. Submit it to trusted leaders or mature friends. Seek counsel from those who know you well and are not afraid to disagree.
4. Pray and consult Scripture. Ask whether the word accords with the Bible and with the leading of the Spirit in your own heart.

5. Wait. Time is a good teacher. Do not rush into major commitments such as marriage, relocation, resignation or financial pledges on the strength of a word alone.
6. Respond with respect. If the word is judged inaccurate or unhelpful, set it aside without contempt or bitterness.

In every case, personal prophecy should never replace the ordinary means of guidance: Scripture, prayer, wise counsel, circumstances and sanctified common sense. A prophetic word that conflicts with one's clear responsibilities, such as to care for one's family or to repay debts, should be treated with great caution.

19.6 Discerning of Spirits and Human Factors

Paul lists discerning of spirits among the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10). The gift involves a Spirit-given capacity to distinguish the source of a claim, whether divine, human or demonic. Yet discernment must also take into account human factors. A person may sincerely mistake emotion, imagination, wishful thinking, cultural expectation or even psychological disturbance for a word from God. Some who claim to hear voices or receive visions may be experiencing mental health difficulties and need compassionate pastoral and medical care. The church must not dismiss genuine spiritual experience, nor must it ignore the possibility of illness. Where there is doubt, a combination of spiritual discernment and professional help is wise.

19.7 Warning Signs of Spiritual Abuse and False Prophecy

The following patterns, while not each decisive in isolation, should alert a congregation that something is wrong.

- Demands for money, especially payment in exchange for blessing, healing or a prophetic word, or pressure to give sacrificially to the prophet in order to avoid disaster.
- Claims of unquestionable authority, with threats against those who ask questions or test the word.
- Use of fear, such as predictions of death, illness, failure or curses upon those who disobey.
- Accusations of witchcraft against individuals, particularly children, the elderly and widows. Such accusations have caused terrible suffering and are contrary to the gospel.
- Secrecy and isolation, discouraging contact with family, other churches or outside advice.
- Control of personal decisions about marriage, employment, residence or medical treatment.
- Sexual exploitation or inappropriate intimacy under the guise of spiritual ministry.
- Contradiction of Scripture or the central teaching of the gospel.
- Refusal to accept accountability, correction or external oversight.
- Repeated failed predictions combined with an unwillingness to acknowledge error.

19.8 When a Prophecy Fails

Prophets are fallible, and sometimes words are mistaken. A mature prophetic culture provides a way to handle this. The prophet who has erred should acknowledge the error humbly and without defensiveness, seek forgiveness where harm was done, and submit to correction and, if necessary, a period of restraint. The church should respond with grace to honest mistakes while maintaining firmness toward persistent deception. Repeated, unrepentant error disqualifies a person from a recognised prophetic ministry. The church must also avoid humiliating those who have erred, remembering Paul's instruction to restore in a spirit of gentleness, keeping watch over ourselves (Galatians 6:1).

19.9 The Responsibility of Hearers

Ultimately, each believer bears responsibility to test what is heard. The Bereans are praised for noble character because they examined the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). The anointing that believers have received teaches them about everything (1 John 2:27). Churches should therefore teach their members to read the Bible for themselves, to know the gospel well, to ask questions respectfully and to feel free to say no. A congregation that is biblically literate and spiritually mature is the best protection against false prophecy.

19.10 Case Studies in Discernment

The following five cases are composite illustrations, not accounts of particular persons or churches. Each can be analysed using the six questions of section 19.4. Readers are encouraged to work through them in groups.

Case 1: A prediction about an election

A well-known preacher announces that God has revealed to him the winner of the coming national election and calls on his followers to vote accordingly. He says that anyone who opposes this candidate is opposing God. Analysis: Scripture does not authorise a preacher to name a particular candidate as God's choice for a modern election. The Old Testament prophets spoke to kings in terms of covenant faithfulness, not as campaign agents. The claim is likely to be tested by events; if wrong, it brings disrepute. The statement that opponents are opposing God is a form of spiritual pressure that violates the freedom of conscience. A mature response would be to teach the church to evaluate candidates in light of biblical principles of justice and integrity, to pray for the election and to respect differing judgements.

Case 2: A word to give money

A woman is told in a prayer line by a visiting minister that the Lord wants her to give her entire month's salary to his ministry and that if she does she will receive a hundredfold within seven days. She has children to feed. Analysis: The word fails the tests of motive and fruit; it benefits the speaker, it uses a promise of return as an inducement, and it ignores the biblical priority of caring for one's household (1 Timothy 5:8). It resembles the pattern the Didache warned against. Paul says that each should give as he has decided, not under compulsion. The church's leaders should counsel her not to act on the word, offer practical help and address the visitor's conduct.

Case 3: A dream about a neighbour

A teenager dreams that an elderly woman in the neighbourhood is turning into an animal and killing his relatives. A visiting prophet confirms that she is a witch. Neighbours threaten her. Analysis: This case involves a dream, an interpretation presented as authoritative and a public accusation. Scripture does not authorise accusing individuals on the basis of dreams, and Jesus warned against rash judgement. The accusation endangers a vulnerable person. The pastor should intervene immediately to protect the woman, calm the neighbourhood, listen to the teenager's fears, provide counselling and teach clearly against witchcraft accusations. In some jurisdictions, such accusations may violate the law.

Case 4: A promised healing that does not occur

A pastor announces that a church member with a serious illness will be healed by the next Sunday, and the member stops taking medication. The member's condition worsens. Analysis: The pastor's certainty exceeded what Scripture warrants, and the directive to stop medication placed the member at risk. The church should respond with honesty, repentance on the part of the pastor and practical care for the member and family. Prayer for healing is legitimate and encouraged, but promises should be made with humility, and medical care should never be discouraged without medical advice.

Case 5: Flattery for the pastor

A visiting prophet tells the senior pastor in public that God sees him as a great man, that nobody should question his vision and that those who leave the church will suffer. The pastor is delighted. Analysis: The word is flattering, protects the leader from scrutiny and threatens dissenters. These are marks of prophecy that serves power, like that of the four hundred prophets in 1 Kings 22. The elders should weigh the word and consider whether it is an unhealthy expression of the pastor's desire for approval. The pastor should respond with humility and welcome correction.

19.11 The Role of Scripture in Testing

The most reliable test of any prophetic claim is its agreement with Scripture. But using this test well requires skill. Several principles help.

1. Distinguish contradiction from silence. A claim that contradicts clear biblical teaching is to be rejected. A claim on which Scripture is silent, such as the specific choice of a career or a place to live, cannot be tested directly by Scripture but may be evaluated by wisdom, counsel and the principles of Scripture.
2. Read texts in context. A verse used to support a prophetic claim may have been wrenched from its setting.
3. Use the whole of Scripture. The analogy of faith, the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, helps avoid reliance on obscure or isolated texts.
4. Examine what is emphasised. A prophetic message that gives prominence to matters minor in Scripture, and neglects the central teachings of repentance, faith, holiness, love and justice, is out of proportion.
5. Take the example of the Bereans. They received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11). Eagerness and examination go together.

The use of Scripture to test is not the same as quoting a verse in defence of a pre-existing opinion. It requires humility, study and openness to correction.

19.12 Discerning Spirits and Claims of Deliverance

Paul lists the discerning of spirits among the gifts. John commands testing of the spirits. The ministry of Jesus included the casting out of demons, and he gave his disciples authority to do so. The New Testament thus treats the reality of evil spirits as part of the context of Christian ministry. At the same time, the apostles' letters, which deal at length with the problems of the churches, speak little of exorcism as a regular activity of local churches. The emphasis falls on teaching, character, community and the armour of God.

In Acts, Paul commanded a spirit of divination to come out of a slave girl in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:16-18), and the sons of Sceva were overpowered when they attempted to use the name of Jesus as a formula without relationship to him (19:13-16). These accounts illustrate the authority of Jesus' name and the danger of treating it as magic.

Churches that practise deliverance ministry should observe certain safeguards.

- Teach that Christ's victory is decisive, and that believers need not live in fear.
- Insist on mature, trained teams working under the oversight of the leadership.
- Ensure consent. No one should be restrained, shouted at or physically harmed in the name of deliverance.
- Avoid public sensationalism and exposure of private matters.
- Do not diagnose illness as demonic without medical or psychological assessment; where there are signs of mental illness, epilepsy or other conditions, ensure professional care alongside prayer.
- Protect children from practices that frighten or harm them.
- Follow up with discipleship. Freedom is to be maintained by walking with Christ in the word and fellowship.

19.13 Prophecy in the Digital Age

Digital media have transformed the way prophecy is shared. Prophetic words may now be broadcast to millions through television, video platforms, social media and messaging applications. This brings opportunities, such as encouragement across distances and wider access to teaching. It also creates new risks.

- Virality without accountability. A dramatic claim can spread widely before anyone checks it. Predictions that fail are quietly deleted, and the audience is left unaware.
- Commercialisation. Online prophetic consultations for fees, paid access to prophetic words and sales of prophetic merchandise are forms of the commercialisation discussed in Chapter 30.
- Distance from community. A person who follows an online prophet may have no personal relationship with the speaker and no way of testing his or her life. The criteria of character and community confirmation are hard to apply.
- Misinformation. Prophetic claims are sometimes mixed with false news, conspiracy theories and political propaganda. Believers need skills of media literacy.
- Manipulation through algorithms. Platforms reward sensational content, which can encourage preachers to exaggerate.

- Privacy and children. Prayer sessions recorded and shared without consent can embarrass or harm participants, especially minors.

Practical responses include teaching members to ask who is speaking, what they are asking of the audience, whether they are accountable to a local church and what the track record is. Churches should adopt policies on recording and sharing prophetic ministry. Leaders who use digital platforms should be transparent about their accountability and finances, correct errors publicly and resist the pressure to sensationalise. Members should be encouraged to prioritise the local church, where they can be known, rather than substituting online content for fellowship.

19.14 Discernment as a Communal Practice

Discernment is not only an individual skill but a communal practice that can be cultivated. Christian traditions offer resources. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, described attention to movements of consolation and desolation in the soul as a way of discerning the Spirit's leading. The Quaker tradition has developed the practice of the clearness committee, in which a small group of trusted friends sits with a person facing a decision, asking honest, open questions and refraining from giving advice, so that the person may discern their own way. Reformed and Pentecostal traditions have emphasised the weighing of prophecies by leaders and the congregation.

Elements that recur in healthy communal discernment include silence and prayer; careful listening to each person; sharing of Scripture; willingness to name what each person senses; patience; and the readiness to wait for clarity. A decision should be tested by whether it brings peace, builds up the church, is consistent with Scripture and is received with joy by those most affected. Where discernment is difficult, it is better to wait.

19.15 Training a Discerning Congregation

The best protection against false prophecy is a congregation that is trained. The following areas of teaching and practice contribute.

1. Bible knowledge. Regular systematic teaching of Scripture, with opportunities for members to study themselves.
2. Church history and theology. Familiarity with the creeds, the main stories of the church and the debates of the past provides perspective.
3. Critical thinking. The ability to ask good questions, to distinguish evidence from assertion and to recognise common rhetorical tricks.
4. Media literacy. The skill to evaluate sources of information, including online claims.
5. Emotional health. People who are emotionally healthy are less vulnerable to manipulation. Churches should provide pastoral care, counselling and community.
6. Mentoring. Experienced believers can accompany new ones in learning to hear God and to test what they hear.
7. A culture of questions. Leaders should model willingness to be questioned and to admit mistakes.
8. Testimony of correction. When the church has been wrong, it should say so, and use the occasion to teach.

19.16 Chapter Summary

- Scripture commands testing, and the Old and New Testaments supply criteria.
- A word must accord with revealed truth, exalt Christ, come from a person of integrity, edify, be confirmed by the community and bear good fruit over time.
- Practical procedures include recording, consulting, waiting and relying on the ordinary means of guidance.
- Discernment includes recognising human, psychological and cultural factors.
- Warning signs include demands for money, fear tactics, witchcraft accusations, secrecy and control.
- Hearers share responsibility, and mature, biblically literate congregations are the best safeguard.
- Case studies, careful use of Scripture, safeguards for deliverance ministry, awareness of digital risks and communal discernment practices help churches apply the tests.

19.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which of the six questions do you find most useful, and which is most neglected in practice?
2. How should a church respond when a prophetic word proves false?
3. What steps can a church take to protect children and the elderly from accusations of witchcraft?
4. How can pastors teach members to test prophecies without producing cynicism?
5. What role should professional mental health care play alongside spiritual discernment?

19.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God*.
- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.
- Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*.
- David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.
- Craig S. Keener, *Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today*.
- Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*.

Chapter 20: Accountability, Ethics and Authority

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by your faith that you stand firm. (2 Corinthians 1:24, author's rendering)

20.1 Introduction

Authority is one of the most contested and misunderstood aspects of church life. It can be a source of blessing when exercised in the pattern of Christ, but a source of devastating harm when it is abused. Prophetic ministry, which claims to speak for God, is especially vulnerable to the abuse of authority. This closing chapter of Part V sets out a biblical theology of authority, defines spiritual abuse and proposes an ethic and structure of accountability for prophetic ministry. The aim is a church in which the prophetic voice is both free and safe.

20.2 A Biblical Theology of Authority

All authority belongs to God. Jesus declares that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Matthew 28:18). Any authority exercised by leaders in the church is derivative and delegated, and it is to be exercised in the manner of the One from whom it comes. Three principles stand out.

1. Authority is for service. Jesus washed his disciples' feet and said that he had given them an example (John 13:14-15). Authority in the church is measured by willingness to serve.
2. Authority is for building up. Paul speaks of the authority the Lord gave him for building up and not for tearing down (2 Corinthians 13:10). Authority that damages the people it is supposed to serve is a misuse.
3. Authority is limited by Scripture. No leader may command what contradicts the word of God. Peter and the apostles said, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Conscience and Scripture stand above the voice of any pastor or prophet.

Paul's conduct provides a model. He appealed to the Corinthians as to beloved children, refused to take their money so as not to burden them, and subjected himself to their scrutiny even when they questioned his motives. Yet he also exercised firm discipline when necessary. Authority and humility were held together.

20.3 What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse may be understood as the misuse of spiritual authority, position or claims to coerce, control, exploit or harm another person. It may involve manipulation of Scripture, appeals to divine endorsement, threats of divine punishment, demands for unquestioning obedience, isolation from others, financial exploitation, public shaming and the suppression of dissent. It differs from ordinary pastoral error in its pattern of control and its damage to the dignity and freedom of the person. Survivors often report confusion, guilt, anxiety, loss of faith and difficulty trusting any authority.

The prophets of Scripture were quick to condemn the shepherds who fed themselves rather than the sheep. Ezekiel 34 is a searing indictment: woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe

yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them (Ezekiel 34:2-4). Against these leaders, God promises to come himself as the true shepherd. The chapter is a standing warning to every leader and a comfort to every wounded sheep.

20.4 The Ethics of Prophetic Ministry

Prophetic ministry carries particular ethical obligations.

- Truthfulness. Put away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with his neighbour (Ephesians 4:25). A prophet must never fabricate information, exaggerate experiences or claim to have heard what he has not. Where the speaker is uncertain, humility requires saying so.
- Respect for persons. Prophetic ministry must honour the dignity and freedom of every individual. No one is to be pressured, humiliated or coerced. Laying on of hands, prayer for deliverance and counselling should be done with consent and in appropriate settings.
- Confidentiality. Information shared in confidence should be protected, except where there is a duty to report abuse or serious risk. Prophetic words should not be used to expose private matters in public settings in ways that shame or harm.
- Protection of the vulnerable. The warning of Jesus about those who cause little ones to stumble applies with special force (Matthew 18:6). Churches must adopt clear safeguarding policies for children and vulnerable adults, including screening, supervision, reporting procedures and compliance with the law.
- Sexual integrity. Ministry settings must be free from sexual exploitation. Paul told Timothy to treat younger women as sisters, in all purity (1 Timothy 5:2). Leaders should observe clear boundaries in counselling, prayer ministry and private meetings.
- Financial integrity. Leaders must handle money transparently and avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Paul took care that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honourable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).
- Respect for the civil order. Prophets rightly challenge injustice, but they should not break the law or incite violence. When conscience requires disobedience to a human command, it should be done openly and peaceably, accepting the consequences, as the apostles did.

20.5 Structures of Accountability

Ethical commitments need structures. The following are recommended for churches that wish to practise prophetic ministry responsibly.

1. A written code of conduct for leaders, prophets and ministry teams, covering behaviour, finances, relationships and communication.
2. A leadership board or council with real authority, including members who are not employed by or financially dependent on the senior leader.
3. Independent financial oversight, including annual accounts reviewed by a qualified person and, where possible, made available to members.

4. A clear complaints and whistleblowing process through which any member can raise concerns without fear of retaliation, with a route to an external body if internal channels fail.
5. Peer relationships for leaders, such as a fellowship of pastors or an apostolic network that provides mutual accountability and counsel.
6. Regular review of ministry practices, including the way prophetic words are given and evaluated.
7. Training for leaders and members in discernment, safeguarding and healthy boundaries.

20.6 Discipline and Restoration

When a leader sins, the church must act with both justice and mercy. Matthew 18:15-17 provides a process for dealing with sin among believers: private conversation, then with witnesses, then the church. For elders, 1 Timothy 5:19-21 requires that accusations be received only on the evidence of two or three witnesses, and that those who persist in sin be rebuked in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. Such discipline is to be applied impartially, without favouritism.

Restoration is the aim where there is genuine repentance. Galatians 6:1 instructs the spiritual to restore a transgressor in a spirit of gentleness. Restoration to fellowship is not the same as restoration to a position of leadership, which may require a prolonged period of healing and proven change, and in some cases may never be appropriate. Where crimes have been committed, the church must cooperate with the authorities, and must never use spiritual language to evade accountability under the law.

20.7 Authority and the Hearer

Healthy authority is matched by healthy discipleship. Believers are neither passive recipients nor rebels, but mature participants in the body. They honour leaders, pray for them and follow them as they follow Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), yet they retain responsibility before God for their own faith and decisions. They have the right to ask questions, to seek second opinions, to leave a church that has become abusive and to report wrongdoing. A culture that treats questioning as rebellion or disloyalty is not the culture of the New Testament.

20.8 Prophetic Humility

The foundation of all ethical and accountable prophetic ministry is humility. The prophet knows that he or she sees in a mirror dimly and prophesies in part (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). The prophet's authority rests on the word of God, not on personal charisma. Moses was described as very meek, more so than anyone on earth (Numbers 12:3). Jesus, the great Prophet, described himself as gentle and lowly in heart (Matthew 11:29). The more a person is used by God, the more he or she should become aware of dependence on grace.

20.9 Authority and Culture in African Contexts

Cultural expectations shape how authority is understood and exercised in churches. In many African societies, respect for elders, chiefs and other leaders is a deep value. Leaders are honoured with titles, special seating and gifts, and communal decision-making often rests on the word of those of high status. Such values contain much that is good: they promote social

cohesion, protect the wisdom of age and give structure to communities. The proverb that it takes a village to raise a child reflects communal solidarity. Africa is highly diverse, and generalisations must be made with care, but it is fair to say that in many settings, the culture of honour toward leaders can powerfully influence church life.

The culture of honour can, however, interact with the church in ways that create risk. The expectation that leaders should not be questioned may suppress legitimate concerns. The tradition of presenting gifts to leaders may blur the line between honour and exploitation. The model of the chief or big man as an unchallengeable patron may shape expectations of the pastor or prophet, who becomes a figure of near-absolute authority. Patron-client relationships may lead to favouritism in appointments. The close association of spiritual power with the person of the leader may heighten the sense of dependence.

The gospel affirms the dignity of honouring leaders. Paul says that elders who rule well are worthy of double honour (1 Timothy 5:17), and the writer to the Hebrews urges obedience to leaders. But it also relativises all human authority and reverses the pattern of status. Jesus said that among the Gentiles the rulers lord it over their subjects, but it shall not be so among you (Mark 10:42-43). A healthy synthesis honours leaders without idolising them, gives thanks for their service, supports them financially and prays for them, while building structures of accountability and insisting on servant-heartedness. The church may draw on indigenous values such as consensus-building, council of elders and restorative justice, and may challenge those that conflict with the gospel.

20.10 Safeguarding in Practice

Safeguarding refers to the policies and practices by which a church protects children and vulnerable adults from harm. The importance of the subject has been underscored by painful cases of abuse in churches around the world. The words of Jesus make the priority plain: whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6). A church's safeguarding policy should include the following elements.

1. A written policy, approved by the leadership, which states the church's commitment, defines abuse and sets out procedures.
2. A designated safeguarding officer, with a deputy, who is trained and who is independent of the senior pastor in matters concerning him or her.
3. Screening and training of all who work with children and vulnerable adults, including references and, where available, criminal record checks.
4. Rules for ministry, such as the presence of at least two adults, open spaces and appropriate use of touch, with particular guidance for prayer ministry, counselling and overnight activities.
5. Clear procedures for reporting concerns, including who to tell, how to record information and how to protect the person who raises the concern.
6. Cooperation with statutory authorities. Where a crime is suspected, the matter must be reported to the police or child protection agency; the church must not attempt to handle crimes internally.
7. Support for survivors, including pastoral care, access to counselling and protection from retaliation.

8. Review and training. The policy should be reviewed regularly and updated, and leaders should receive refresher training.

Legal obligations vary from country to country. In Nigeria, child protection legislation exists, including the Child's Rights Act of 2003, which has been adopted by many states but not uniformly. Churches should seek local advice about their obligations. Regardless of legal minimums, the church's duty to protect the vulnerable flows from the gospel.

20.11 Financial Accountability in Practice

Chapter 18 stated principles of transparency in finances. The following practical measures illustrate how these can be implemented in a local church.

- A budget approved by the leadership each year, with reporting against it at regular intervals.
- Offerings counted by at least two unrelated persons, recorded and deposited promptly. Pastors and their family members should not be sole handlers of offerings.
- Separation of duties: the person who receives funds does not record them, and the person who authorises payments does not make them.
- Dual authorisation for payments above a modest limit, with bank accounts in the name of the church or its trustees, not individuals.
- Written policies on expenses, loans, gifts and conflicts of interest. The church should not make loans to leaders or lend to members in ways that create dependency.
- Annual independent examination of accounts by a qualified person not connected to the leaders, with a summary shared with members.
- Reasonable and transparent remuneration for pastors and staff, approved by a committee that does not include the persons concerned.
- Separate accounts for restricted funds, such as building projects and benevolence, with reports on their use.
- Clear and honest fundraising appeals, which describe the purpose of the funds and do not promise supernatural returns.
- Documentation of property ownership, with titles held in the name of the church or trustees according to the law.

These practices are not marks of distrust but of stewardship. They protect leaders from temptation and false accusation, and they build the confidence of the congregation.

20.12 A Process for Handling Allegations

A church should have a defined process for responding to allegations of misconduct by leaders. A suggested outline follows.

1. Receive the concern. The complainant is listened to respectfully, without judgement, and is told what will happen next. Notes are taken.
2. Assess for immediate risk. If anyone is in danger, take steps to protect them at once. If a crime may have been committed, notify the authorities.
3. Inform the appropriate oversight. The matter is brought to the designated body, which should include persons independent of the accused. The accused leader should not be involved in deciding how the complaint is handled.

4. Investigate fairly. Appoint a competent and impartial investigator. Gather evidence from the complainant, the accused and witnesses. Observe the principle of two or three witnesses where applicable, while recognising that abuse often happens in private and that the absence of witnesses does not prove innocence.
5. Provide support. Offer pastoral care to the complainant and to the accused and to their families, without prejudging the outcome. Consider whether the accused should step aside temporarily.
6. Decide and act. If the allegations are substantiated, apply appropriate discipline. If they are not substantiated, communicate that fairly and consider whether other action is needed.
7. Communicate. Inform the congregation as appropriate, balancing transparency with privacy and the avoidance of gossip.
8. Review and learn. Examine what the situation reveals about the church's culture and systems, and make changes.

Such processes are demanding but necessary. A church that avoids them to protect its reputation will eventually damage it far more.

20.13 Forgiveness, Justice and Reconciliation

The gospel proclaims forgiveness, and Jesus commanded his disciples to forgive. Yet the subject of forgiveness is often misused in cases of abuse. Pressure on a victim to forgive quickly, or to reconcile with the abuser, can compound harm. Several distinctions are important.

- Forgiveness is not the same as trust. A person may forgive without again placing themselves or others at risk. Trust is rebuilt only through demonstrated change over time.
- Forgiveness does not cancel consequences. David was forgiven but Nathan told him that the sword would not depart from his house (2 Samuel 12:10-14). A person who is forgiven by God may still face legal, relational and vocational consequences.
- Forgiveness does not require silence. A victim may forgive and still report a crime.
- Forgiveness is a process. Survivors of deep wounds may need time and support. The church should not rush them or judge their pace.
- Reconciliation requires repentance. Jesus said that if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3). Reconciliation depends on truth-telling and changed behaviour.

Desmond Tutu, in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, reflecting on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, argued that genuine reconciliation requires honest acknowledgement of the past, accountability and the willingness to forgive, and that forgiveness is not weakness but a form of strength. His reflections on South Africa have wider application. The church should be a place where wrongdoing is named, justice is sought, victims are protected, repentance is welcomed and forgiveness is offered, in the freedom and hope of the gospel.

20.14 Cultivating a Culture of Humility and Truth-Telling

Structures matter, but culture matters more. A church can have excellent policies and still be unhealthy if its culture suppresses honesty. Practices that promote a healthy culture include the following.

1. Leaders confess their own sins and failures openly where appropriate, modelling repentance.
2. Feedback is welcomed. Leaders invite honest evaluation from peers, staff and members, and respond graciously. Proverbs says that faithful are the wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6) and that the wise person loves a rebuke (Proverbs 9:8).
3. Leaders have mentors, spiritual directors or accountability partners who know them well and are free to speak the truth.
4. Sabbaticals and rest are normal parts of ministry, not signs of weakness.
5. Those who raise concerns are thanked and protected, not punished.
6. Failures are discussed openly in a spirit of learning.
7. Celebrate faithfulness and humility, not only success. Applause for large numbers and dramatic events can distort values.
8. Pray together for one another, especially for those in leadership.

The apostle Paul described his own ministry in terms of weakness. We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us (2 Corinthians 4:7). That image sets the tone for prophetic ministry: gifted, called and empowered, but always fragile, always dependent, always accountable, and always pointing beyond itself to the One who sends.

20.15 Chapter Summary

- All authority belongs to Christ. Ecclesial authority is delegated, servant-like, aimed at building up and limited by Scripture.
- Spiritual abuse is the misuse of spiritual authority to coerce, control or exploit, and is condemned throughout the prophets, notably in Ezekiel 34.
- Prophetic ministry entails ethical duties of truthfulness, respect, confidentiality, protection of the vulnerable, sexual and financial integrity.
- Practical structures of accountability, including independent oversight, codes of conduct and complaints procedures, safeguard both leaders and members.
- Discipline is applied with justice, and restoration is pursued with gentleness, while remembering that restoration to fellowship differs from restoration to office.
- Humility is the root of trustworthy prophetic ministry.
- Cultural attitudes to authority, safeguarding, financial controls, processes for allegations, the ethics of forgiveness and a culture of truth-telling make accountability practical.

20.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the signs that authority in a church has moved from service to control?
2. Which accountability structures does your church already have, and which are lacking?

3. How should a church handle allegations against a respected leader?
4. What distinguishes restoration to fellowship from restoration to leadership?
5. How can congregations be taught to honour leaders while retaining their own responsibility to test and discern?

20.17 Suggested Further Reading

- Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse.
- David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse.
- Diane Langberg, Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church.
- Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership.
- Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction.

Part VI: The Prophetic Church in Practice

Chapter 21: Prophetic Worship and Preaching

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16, author's rendering)

21.1 Introduction

The theology of the prophetic church becomes visible in what the church does when it gathers. Worship and preaching are the central acts of the congregation in which the word of God is heard, the Spirit is welcomed and the people respond in praise, repentance and commitment. This chapter considers how worship and preaching can be prophetic: shaped by Scripture, open to the Spirit, attentive to justice and oriented toward God's coming kingdom.

21.2 The Nature of Prophetic Worship

Worship in Scripture is a response to the God who has spoken and acted. Isaiah's vision in the temple moves from the vision of God's holiness, through confession and cleansing, to commissioning (Isaiah 6). Worship is therefore not merely an expression of feeling; it is an encounter in which people are confronted, forgiven and sent. The pattern of revelation and response runs through the whole of the Bible. In the book of Revelation, the worship of heaven centres on the throne and the Lamb, and it shapes the church's understanding of its own mission (Revelation 4 and 5).

Prophetic worship has several marks.

- It is God-centred. The aim is to honour God, not to entertain or to manufacture an atmosphere.
- It is word-centred. Scripture is read, preached, sung and prayed. The congregation hears God before it speaks to him.
- It is Spirit-dependent. Worship is not a performance but a work of the Spirit, who enables the church to cry Abba, Father and to confess Jesus as Lord.
- It is participatory. Paul's description of a gathering in which each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:26) assumes that many members contribute. The goal is edification.
- It is honest. The Psalms contain lament, protest and confession as well as praise. A prophetic worship tradition makes room for grief and for the cries of the oppressed.
- It is ethical. As the prophets insisted, worship that is detached from justice and mercy is not acceptable to God. Offerings, benedictions and intercessions should reflect concern for the poor and the wronged.

21.3 Music and the Prophetic

Music and prophecy are linked in Scripture. The Chronicler describes the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun as those who prophesied with lyres, harps and cymbals (1 Chronicles 25:1-3). When Jehoshaphat faced a vast army, he appointed singers to go before the army praising the Lord, and the Lord gave victory (2 Chronicles 20:21-22). Mary's song (Luke 1:46-

55) and Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67-79) are prophetic hymns that celebrate God's deliverance and announce the coming of the Messiah.

Music in worship can open the heart, teach doctrine, unite the congregation and carry a message across cultural barriers. In African Christianity, rhythm, dance, drumming and call-and-response are integral to praise, and they should not be viewed with suspicion. David danced before the Lord with all his might (2 Samuel 6:14), and the Psalms invite worship with tambourine, dance and loud clashing cymbals (Psalms 149 and 150). Worship in local languages and idioms honours the principle of Pentecost, in which the gospel is heard in the mother tongue.

Yet cautions are in order. Music can be manipulative when it is used to induce emotional states that are mistaken for the presence of the Spirit, or when the quality of performance eclipses the focus on God. The content of songs matters. Songs should be theologically sound and should express the full range of biblical themes, including repentance, justice, suffering and hope. Worship leaders should be chosen for their character and spiritual maturity as well as their talent.

21.4 Prophecy and Other Spiritual Gifts in the Worship Service

Where the church believes in the continuing gifts of the Spirit, the gathered assembly is a primary place for their exercise. The guidance of 1 Corinthians 14 shows how this can be done decently and in order. A practical pattern might include the following.

1. A leader who oversees the flow of the service and creates a safe, orderly space for contributions.
2. Opportunities for members to share prophecies, Scriptures, testimonies or songs, with the understanding that contributions will be weighed.
3. A brief explanation, especially for visitors, of what the church believes about the gifts and how contributions are tested.
4. Timely correction, offered kindly, if contributions are unhelpful or disorderly.
5. The affirmation that all gifts serve the building up of the body and that the Scriptures remain the final authority.

21.5 The Sacraments as Prophetic Acts

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are enacted proclamations. Paul says that as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Supper looks back to the cross, forward to the coming banquet and outward to the unity of the body. Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians, who humiliated the poor at the Lord's table (1 Corinthians 11:17-22), shows that the sacrament has social implications. A church that feasts while others go hungry denies the meaning of what it celebrates. Baptism likewise declares death to the old life and union with Christ in his resurrection, and it incorporates believers of every background into one body (Galatians 3:27-28).

21.6 The Prophetic Character of Preaching

Preaching is the proclamation of the word of God to a particular people in a particular place. It stands in continuity with the preaching of the prophets, of Jesus and of the apostles. Paul's charge to Timothy captures the spirit: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season;

reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2). Several features distinguish prophetic preaching.

21.6.1 It is rooted in the text

The preacher's authority arises from the Scripture, not from personal opinion or charisma. Careful exegesis, attention to context and fidelity to the intent of the passage guard against using the pulpit for private agendas. Expository preaching, which explains and applies a passage, is one of the best safeguards against manipulation.

21.6.2 It speaks to the present situation

The prophets never spoke in generalities. They addressed particular rulers, particular injustices, particular fears. Prophetic preaching engages the real conditions of the hearers: their economic hardships, family struggles, fears about security, temptations to corruption and hopes for the future. It requires the preacher to know the congregation and the world. John Stott spoke of the preacher as building a bridge between the biblical world and the modern world.

21.6.3 It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable

A well-known saying holds that the task of preaching is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. The prophets did both. Isaiah 40 opens with comfort for the exiles, while Amos denounces the complacent in Zion (Amos 6:1). A prophetic preacher is attentive to who is in the room. Some need assurance, others need challenge, and often the same message does both.

21.6.4 It calls for repentance and holds out hope

The proclamation of judgement without hope leads to despair, and the proclamation of hope without repentance leads to complacency. Prophetic preaching keeps the two together, following the pattern of John the Baptist and Jesus: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2; 4:17).

21.6.5 It centres on Christ

All the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). Preaching that offers moral advice without the gospel, or that treats the Bible as a manual for success, fails to proclaim Christ. The apostle Paul resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

21.6.6 It is costly

Prophetic preaching sometimes brings opposition. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador spoke on behalf of the poor and against violence in the late 1970s and was shot while celebrating Mass in 1980. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa preached against apartheid from the pulpit of St George's Cathedral and in the streets. These examples illustrate that faithfulness to the word may carry a price. Most preachers will never face such danger, but all are tempted to soften the message to retain approval.

21.7 Contrasts: What Prophetic Preaching Is Not

- It is not merely political. Preaching should address public life, but it must not reduce the gospel to a partisan programme or give uncritical endorsement to any party or leader.

- It is not prosperity promotion. A message that promises wealth and health to those who give or have enough faith misrepresents the gospel and exploits the poor.
- It is not entertainment. The goal is transformation, not applause.
- It is not scolding. The prophets wept as well as warned, and the preacher who lacks love is merely a noisy gong (1 Corinthians 13:1).
- It is not self-promotion. The preacher is a herald, not the subject of the message.

21.8 Preparing to Preach Prophetically

The following simple pattern of preparation can help a preacher develop prophetic sermons.

1. Listen to the text. Pray over the passage, study it carefully and ask what it says about God, humanity, sin and salvation.
2. Listen to the world. Notice the questions, pains and temptations of the congregation and the surrounding society.
3. Listen to the Spirit. Ask for wisdom regarding what needs to be said in this moment.
4. Shape the message. Aim for clarity, a central idea, a Christ-centred focus and a call to response.
5. Submit the message. Where possible, share it with a trusted colleague or mentor and welcome feedback.
6. Live the message. The credibility of the preacher depends on consistency between word and life.

21.9 A Theology of Gathered Worship

Before turning to practical matters, it is worth asking why Christians gather at all. The letter to the Hebrews urges believers not to neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). The earliest Christians gathered on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, for the breaking of bread and teaching (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), and John received his vision on the Lord's day (Revelation 1:10). Luke summarises the life of the first community in four elements: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). These four, teaching, fellowship, the table and prayer, have served as a basic pattern of Christian assembly ever since.

Gathering is not an escape from the world but a rehearsal for faithful living in it. Paul urges believers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1). The Sunday gathering and the Monday workplace belong together. Worship that has no effect on the rest of life is the target of the prophets' criticism. Conversely, a life of service that never gathers for worship loses the source of its strength.

Isaiah's vision in the temple (Isaiah 6) has often been taken as a pattern of the movement of worship: adoration in the presence of the holy God, confession of sin, assurance of forgiveness, hearing the word and the call, and response in commitment and mission. Many churches, whether liturgical or free in style, find this movement helpful. A service structured by this pattern allows the congregation to experience the dynamic of encounter and response.

21.10 The Order of Service: Principles and a Model

Churches vary widely in the order of their services. Some follow a fixed liturgy, such as the Anglican Book of Common Prayer or its African adaptations. Others follow a flexible pattern led by the Spirit and the leader. Others combine both. The question for a prophetic church is not which pattern is correct but whether the service serves the purposes of worship. Several principles apply.

1. The service should be Christ-centred, Scripture-saturated and Spirit-dependent.
2. It should have a coherent flow, so that each element leads naturally to the next.
3. It should include elements of praise, confession, the word, prayer, response and sending.
4. It should be accessible to newcomers, who should be able to understand what is happening.
5. It should allow for the participation of the congregation.
6. It should leave room for the Spirit to lead, while remaining orderly.

A model order for a Sunday service that includes prophetic elements might be as follows. This is a suggestion, not a requirement.

- Gathering: welcome, call to worship from Scripture, opening prayer.
- Praise: songs of adoration and thanksgiving, with opportunities for spontaneous praise.
- Confession and assurance: a prayer of confession, silence, a declaration of forgiveness from Scripture.
- The word: reading of Scripture, in the main language and, where needed, in others.
- Testimony and prophecy: brief testimonies of God's work; opportunities for prophetic contributions, weighed by the leaders.
- The sermon: exposition of Scripture, with application.
- Response: a time for people to respond, through prayer, commitment, singing or ministry.
- Intercession: prayers for the church, the community, the nation and the world, including the persecuted and the poor.
- The table or offering: the Lord's Supper (on appropriate occasions) and the presentation of offerings, with transparent explanation of their use.
- Sending: a closing song, a charge and blessing.

A service of this kind will take time, and churches should consider the burden of very long services on families, the elderly and those who must travel. Quality and clarity matter more than length.

21.11 Lament, Confession and Justice in Worship

Walter Brueggemann, in *The Message of the Psalms*, grouped the psalms into psalms of orientation, which celebrate a stable, ordered world; psalms of disorientation, which cry out of suffering and confusion; and psalms of new orientation, which testify to surprising renewal. He observed that the contemporary church sings mainly the first and third types and neglects the second, thus failing to give voice to pain. Roughly a third of the Psalms are laments, such as

Psalms 13, 44 and 88. A church that cannot lament will have little to say to those who suffer, and may leave the impression that faith is incompatible with sorrow.

Worship should therefore provide opportunities for lament and confession. The following is an example of a short prayer of confession that a congregation might use together.

Merciful Father, we confess that we have not loved you with all our heart, nor our neighbour as ourselves. We have heard your word and not obeyed it. We have been silent when we should have spoken, and loud when we should have listened. We have grown comfortable while others go hungry. Forgive us, heal us and renew us by your Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of intercession should also name specific concerns: those affected by violence and displacement, prisoners, the unemployed, the sick, the leaders of the nation and the persecuted church. Such prayers train the congregation to carry the world in its heart.

21.12 The Craft of Prophetic Preaching

Prophetic preaching calls for spiritual preparation and for craftsmanship. The following steps summarise an approach to sermon preparation.

1. Select the text. Choose a passage that fits the needs of the congregation and the church's calendar, or follow a series through a book of the Bible, which protects against preaching only favourite themes.
2. Study the text. Read it in several translations, examine the context, identify the genre, observe the structure and key words, and consult trustworthy commentaries.
3. Identify the central idea. State in one sentence what the passage says and why. Haddon Robinson described this as the big idea.
4. Relate the text to Christ and the gospel. Ask how the passage points to Jesus and what response it calls for.
5. Know the hearers. Think about the people who will hear: their questions, fears, needs and context.
6. Shape the message. Arrange the material so that it is clear, memorable and moves toward application. Use illustrations that illuminate and do not distract.
7. Apply. Show how the text speaks to specific aspects of life: personal, family, church and society.
8. Pray and rehearse. Commit the preparation to prayer. Practise the sermon so that delivery serves the content.
9. Deliver with sincerity and integrity. Speak naturally, with passion but without manipulation.
10. Evaluate. After preaching, seek feedback from trusted listeners and reflect on how to improve.

In oral cultures, storytelling, proverbs, repetition and call-and-response are potent tools. Preachers in Africa can draw on a rich heritage of rhetorical forms while remaining anchored in Scripture. Where a congregation includes speakers of several languages, interpretation requires preparation, and the preacher should speak clearly and allow time for the interpreter. Preachers should also be wary of the temptation to preach long sermons that exhaust the congregation, to rely on stories that outshine the text or to use the pulpit to settle scores.

21.13 Testimony, Drama, Dance and the Arts

The arts have a legitimate place in the prophetic church. The Bible mentions craftsmen filled with the Spirit to make the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5), poets, musicians and dancers. Prophets used drama, as in Ezekiel's acted siege and Isaiah's walking naked. Contemporary churches may use drama, dance, visual art, poetry and film to communicate truth. African cultural forms such as drumming, dance, storytelling and masquerade-like performance can be redeemed for Christian purposes where they are free from association with idolatry, a judgement that requires wisdom and local knowledge.

Testimony deserves particular care. A good testimony is brief, truthful and focused on what God has done, not on the speaker. It avoids exaggeration, lurid detail and attacks on others. Leaders should ask those who wish to testify to share their plans in advance, particularly if the testimony involves sensitive matters or claims of healing. The aim is to encourage faith, not to create pressure or to showcase the individual.

In all uses of the arts, the guiding question is whether the form serves the worship of God and the edification of the church. Excellence is valuable but performance for its own sake is not. Participation by non-professionals should be welcomed, since worship is the work of the whole people.

21.14 Children, Youth and Intergenerational Worship

The Old Testament envisions children as part of the worshipping community. Moses told Israel to gather the people, men, women, little ones and the sojourner, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord (Deuteronomy 31:12-13). Joel called for even nursing infants to be gathered for a solemn assembly (Joel 2:16). Jesus welcomed the children who came to him and held them up as models of the kingdom (Mark 10:13-16). Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians address children directly (Ephesians 6:1-3), implying their presence when the letters were read in church.

A prophetic church ensures that children and young people are included. This may involve special children's ministries that teach Scripture in age-appropriate ways, but it should also include moments in the main service in which all generations worship together. Children should be taught to pray and to understand the practices of worship. Young people should be given opportunities to lead, to testify and to serve. Older members have wisdom to share, and younger members bring energy and fresh perspectives. The Spirit's promise in Joel includes young and old, and a congregation of mixed ages reflects that promise.

21.15 Chapter Summary

- Prophetic worship is God-centred, word-centred, Spirit-dependent, participatory, honest and ethical.
- Music can carry prophetic content, and African cultural forms are valuable vehicles for praise, but manipulation must be avoided.
- The gifts of the Spirit may be exercised in worship in an orderly and edifying manner.
- The sacraments proclaim the gospel and have social implications.
- Prophetic preaching is rooted in the text, addresses the present, comforts and challenges, calls for repentance, centres on Christ and bears a cost.

- A theology of gathering, a model order of service, lament and confession, the craft of preaching, the arts and intergenerational worship make the vision practical.

21.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How could your church's worship service become more attentive to Scripture, to the Spirit and to justice?
2. What are the signs that worship has become manipulative or performance-driven?
3. How can the Lord's Supper be celebrated in a way that expresses concern for the poor and for unity?
4. Which of the features of prophetic preaching is most challenging for you or your pastor?
5. How can preachers address difficult public issues without becoming partisan?

21.17 Suggested Further Reading

- John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today*.
- Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*.
- Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*.
- Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*.
- Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*.
- Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century*.

Chapter 22: Intercession and Prophetic Prayer

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain. (James 5:16-17, author's rendering)

22.1 Introduction

The prophets were people of prayer. They spoke to the people on behalf of God, but they also spoke to God on behalf of the people. Intercession is therefore inseparable from the prophetic task. The church that speaks to the world without praying for the world is a clanging cymbal, and the church that prays without speaking forgets that God often answers prayer through the obedience of those who pray. This chapter explores the biblical foundations of intercession, the character of prophetic prayer and the practical shape of a praying church.

22.2 Intercession in the Prophetic Tradition

The intercessory role of the prophets runs through the Old Testament. Abraham pleads with the Lord on behalf of Sodom, asking whether he will sweep away the righteous with the wicked (Genesis 18:22-33). The Lord himself calls Abraham a prophet in connection with intercession for Abimelech (Genesis 20:7). Moses stands before the Lord after the golden calf, pleading for the people and even offering himself in their place (Exodus 32:11-14, 30-32). Samuel declares that for him to cease praying for Israel would be a sin (1 Samuel 12:23). Amos prays, O Lord God, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small (Amos 7:2, 5), and the Lord relents. Jeremiah prays for his people repeatedly, though at one point he is told not to (Jeremiah 7:16; 14:11), a command that shows how rare it was for God to withhold permission. Ezekiel 22:30 voices God's search for someone to stand in the breach before him on behalf of the land, and finding none.

The image of the watchman recurs. Ezekiel is appointed as a watchman for the house of Israel (Ezekiel 33). Isaiah 62:6-7 speaks of watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem who are to give the Lord no rest until he establishes the city. The prophet is one who stands, watches, prays and speaks.

22.3 The Intercession of Christ and the Spirit

The church's intercession is rooted in the intercession of Christ. Jesus prayed for Simon that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). In John 17 he prays for his disciples and for all who would believe through their word, asking for their protection, sanctification and unity. The letter to the Hebrews declares that he always lives to make intercession for those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7:25). Paul adds that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26-27). Prayer is therefore participation in the Trinitarian life: we pray to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

22.4 The Church as a Priestly Community of Prayer

The church is called a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and one of the main priestly functions is intercession. Paul urges that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (1 Timothy 2:1-4). This text is of great significance for believers in nations where governance is troubled. The church is to pray for its leaders, even when it disagrees with them, and for the welfare of the whole society. The Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught as a pattern for his followers, moves from the hallowing of God's name to the coming of his kingdom and the doing of his will on earth as in heaven, and then to bread, forgiveness and deliverance (Matthew 6:9-13). It is a prayer for the world as well as the individual.

22.5 The Character of Prophetic Prayer

22.5.1 *It begins with listening*

Prophetic prayer is more than a stream of requests. It begins with listening to God. Samuel's prayer, speak, Lord, for your servant hears, sets the pattern. Prayer includes silence, meditation on Scripture and attentiveness to the Spirit.

22.5.2 *It prays the word of God*

Many of the prayers of Scripture are shaped by earlier words of God. Daniel, understanding from the book of Jeremiah that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years, turned to the Lord God to seek him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting (Daniel 9:2-3). Praying the promises, commands and patterns of Scripture anchors prayer in what God has said.

22.5.3 *It identifies with the people*

Intercessors in Scripture do not stand aloof from the sins of the people. Daniel's prayer says, we have sinned and done wrong (Daniel 9:5). Nehemiah confesses, I and my father's house have sinned (Nehemiah 1:6). Ezra mourns over the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles. Prophetic prayer involves solidarity and repentance, not self-righteous condemnation.

22.5.4 *It is persistent and expectant*

Jesus told a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1-8), about a widow who kept pleading before an unjust judge. The point is that if even an unrighteous judge responds to persistence, how much more will God. Persistent prayer is not an attempt to wear down a reluctant God but an expression of trust and a way in which believers participate in God's purposes.

22.5.5 *It is accompanied by fasting and action*

Fasting appears in connection with prayer at critical points: Nehemiah, Esther, the Antioch church before sending missionaries (Acts 13:2-3). Yet Isaiah 58 warns that fasting without justice is empty; the fast God chooses includes loosing the bonds of injustice, sharing bread with the hungry and housing the homeless poor. Nehemiah prayed and then acted, approaching the king with a request and organising the rebuilding of the wall. Prayer and action belong together.

22.6 Prayer and Spiritual Warfare

Paul reminds the Ephesians that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness (Ephesians 6:12). He then describes the armour of God and concludes with an exhortation to pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication (6:18). Prayer is a weapon of the church in a spiritual conflict. Revelation shows the prayers of the saints rising before the throne and prompting dramatic action (Revelation 8:3-5).

A balanced approach is needed. Scripture affirms the reality of evil spiritual forces, and the church should resist them in the name of Christ. Yet the New Testament stresses that Christ has already disarmed the powers and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross (Colossians 2:15). The believer's stance is therefore one of standing in a victory already won. Some popular teachings on territorial spirits, generational curses or the naming of demonic strongholds go well beyond the biblical evidence and can foster fear, superstition and blame. Another danger is the habit of attributing all misfortune to demonic attack, which may lead people to neglect practical remedies and responsibility. The church should teach believers to pray with confidence in Christ's authority while remaining anchored in Scripture.

22.7 Declaration, Decree and Intercession

A feature of some prophetic prayer cultures is the practice of declaring or decreeing, speaking aloud words of faith concerning situations, nations or personal circumstances. Properly understood, this can be an expression of confidence in God's promises and a way of agreeing with his revealed will. Scripture records that Elijah announced the drought and the rain in the name of the Lord (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-45) and that Jesus spoke to the storm and to the fig tree. The danger arises when declaration becomes an attempt to command God, to bind God's hands or to manipulate outcomes by the correct formula. Prayer is not magic. In the Lord's Prayer, believers address God as Father and ask him to act. Jesus himself prayed in Gethsemane, not my will, but yours, be done (Luke 22:42). Faith submits to the sovereign wisdom of God even as it prays boldly.

22.8 Praying for the Nation

The prophetic church has a particular duty to pray for the nation in which it lives. In the setting of Nigeria, where political, economic and security challenges are acute, many Christians keep prayer gatherings, vigils and fasts for the country. Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles to pray for the welfare of Babylon (Jeremiah 29:7) supports this. Prayer for a nation includes repentance for corporate sins such as corruption, injustice and violence; intercession for leaders, for peace and for the vulnerable; and thanksgiving for God's mercies. It should be accompanied by practical engagement, whether through voting, advocacy, service to the poor, peacemaking and truthful speech. Prayer that is not followed by obedience risks hypocrisy.

22.9 Building a Culture of Prayer

1. Teach prayer from Scripture, using the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer and the prayers of Paul as models.
2. Establish regular times of corporate prayer, whether weekly meetings, early morning gatherings or seasons of fasting, and include a diversity of voices.

3. Cultivate intercession teams who pray for the church, the community and the nation, under the oversight of leadership.
4. Provide training in listening prayer and discernment, so that those who pray learn to distinguish the Spirit's leading.
5. Keep records of answered prayer to encourage thanksgiving.
6. Guard the health of intercessors. Overnight vigils and extended fasts should be approached wisely, with attention to rest, nutrition and medical needs, especially for the elderly, pregnant women, the sick and the young.
7. Pair prayer with action wherever possible.

22.10 The Lord's Prayer as a Pattern of Prophetic Prayer

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he gave them a pattern that has shaped Christian prayer ever since (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Each petition carries prophetic significance.

- Our Father in heaven. Prayer begins with relationship. The one addressed is Father, close and caring, and also in heaven, sovereign and holy. The word our reminds us that we pray as members of a family.
- Hallowed be your name. The first petition is that God's name be honoured, held holy and recognised. It echoes the prophets' concern that the name of the Lord not be profaned among the nations by the conduct of his people (Ezekiel 36:20-23).
- Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This is the heart of the prophetic hope. We pray for the reign of God to be established, for his justice and peace to prevail. It is a prayer for transformation of the world.
- Give us this day our daily bread. We ask for daily provision. The plural pronoun again embraces others: give us. Those who pray this prayer must remember the hungry.
- Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Forgiveness received and forgiveness given belong together. Debts may be understood in moral terms and, in a wider sense, economic ones.
- Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. We ask for protection from testing and from the evil one. It acknowledges our dependence and the reality of spiritual conflict.

Many manuscripts of Matthew add a closing doxology: for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen. The earliest manuscripts do not include it, though it reflects ancient Christian practice of ending prayer with praise (compare 1 Chronicles 29:11). The prayer offers a template that a church can use not only by reciting it but by praying through each petition with specific content.

22.11 The Prayers of the Apostles

The letters of Paul contain prayers that reveal what he considered most important to ask for his churches. They differ strikingly from many contemporary prayers, which tend to focus on circumstances. Consider Ephesians 1:15-23, in which Paul asks that God may give them a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened to know the hope of his calling, the riches of his inheritance and the immeasurable greatness of his power. In Ephesians 3:14-21, he prays that they may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner being, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith,

that they be rooted and grounded in love, and that they may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. In Philippians 1:9-11, he prays that their love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that they may approve what is excellent and be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. In Colossians 1:9-12, he prays that they may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit, increasing in knowledge, being strengthened with all power and giving thanks.

These prayers focus on knowledge, strength, love, holiness, fruitfulness and thanksgiving. They suggest an agenda for prayer for churches: that they may know God more deeply, be strengthened in the inner person, grow in love, discern what is excellent, live in a manner worthy of the gospel and bear fruit. D. A. Carson's *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* draws out the lessons of these prayers for contemporary believers. Prophetic intercession will include prayer for circumstances, but it will be shaped by this larger vision.

22.12 Fasting

Fasting is a recurring practice in Scripture. Moses fasted forty days on Sinai (Exodus 34:28). Israel fasted in times of national repentance (Joel 2:12-17; Jonah 3:5-9). Ezra proclaimed a fast at the river Ahava to seek a safe journey (Ezra 8:21-23). Esther asked the Jews of Susa to fast for three days before she approached the king (Esther 4:16). Daniel fasted and prayed over the writings of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:3). Anna worshipped with fasting and prayer (Luke 2:37). Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness and assumed that his disciples would fast (Matthew 4:2; 6:16-18). The church at Antioch fasted before sending Barnabas and Saul, and Paul and Barnabas appointed elders with prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

The purposes of fasting in these texts include repentance and humbling before God; seeking guidance; intercession for others; preparation for a task; and expression of longing for God. Jesus warned against fasting for show (Matthew 6:16-18), and Isaiah 58 insists that a fast must be accompanied by justice and mercy.

Practical guidance for fasting includes the following.

1. Fast with a clear purpose and prayerful intention.
2. Fast privately, as a rule, and avoid drawing attention.
3. Consider the range of forms: abstaining from certain foods, from a meal or from all food for a day, or abstaining from media or other pleasures to devote time to prayer.
4. Take care of your health. Those who are pregnant or nursing, have diabetes or other medical conditions, take medication, are elderly or are children, or have a history of an eating disorder, should consult a doctor and consider alternative forms of fasting that do not involve abstaining from food.
5. Break the fast gently and with thanksgiving.
6. Do not treat fasting as a way of manipulating God or earning favour. God hears the prayers of the humble who trust in his mercy.
7. Join fasting to action: share food with the hungry, practise justice.

22.13 Practices of Corporate Prayer

The church has developed many ways of praying together. Some have special relevance to a prophetic church.

- Prayer meetings. Regular gatherings for prayer, midweek or early morning, provide a rhythm for the life of the church. They are most fruitful when they are well led, with variety in format and a balance of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and petition. A simple pattern, often called ACTS, uses these four elements.
- Concerts of prayer. In 1747, Jonathan Edwards published a call for extraordinary united prayer for revival, urging churches to agree on specific times to pray together. The idea of churches praying together across boundaries has inspired many movements since.
- Continuous prayer. The Moravian community at Herrnhut maintained, from 1727, a round-the-clock prayer watch that, by tradition, continued for over a century. Contemporary movements have organised continuous prayer rooms for periods of days or weeks.
- Prayer walks. Groups of believers walk through neighbourhoods, praying for the people and the needs they see. This can build compassion and awareness.
- Vigils and all-night prayers. In many African churches, nights of prayer are a tradition. Jesus himself spent a night in prayer before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12), and the church prayed through the night for Peter (Acts 12). These can be times of deep spiritual experience. Leaders should plan responsibly for safety, transport, rest and the well-being of participants, especially women, children and the elderly.
- Listening prayer. Quiet times of waiting on God, in which participants share what they sense, are a valuable complement to more vocal prayer.

Whatever forms are used, the leaders should teach about prayer so that the practices are grounded in Scripture and do not drift into superstition, repetition for its own sake or competition over who prays the loudest or longest.

22.14 Prayer and Social Action

Prayer and action belong together. Nehemiah prayed for four months and then acted when the king asked what he wanted. The early church prayed for Peter's release and also gathered to support him. Prayers for the hungry should lead to feeding the hungry. Prayers for peace should lead to peacemaking. James wrote that if a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking daily food, and one says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15-16). The pattern of pray and act can be practised by congregations: identify a community need; pray about it; listen for guidance; plan a response; act; and give thanks.

Churches may also pray for the persecuted, for those who suffer injustice and for leaders. Questions arise about praying with people of other faiths, especially in times of national crisis. Christians differ on whether to join in a common act of prayer. Some regard prayer alongside neighbours of other faiths as a legitimate expression of shared concern for the common good, provided no Christian conviction is compromised; others hold that prayer, being addressed to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, cannot be genuinely shared, and prefer to pray in parallel or separately, while cooperating in acts of service. Leaders should discuss the matter with sensitivity and clarity.

22.15 When Prayer Seems Unanswered

Not every prayer is answered in the way that is hoped. The Bible is honest about this. The psalmist cries, how long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? (Psalm 13:1). Job pleads with

God and receives no explanation. Paul prayed three times that the thorn in his flesh might be removed, and God replied, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that the cup might pass and then submitted to the Father's will. Some who pray for healing are not healed; some who pray for children do not conceive; some who pray for justice wait a lifetime.

Pastoral wisdom is needed here. Several things should be said and several avoided.

- Do not blame the person for lack of faith. Such explanations are cruel and are not warranted by Scripture.
- Allow lament. Honest expression of pain is part of prayer, as the Psalms show.
- Affirm God's goodness and sovereignty without pretending to explain all things. The Lord says through Isaiah that his thoughts are not our thoughts, nor his ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).
- Point to the presence of God in suffering. The Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26), and Christ himself suffered.
- Encourage perseverance in prayer together with practical steps. Some situations need medical treatment, counselling, legal help or patient waiting.
- Celebrate answers to prayer, and also testify to God's faithfulness in unanswered prayer.

A church that can accompany people in unanswered prayer without trivialising their suffering and without losing hope is a church that has grown into maturity.

22.16 Chapter Summary

- The prophets were intercessors, standing in the gap and watching on behalf of the people.
- Christ and the Spirit intercede for believers, and the church participates in this ministry as a priestly community.
- Prophetic prayer begins with listening, prays the word, identifies with the people, persists in faith and is joined with fasting and action.
- Spiritual warfare is real, but believers pray from the victory of Christ, avoiding fear-driven or speculative teachings.
- Declarations of faith must not become attempts to manipulate God, and prayer for the nation must be matched by obedience.
- The Lord's Prayer and the apostles' prayers shape the content of prayer; fasting, corporate practices and prayer joined to action deepen it; and unanswered prayer calls for honest, compassionate pastoral care.

22.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean for your church to stand in the gap for your community or nation?
2. How can prayer meetings be made places of both listening and bold petition?
3. What are the dangers of unbalanced teaching on spiritual warfare, and how can they be avoided?
4. How might your congregation combine prayer for justice with action for justice?
5. What practical wisdom is needed for long vigils and fasts?

22.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, on prophetic sympathy and prayer.
- Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People* and *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*.
- D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*.
- Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.
- Clinton E. Arnold, *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*.
- Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, on repentance and reconciliation.

Chapter 23: Prophetic Pastoral Care and Discipleship

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. (Ezekiel 34:15-16, author's rendering)

23.1 Introduction

Prophetic ministry is not only a matter of public pronouncement. It is lived out in the daily care of people: the sick, the grieving, the doubting, the poor, the young and the elderly. The prophets who wept over Israel and the Lord who bound up the broken-hearted show that pastoral compassion belongs at the heart of the prophetic vocation. This chapter explores how pastoral care and discipleship can be shaped by the prophetic character of the church, and how the prophetic gifts can serve the formation of mature believers.

23.2 The Shepherd Image

The shepherd is one of the oldest biblical images of leadership and care. The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23). Ezekiel 34 condemns the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves and neglect the flock, and promises that God will himself shepherd his people, seeking the lost, binding the injured and strengthening the weak. Jesus declares, I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). Peter commissions the elders to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2), and the risen Christ restores Peter with the threefold charge to feed his lambs and tend his sheep (John 21:15-17). Prophetic ecclesiology holds that pastoral care is neither a secondary task nor a mere professional service, but participation in the Chief Shepherd's own care.

23.3 The Prophetic Word in Pastoral Care

In pastoral encounters, a timely word can be a powerful gift. Isaiah is told to speak tenderly to Jerusalem (Isaiah 40:2). Paul describes the purpose of prophecy as upbuilding, encouragement and consolation (1 Corinthians 14:3). The pastor and other caregivers listen to the person's story, listen to the Spirit and speak truth with compassion. Sometimes this will mean affirmation and comfort; at other times it will mean gently naming sin, error or avoidance. Wisdom is needed to discern which word is called for. Proverbs reminds us that a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver (Proverbs 25:11).

Pastoral prophetic care is marked by several attitudes.

- Listening before speaking. James urges that everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak (James 1:19). Job's friends did well while they sat in silence, and badly when they began to speak.
- Tentativeness and respect. Prophetic impressions in a pastoral setting should be offered humbly, as something to be weighed, not as a command. The person retains freedom and responsibility.
- Confidentiality. What is shared in pastoral trust should be protected within the bounds of safety and law.

- Hope. Even when hard truths are spoken, the aim is restoration and the hope of the gospel.

23.4 Caring for the Suffering

The church is called to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15). The Bible does not offer easy answers to the problem of suffering. The Psalms give voice to lament, and Job's story warns against glib explanations. The book of Job rebukes the friends who insisted that his suffering must be due to hidden sin. A prophetic pastor resists the temptation to blame the sufferer or to spiritualise pain with clichés. Presence, prayer, practical help and patience are often more valuable than explanations.

The care of the sick is explicitly commended: is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14). Prayer for healing is a legitimate and biblical ministry. At the same time, the church should affirm the value of medical care, which is itself a gift of God, and should never discourage the sick from seeking treatment. Failures of healing should not be attributed to lack of faith in the sufferer. Pastors should accompany those who are not healed with compassion and hope.

23.5 Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Many people suffer from depression, anxiety, trauma, grief and other emotional or psychological conditions. In some settings, such conditions are misinterpreted as demonic oppression, witchcraft or lack of faith, and sufferers may be subjected to harmful treatments, shame and neglect. A prophetic pastoral approach recognises that the human person is a unity of body, mind and spirit, and that suffering may have physical, psychological, relational and spiritual dimensions. Elijah, after his triumph on Carmel, fell into exhaustion and despair; God responded by providing sleep, food and gentle companionship before speaking to him (1 Kings 19). Churches should educate their leaders about mental health, develop relationships with qualified professionals, make appropriate referrals and offer supportive fellowship. Pastoral care and professional care are partners, not rivals.

23.6 Caring for the Vulnerable

The prophets and the apostles single out the widow, the orphan and the stranger. James declares that pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27). The early church organised the daily distribution of food to widows (Acts 6). Contemporary pastoral care includes attention to the poor, the unemployed, the displaced, victims of violence, people with disabilities, and others who are marginalised. It also includes advocacy, so that those who lack a voice are heard. Care that does not reach those on the margins has missed the prophetic point.

23.7 Discipleship as Formation

The commission of the risen Lord is to make disciples of all nations, baptising and teaching them to observe all that he has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Discipleship is lifelong apprenticeship to Jesus. A prophetic church takes seriously the task of forming people who can hear God's word, discern the times and live with integrity. Several elements are essential.

- Scripture. Teach believers to read, understand and obey the Bible, so that they can test every claim. Biblical literacy is the chief safeguard against error.
- Prayer and the Spirit. Teach believers to pray, to listen to God, to be filled with the Spirit and to practise the gifts in an orderly way.
- Character. The fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23), is the evidence of true spiritual growth.
- Community. Discipleship takes place in relationships. Small groups, mentoring, accountability partnerships and church families provide support and challenge.
- Mission. Disciples are sent into their workplaces, neighbourhoods and nations to bear witness in word and deed.

Paul's instruction to Timothy to entrust what he has heard to faithful people who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2) shows a vision of multiplying discipleship across four generations. Churches should invest in mentoring and in the training of leaders at every level.

23.8 Releasing the Prophetic Gifts Safely

A prophetic church will want to equip its members to exercise the gifts of the Spirit. This is best done in a context of teaching, practice and feedback. Safe environments, such as small groups or training classes, allow beginners to practise listening to God and speaking encouraging words under the guidance of mature leaders. Participants should be taught the biblical purposes and boundaries of prophecy, the importance of testing, and the need for humility and love. Early efforts will be imperfect, and mistakes handled gracefully can become occasions for learning. The goal is a church in which every member is confident that God can use them to build up others, and in which the culture of testing protects against abuse.

23.9 Families, Marriages, Youth and the Elderly

The prophet Malachi looks to a day when the hearts of the fathers will be turned to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (Malachi 4:6). The family is a primary site of discipleship. Churches should help parents pass on the faith (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), strengthen marriages, support single parents and widows, nurture young people with relevant teaching and meaningful roles, and honour the elderly as bearers of wisdom and as intercessors. Paul told Timothy, let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example (1 Timothy 4:12). Joel's vision of old men dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions suggests that the Spirit's gifts are meant to bind generations together.

23.10 Caring for Those Who Care

Pastors and other carers often neglect their own wellbeing. Jesus withdrew to pray and rest. Paul spoke of the daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28). Prolonged stress, isolation, financial pressure and the weight of other people's burdens can lead to burnout, illness and moral failure. Churches should ensure that pastors receive fair support, regular rest, opportunities for study and spiritual renewal, and genuine friendship. Pastors should seek their own counsellors and mentors. A prophetic church cares for its prophets and shepherds.

23.11 Care for the Bereaved and the Dying

Death is a universal experience, and the church is called to care for those facing it. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35), showing that grief is not a lack of faith. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he does not want them to be uninformed about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The Christian way of grieving is grief with hope. The church can accompany the dying with prayer, Scripture, presence and practical help, and can support families as they prepare.

In many African societies, funerals are major social events, with extended rites, gatherings of relatives and community involvement. These traditions express solidarity and respect for the departed. The church should honour what is good in them, such as the community's presence with the bereaved, while discerning practices that conflict with the gospel, for example those that involve invocation of ancestral spirits as mediators, or that place heavy financial burdens on families, forcing them into debt. A wise approach is to work with families to design services that honour the person, proclaim the resurrection hope and avoid extravagance.

The treatment of widows deserves special attention. In some communities, widows are subjected to harsh rites, such as confinement, forced marriage to a relative, loss of inheritance or social isolation. The Bible instructs the church to care for widows and to defend their rights (Deuteronomy 24:17-21; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; James 1:27). A prophetic church speaks against practices that humiliate or impoverish widows, offers practical support and advocates for legal protection of their property rights.

23.12 Marriage, Singleness and Family Care

Pastoral care in the area of marriage and family is a major part of church life. Several themes deserve attention.

- **Marriage preparation.** Couples preparing for marriage benefit from counselling that covers faith, communication, finances, sexuality, family expectations, children and conflict resolution. Churches should provide pre-marital courses and encourage couples to seek wise counsel.
- **Marriage enrichment.** Marriages need continuing nourishment. Churches can offer teaching, mentoring and opportunities for couples to share and pray.
- **Singleness.** Both Jesus and Paul were single, and Paul commended singleness for those called to it (1 Corinthians 7). The church should honour single people and include them fully in its life, and should avoid making marriage the measure of maturity.
- **Infertility and childlessness.** In many cultures, childlessness brings stigma, particularly for women. The Bible tells of Hannah and Elizabeth, who experienced barrenness and received a child by God's grace, but it also recognises that not all are given children. The church should offer compassion, avoid blame and speak against practices that humiliate childless couples.
- **Domestic violence.** Violence in the home is a serious sin and, in many places, a crime. The church must never counsel victims to return to danger or to endure abuse in silence. It should protect victims, hold perpetrators accountable and refer to appropriate services. Texts about submission and forgiveness must never be used to justify violence.

- Divorce and remarriage. Christians have understood Jesus' teaching in different ways, from a strict position that permits no remarriage after divorce, to positions that allow it in cases of adultery or abandonment. Pastoral care requires compassion for the divorced and fidelity to Scripture.
- Single parents, widows and blended families. These face particular challenges, and the church should provide support and community.

23.13 Discipling Men, Women, Youth and Children

Effective discipleship is often shaped by the stage of life and gender of the learner. Paul instructed Titus that older women should teach what is good and train the younger women (Titus 2:3-5), and that older men should be sober-minded and sound in faith, with younger men urged to be self-controlled (2:2, 6). Intergenerational mentoring is a biblical pattern.

- Men. In many places, men are under-represented in church life, or are present but passive. Ministries that engage men in Bible study, accountability, service and fatherhood can strengthen families and communities.
- Women. Women are often the majority in congregations and carry much of the church's work. They need opportunities for teaching, leadership and support, and for addressing issues that affect them, such as health, safety, economic empowerment and family life.
- Youth. Young people face questions about identity, education, sexuality, employment and faith. They need honest teaching, role models and a safe space to ask hard questions. In contexts of high unemployment, the church can help with skills training and entrepreneurship, and can offer hope that counters the temptation toward crime, extremism or despair.
- Children. The family is the first school of faith (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and the church supports parents. Children's ministry should be safe, joyful and rooted in the Bible. The book of Proverbs commends training up a child in the way he should go (Proverbs 22:6), a principle of wisdom rather than a guarantee.

23.14 Healing, Wholeness and Medical Care

The Bible's understanding of salvation includes wholeness. Jesus healed the sick as a sign of the kingdom. He sent out the twelve to heal (Luke 9:2), and the New Testament mentions healing among the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:9, 28). James instructs the sick to call for the elders to pray and anoint with oil (James 5:14-15). The church has a long tradition of healing ministry, in the early centuries, in the work of monasteries and mission hospitals, and in the modern healing and charismatic movements.

A balanced approach affirms prayer for healing and also the value of medical care. Luke, the author of the third Gospel and Acts, is called by Paul the beloved physician (Colossians 4:14). Medicine is a gift of God's common grace. The church has established hospitals, clinics and health programmes, especially in Africa, where mission hospitals have saved countless lives. Churches can partner with health professionals to provide education about disease prevention, maternal and child health, HIV, malaria and mental health, and can support patients and their families with prayer and practical help. Healing ministry should be offered with humility, honesty and without pressure. When healing does not occur, the church continues to love and support the person.

23.15 Pastoral Counselling and Referral

Pastors and lay carers often function as counsellors. Their care can be of great value, but it has limits, and wisdom is needed about when to refer to professionals. The following guidelines are offered.

1. Know your competence. Pastoral care includes listening, prayer, encouragement and guidance from Scripture. Complex psychological, medical or legal situations call for qualified professionals.
2. Establish boundaries. Meet in appropriate settings, keep records of the fact and time of meetings, avoid being alone in situations that could compromise safety, and be mindful of power imbalances.
3. Protect confidentiality, explaining its limits. Information that indicates risk of serious harm to the person or others, or abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, must be reported.
4. Recognise warning signs that require referral: thoughts of suicide or self-harm, severe depression, psychosis, substance addiction, domestic violence, abuse and serious trauma.
5. Cultivate a network of trusted professionals, including doctors, counsellors, lawyers and social workers, to whom referrals can be made.
6. Seek supervision and support. Counsellors need their own accountability and care.
7. Avoid simplistic explanations. Not all emotional struggles are due to sin, demons or lack of faith.

Churches should encourage training in basic pastoral care and counselling skills for leaders and lay volunteers. They should foster an environment in which seeking help is regarded as a sign of wisdom, not weakness.

23.16 Pathways of Discipleship: Baptism, Catechesis and Membership

From the early centuries, the church has prepared new believers for baptism through a period of instruction. The catechumenate included teaching on the faith, the Lord's Prayer, moral life and the creed, and was often several years long. Catechisms continued this tradition: Luther's Small Catechism of 1529 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 are examples. Many churches today have courses for new believers and for those seeking membership.

A prophetic church may develop a clear pathway of discipleship with stages such as the following.

1. Welcome. Newcomers are greeted, invited into relationships and given an introduction to the church.
2. Exploration. Those interested in the faith can ask questions in a safe setting.
3. Commitment. Those who profess faith are baptised and join the church.
4. Foundations. New believers study the basics: the gospel, Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit, the church, holiness and mission.
5. Growth. Believers join small groups, engage in regular study and prayer and participate in worship.
6. Service. Believers discover their gifts and serve within and beyond the church.
7. Leadership. Those who are called and gifted are trained and mentored for leadership.

Church membership, where practised, is best understood as a mutual covenant in which members commit to the church's faith, worship, fellowship, service and discipline, and the

church commits to care for them. It is not a mere roll but a recognition of belonging and responsibility. A membership covenant can be explained clearly and affirmed publicly.

23.17 Chapter Summary

- Pastoral care participates in the Chief Shepherd's care for his people.
- The prophetic word in pastoral settings is offered with listening, humility, confidentiality and hope.
- Care for the suffering requires presence, prayer and practical help, without blaming the sufferer, and it welcomes medical and psychological care.
- Discipleship forms people in Scripture, prayer, character, community and mission.
- Prophetic gifts are released safely through teaching, practice and feedback, and the church cares for its families, generations and leaders.
- Care for the bereaved, for marriages and families, for people of every age group, for the sick and for those needing counselling, along with a clear discipleship pathway, completes the picture of pastoral care.

23.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How can pastors balance the offering of prophetic insight with respect for a person's freedom?
2. What can your church do to support people with mental health challenges and their families?
3. How effective is your church's discipleship process in forming people who can discern truth from error?
4. What structures could safely release the prophetic gifts among your members?
5. How does your church care for the health and wellbeing of its leaders?

23.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*.
- Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*.
- Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.
- Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.
- Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

Chapter 24: Prophetic Leadership and Church Governance

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time. (Habakkuk 2:2-3, author's rendering)

24.1 Introduction

Chapter 18 considered the New Testament pattern of leadership offices and the principles of prophetic order. This final chapter of Part VI turns to the dynamics of leadership in practice: how leaders discern vision, make decisions, manage conflict, develop others, handle transitions and steward resources. It also considers the practical governance documents and structures that help a church remain faithful and sustainable. The aim is to show that prophetic leadership is not charismatic improvisation alone but a combination of spiritual sensitivity, wisdom and disciplined stewardship.

24.2 Biblical Models of Prophetic Leadership

Scripture presents several models. Moses led Israel from slavery, mediated the covenant, interceded for the people and learned to delegate when advised by Jethro (Exodus 18). Nehemiah heard of the broken walls of Jerusalem, wept, fasted and prayed, secured the king's permission, surveyed the situation, organised the people by families and rebuilt the wall in fifty-two days despite opposition. He also confronted the exploitation of the poor by their wealthy compatriots and called for restitution (Nehemiah 5). Daniel served faithfully in the courts of pagan kings, remained steadfast in prayer and spoke truth with courage and wisdom. Paul planted churches, trained leaders, wrote letters, raised funds for the poor and endured great hardship. And above all, Jesus led by serving, teaching, healing, forming a community and giving his life.

From these models, several qualities emerge: a sense of calling, dependence on prayer, courage, integrity, concern for justice, ability to organise and mobilise, willingness to share responsibility, and perseverance under pressure.

24.3 Discerning Vision

Vision in the biblical sense is not a corporate slogan but a God-given sense of direction. Proverbs 29:18, quoted at the start of this book, links vision with restraint and flourishing. Habakkuk is told to write the vision and wait for its appointed time. Yet vision language is open to abuse. Leaders sometimes present personal ambitions, such as larger buildings, wider platforms or greater wealth, as a divine vision, and treat dissent as rebellion.

A healthy approach to vision includes the following.

1. Grounding in Scripture and mission. A vision must serve the great commission and the great commandment.
2. Prayerful discernment together. Vision is tested and refined in the community, not imposed. The church in Antioch discerned the call to mission corporately (Acts 13:1-3).

3. Clarity and communication. The vision should be expressed simply and shared widely, so that members can understand and participate.
4. Flexibility and humility. Leaders hold plans loosely, recognising that the Lord directs steps (Proverbs 16:9). They are willing to adjust or abandon plans that prove unwise.
5. Counting the cost. Jesus taught that anyone building a tower first sits down to estimate the cost (Luke 14:28). Wise planning includes budgeting, risk assessment and realistic timelines.

24.4 Decision-Making

The book of Proverbs commends counsel: without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed (Proverbs 15:22). Acts 15 shows a model of deliberation that included testimony, Scripture, debate, listening and consensus. Leaders should create processes in which relevant voices are heard, information is gathered, prayer is made and decisions are communicated clearly. Major decisions, such as appointing leaders, changing doctrine, undertaking large financial commitments or disciplining members, should be made by a team or council rather than a single person. Where a unanimous decision is not possible, a commitment to honour the outcome and to maintain unity is essential.

24.5 Handling Conflict

Conflict is inevitable in any community. Even Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over whether to take John Mark with them and parted company (Acts 15:36-41), though the Lord brought good out of it and the two were later reconciled in respect. Jesus gave a pattern for addressing offences in Matthew 18:15-17: go to the person privately, then take one or two others, and then involve the church. Paul urged the Corinthians to resolve disputes within the community rather than going to law before unbelievers (1 Corinthians 6:1-8), though serious crimes require the involvement of the proper authorities. Leaders should model humility, listen carefully to all sides, seek reconciliation and avoid gossip. A culture of speaking the truth in love reduces the build-up of unspoken resentment.

24.6 Developing Leaders and Planning Succession

The Bible repeatedly shows leaders preparing successors. Moses laid hands on Joshua in the sight of the people (Numbers 27:15-23). Elijah called Elisha, who received a double portion of his spirit (2 Kings 2). Jesus trained the Twelve. Paul invested in Timothy and Titus and urged them to appoint others. The pattern is intentional and relational: identify potential, give responsibility, offer feedback, release authority and entrust the future to the next generation.

In practice, this requires churches to create pathways for leadership development, such as internships, training programmes, mentoring relationships and opportunities to serve. It also requires leaders to resist the temptation to hold on to power. In some settings, leadership is inherited within families, regardless of gifting or calling. While family members may be gifted and called, the New Testament criterion is character and giftedness recognised by the community, not bloodline. A fair and transparent succession plan, agreed in advance by the leadership and communicated to the congregation, protects the church from crisis.

24.7 Stewardship of Resources

Leaders are stewards of what God has entrusted to the church: people, time, buildings and money. Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) underlines accountability for what is received. Paul organised a collection for the poor in Jerusalem and took care to involve trustworthy representatives chosen by the churches (2 Corinthians 8 and 9). Principles of stewardship include the following.

- Budgeting and planning, approved by the leadership council and, where appropriate, the congregation.
- Segregation of duties, so that no one person controls the receiving, recording and spending of funds.
- Regular reporting to the congregation and independent review of accounts.
- Generosity beyond the local church, including support for mission, relief of the poor and partnership with other ministries.
- Reasonable and transparent compensation for pastors and staff, avoiding both neglect and extravagance.

24.8 Governing Documents and Policies

Written documents provide clarity and protection. A church should have, at minimum, a statement of faith that expresses its doctrinal commitments; a constitution or by-laws that set out its purposes, membership, leadership structure, decision-making processes, discipline procedures and procedures for amendment and dissolution; and policies regarding finances, safeguarding, conflicts of interest, complaints, use of facilities, data protection and media. These documents should be known by the leaders and available to members. They should be reviewed periodically. Churches should comply with local laws on registration and governance, taking appropriate legal advice.

24.9 Partnership and Unity

No church exists alone. Jesus prayed that his followers might all be one so that the world may believe (John 17:21). The prophetic church participates in networks and associations that provide mutual support, accountability, shared resources and common witness. In contexts such as Nigeria, where Christianity is diverse and vibrant, cooperation across denominational lines can strengthen the church's voice on public issues, enable joint ministries to the poor and display the unity of the body. Humility and openness to learn from other traditions guard against sectarianism.

24.10 Leading under Pressure

Leadership brings strain. Moses grew weary under the burden of leading a complaining people, and Elijah wanted to die. Paul was sometimes so utterly burdened beyond his strength that he despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8). Leaders need rhythms of Sabbath rest, spiritual disciplines, friendships, family time and honest accountability. Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray. A leader who neglects his or her own soul will eventually have little to give. Churches should encourage their leaders to rest and should resist cultures that glorify overwork.

24.11 Five Biblical Lessons in Leadership

The Bible's leadership stories supply lessons that apply across time. Five may be singled out.

1. Delegate wisely (Exodus 18). Moses was overwhelmed by the demands of judging the people from morning till evening. Jethro, his father-in-law, saw that the task was too heavy and advised him to appoint capable, God-fearing, trustworthy men who hated a bribe to serve as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Moses listened and did as he was told. A leader who tries to do everything will burn out and will fail to develop others. Humility to accept advice, even from family, is a sign of wisdom.
2. Prepare the successor (Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 34). When Moses learned that he would not enter the land, he asked the Lord to appoint a man over the congregation. The Lord told him to take Joshua, a man in whom is the Spirit, and to lay his hand on him and commission him in the sight of the people. Moses gave Joshua some of his authority. Joshua's leadership was thereby affirmed. Good succession is public, prayerful and generous.
3. Repent quickly (2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51). David's sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah was grave, but when confronted by Nathan, he said, I have sinned against the Lord. Psalm 51 records his repentance. Leaders will fail, and what matters is the response. A leader who admits error and seeks forgiveness leaves a legacy of grace.
4. Persevere under opposition (Nehemiah 4 and 6). Nehemiah faced ridicule, threat and intrigue, yet he prayed and set a guard. His answer to a call to a meeting that was a trap is a model: I am doing a great work and I cannot come down (Nehemiah 6:3). Focus and prayer are essential.
5. Act with courage for the sake of others (Esther 4). When Mordecai urged Esther to appear uninvited before the king on behalf of her people, she hesitated, since the penalty was death. He replied that deliverance would arise from another place if she kept silent, and added, who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? She said, if I perish, I perish. Leaders in positions of influence must sometimes risk their comfort and safety to defend others.

24.12 Strategic Planning in a Prophetic Church

Is planning compatible with dependence on the Spirit? Scripture affirms both. Proverbs says that the plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance (Proverbs 21:5), and that the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps (16:9). Joseph, interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, advised a plan to store grain during seven good years against seven lean ones (Genesis 41). Jesus spoke of the builder who counts the cost (Luke 14:28). Nehemiah surveyed the walls by night before announcing his plan (Nehemiah 2:11-16). Planning done in prayer and humility is an act of stewardship.

A simple planning cycle for a church might include the following.

1. Pray and seek God's guidance, together with the leadership and the congregation.
2. Assess the current situation honestly: the church's strengths and weaknesses, the needs and opportunities in the community, available resources and risks.
3. Clarify the church's mission and values: why it exists and what it believes.
4. Set a small number of priorities and goals, with timelines and responsibilities.

5. Allocate resources and appoint persons to lead.
6. Implement, with communication and support.
7. Review regularly, learning from success and failure, and adjust.

Churches should be careful in how they use numbers. Acts mentions numbers of converts, but a church can become obsessed with attendance, offerings and building size at the expense of depth and faithfulness. Measures should include the quality of discipleship, service to the poor, health of relationships, integrity and fruit in the community.

24.13 Managing Staff and Volunteers

Larger churches employ staff, and all churches rely on volunteers. Fair and caring management is part of faithful leadership. The Bible gives guidance on employment. Leviticus 19:13 says, you shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. Paul instructs masters to treat servants justly and fairly, knowing that they also have a Master in heaven (Colossians 4:1), and Ephesians 6:9 adds that there is no partiality with him. Practical implications include the following.

- Clear written contracts and job descriptions, which specify duties, pay, hours, leave and procedures for resolving disputes.
- Fair and timely payment of wages, in accordance with the law, and provision for benefits such as pensions or insurance where possible.
- Regular supervision and appraisal, with encouragement and constructive feedback.
- Processes for discipline and dismissal that are fair, documented and humane.
- Avoidance of nepotism. Appointing relatives who are not qualified, or building ministries entirely around family members, creates conflicts of interest and weakens accountability.
- Care for volunteers: clear expectations, training, appreciation, rest and the freedom to say no.
- Guarding against exploitation of staff or volunteers on the plea that they are serving the Lord.

24.14 Communication, Meetings and Administration

Paul's instruction that all things should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40) applies to the church's administration as well as to its worship. Good administration is a service to the mission, not a distraction from it. Several practices are helpful.

- Clear communication. Leaders should communicate regularly and honestly with the congregation, using multiple channels such as announcements, newsletters, messaging groups and meetings. Messages should be accurate, courteous and timely.
- Effective meetings. Meetings should have agendas, defined purposes, time limits and written records of decisions and actions. Prayer and Scripture should open and close them.
- Record-keeping. Churches should keep accurate records of membership, baptisms, marriages, finances, property and minutes. These records are important for continuity and for legal compliance.

- Policies on social media and data. Church leaders should guide staff and members on the responsible use of digital platforms, respecting privacy and refraining from posting images of children or personal information without consent.
- Handling of complaints. A clear and accessible process invites concerns to be raised early.
- Annual general meetings or equivalent, at which reports are presented, leaders are accountable and members can ask questions.

24.15 Multiplying Leaders

Paul's instruction to Timothy to entrust what he had heard to faithful men who would teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2) describes four generations of leadership: Paul, Timothy, faithful men and others. A church that wants to multiply leaders needs a deliberate approach.

1. Identify. Look for people who display character, faithfulness, teachability and gifting, not just charisma or education.
2. Invite. Personally invite promising persons to serve, learn and grow.
3. Instruct. Provide teaching in Scripture, theology, leadership, ethics and ministry skills, through classes, reading and conferences.
4. Involve. Give real responsibilities, beginning with small tasks and increasing, with oversight.
5. Inspect and encourage. Provide feedback, correction and affirmation.
6. Release. Entrust leaders with authority to act, and make room for them to lead independently.
7. Repeat. Encourage them to raise up others.

A church should seek to include women and men, young and old, people of different backgrounds and professions, and to resist the tendency to reproduce leaders in one's own image. Lay leaders are crucial. Many churches, especially in Africa, are served by lay pastors and bi-vocational leaders who need training and support.

24.16 Leading in Crisis

Crises test leadership. Examples include a pandemic that closes church buildings, as happened widely in 2020; violence or natural disaster; a financial collapse; a scandal involving a leader; internal division; or threats to security. Biblical examples are instructive. Acts 11:27-30 records the church at Antioch's response to a prophecy of famine, in which the disciples determined to send relief to Judea, each according to his ability. In Acts 27, Paul, a prisoner on a ship caught in a storm, offered counsel, encouraged the crew, shared bread with them and gave thanks, and so exercised leadership in a crisis.

Principles for crisis leadership include the following.

- Prepare in advance. Have plans for emergencies, communication trees and contingency funds.
- Stay calm and prayerful. Panic spreads, and calm reassures.
- Tell the truth. Be honest about what is known and not known, and do not minimise or exaggerate.
- Protect the vulnerable first. In any crisis, the weakest are most at risk.
- Communicate frequently, through trusted channels.

- Mobilise the community. Many hands share the burden, and crises can reveal and develop gifts.
- Care for the carers. Leaders and volunteers in a crisis are at risk of exhaustion.
- Review afterwards, and capture lessons learned.

The pandemic of 2020 and the years that followed demonstrated how quickly churches could adapt, moving to online services, delivering food and care in new ways, and rethinking the meaning of gathering. It also exposed difficulties, including conflicts about how to balance public health with worship, and the vulnerability of those who lacked access to technology. These experiences offer lessons for the future.

24.17 Chapter Summary

- Biblical models of leadership combine prayer, courage, integrity, organisation and servanthood.
- Vision is discerned prayerfully in community, grounded in mission and held with humility.
- Decisions are made with counsel and shared responsibility, and conflicts are handled biblically.
- Leaders develop successors and plan transitions intentionally.
- Good stewardship, clear governing documents, partnerships and healthy rhythms sustain a prophetic church.
- Biblical lessons in leadership, strategic planning, staff and volunteer management, administration, leader multiplication and crisis leadership add practical depth.

24.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does your church currently discern and communicate vision, and how might it improve?
2. What decision-making processes are in place, and how are minority voices heard?
3. What succession plan exists for your church's leadership, and how might it be strengthened?
4. Which governing documents does your church have, and which need to be developed?
5. How does your church help its leaders rest and remain spiritually healthy?

24.19 Suggested Further Reading

- J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*.
- Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*.
- John Stott, *Basic Christianity and The Contemporary Christian*, on mission and leadership.
- Tim Keller, *Center Church*.
- Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.

Part VII: Church and Society

Chapter 25: Justice, Peace and Public Witness

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7, author's rendering)

25.1 Introduction

The prophets of Israel never confined their message to the sanctuary. They spoke at the city gate, in the royal court and in the marketplace. The New Testament church likewise bore witness in public spaces: the temple courts, the synagogues, the Areopagus and the halls of governors. A church that is prophetic in the biblical sense cannot be indifferent to the public life of the society in which it lives. This chapter develops a theology of justice, peace and public witness, setting out the biblical grounds for engagement, the forms it may take and the principles that should guide it.

25.2 The Biblical Vision of Justice and Peace

25.2.1 The God of justice

Justice is rooted in the character of God. The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Psalm 146 celebrates the Lord who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the sojourners and upholds the widow and the fatherless. The two Hebrew words most often rendered justice and righteousness, mishpat and tsedakah, belong together. Mishpat concerns fair judgement and the restoration of what is due to people; tsedakah concerns right relationships and covenant faithfulness.

25.2.2 Shalom

The biblical word for peace, shalom, means far more than the absence of conflict. It signifies wholeness, flourishing and right relationships with God, with other people and with creation. The prophets envision a future in which nations beat swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4), the wolf lives with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6) and each person sits under his own vine and fig tree, with none to make them afraid (Micah 4:4). Jesus pronounces a blessing on the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), and Paul describes Christ as our peace, who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). The church's mission includes making peace and ministering reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

25.2.3 Created dignity

Every human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). This gives each person intrinsic dignity, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, class or ability. Injustice is an assault on that dignity. The Bible's concern for the poor, the stranger and the oppressed flows from this foundation.

25.3 The Church's Public Calling

The church engages society in several complementary ways.

- Proclamation. The church announces the lordship of Christ and the values of his kingdom, including truth, justice, mercy and peace. It speaks a word from God into public life, as the prophets did.
- Embodiment. The church is a community that practises justice and reconciliation in its own life. Its treatment of the poor, its inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds and its handling of power and money are part of its witness.
- Service. The church feeds the hungry, cares for the sick, educates the young, shelters the homeless and supports the vulnerable. Jesus identified himself with the least of these (Matthew 25:31-46).
- Advocacy. The church speaks up for those who cannot speak for themselves, as Proverbs 31:8-9 urges: open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute; open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.
- Intercession. The church prays for its rulers and its society (1 Timothy 2:1-4), as discussed in Chapter 22.

25.4 Church and Governing Authority

The New Testament presents two complementary perspectives on political power. Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 call believers to respect governing authorities, to pay taxes and to do good, since rulers are meant to be God's servants for the good of society. Revelation 13 and Acts 4 and 5 show another side: when the state demands worship or forbids obedience to God, the church must resist. Paul wrote Romans under Roman rule, in a context where he had himself benefited from Roman justice, and Revelation was written when Rome was persecuting believers. The two perspectives are not contradictory but reflect different conditions. Authority is legitimate when it serves justice; it forfeits legitimacy when it becomes a tool of oppression.

A prophetic church therefore honours authority, prays for leaders and obeys just laws, but retains the freedom to criticise injustice and, when necessary, to engage in peaceful civil disobedience, accepting the consequences. It does not serve as an uncritical chaplain to power. Nor does it adopt violence as a method. Jesus' teaching on love of enemies and the apostolic instruction not to repay evil for evil but to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21) shape the church's methods.

25.5 Historical Examples of Prophetic Public Witness

- William Wilberforce and the Clapham circle in Britain campaigned for decades, motivated by Christian conviction, against the slave trade, which was abolished in the British Empire in 1807, and for the abolition of slavery itself, achieved in 1833, shortly after his death.
- Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black church in the American civil rights movement combined biblical preaching, prayer and nonviolent resistance. His Letter from Birmingham Jail defended the duty of Christians to confront injustice.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in Germany opposed Nazi interference with the church and the persecution of the Jews. Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945.

- Desmond Tutu and others in South Africa resisted apartheid, and after its end, Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to expose the past and promote healing.
- Oscar Romero in El Salvador spoke for the poor and denounced violence until his assassination in 1980.

These figures were imperfect, as are all human beings, but they show the possibility of costly, constructive witness. They also demonstrate that effective engagement often involves coalition with others, patience, strategic thought and personal sacrifice.

25.6 Areas of Concern for the Prophetic Church

- Corruption. The Bible condemns bribery and the perversion of justice (Exodus 23:8; Deuteronomy 16:19; Micah 3:11). Churches should teach integrity, refuse to benefit from corrupt gifts and speak against corruption in public life.
- Poverty and economic justice. The prophets' concern for fair wages, honest scales and the protection of the poor calls the church to support policies and practices that reduce poverty and promote opportunity.
- Violence and conflict. Churches can serve as mediators and peace-builders, promote nonviolence, support victims and work for reconciliation among communities.
- Human dignity and the vulnerable. Women and children, the disabled, the elderly, displaced persons, migrants and refugees are particular concerns. Leviticus 19:33-34 commands love for the stranger as for oneself.
- Gender-based violence. The church must condemn violence against women and children and create safe pathways for reporting and healing.
- Creation care. The earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). Humanity was placed in the garden to work it and keep it (Genesis 2:15). Environmental degradation, which often harms the poor first, is a matter of Christian concern.
- Education and health. The church has historically been a major provider of schools and hospitals and can continue to contribute to human flourishing.
- Truthfulness in public life. Misinformation, hate speech and manipulation of religious sentiment for political ends are contrary to the way of Christ. The church should model honest speech.

25.7 Principles for Public Engagement

1. Be anchored in Scripture and Christ. Public witness derives its authority from the gospel and not from partisan loyalties.
2. Be non-partisan but not neutral. The church should not become the instrument of a political party, yet it cannot be neutral about justice, truth and the dignity of persons.
3. Stand with the poor and marginalised. The pattern of the prophets and of Jesus is a preferential concern for those who are most vulnerable.
4. Speak with humility and truth. Claims should be informed, accurate and offered with a willingness to listen. The church has no monopoly on political wisdom.
5. Reject violence and hatred. Means must be consistent with ends.
6. Cooperate with others. Christians can work with people of other faiths and none for the common good, while retaining their distinctive witness.

7. Defend freedom for all. Christians who value religious freedom for themselves should defend it for others.
8. Count the cost. Public witness may bring criticism, loss of favour or danger, and the church must be prepared to bear it.

25.8 Case Study: The Abolition of the Slave Trade

The campaign against the transatlantic slave trade is one of the most significant episodes of Christian public witness, and its history is complex and instructive. For centuries, many Christians had participated in or defended slavery, appealing to biblical texts such as the curse on Canaan or Paul's instructions to slaves. Churches owned slaves, and clergy supported colonial economies built on slavery. The trade in human beings between Africa and the Americas, extending over more than three centuries, took an enormous toll on the African continent, and the memory of this history remains deeply significant for Africans and their descendants.

Opposition grew from various sources. Quakers were among the first to denounce slavery as a sin, and in 1783 they presented a petition to the British Parliament. Evangelical Anglicans such as John Newton, a former slave ship captain who became a clergyman and the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, later spoke of his shame. Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson researched and publicised the horrors. Olaudah Equiano, a former slave of African origin, published his autobiography in 1789, giving powerful first-hand testimony. William Wilberforce led the parliamentary campaign, supported by a circle of friends known as the Clapham group. The trade in slaves was abolished in the British Empire in 1807, and slavery itself in 1833.

Other forces also played roles, including slave resistance and economic changes, and historians debate their relative weight. For our purposes, the example shows that persistent, organised, prayerful witness, using publication, petition, boycotts and parliamentary action, can contribute to changing unjust structures. It also shows that the church was divided: the same Bible was used by some to defend slavery and by others to attack it. The church's task is continually to examine its interpretation by the standard of the whole gospel.

The history also has a direct connection with West African Christianity. Freed slaves who had settled in Sierra Leone, a colony founded in part by abolitionists, returned to what is now Nigeria and elsewhere and became important figures in the missionary movement. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, born in the Yoruba region about 1809, was captured as a boy in 1821, sold into the slave trade, rescued from a slave ship by the British navy, educated in Sierra Leone and eventually became the first African Anglican bishop. His story is one example of how God brought good from evil.

25.9 Case Study: The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Church

In the 1950s and 1960s, African American churches led a movement to end legal segregation and secure civil rights in the United States. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956, sparked by Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat, was organised largely through Black churches, with the young pastor Martin Luther King Jr. as its spokesman. Mass meetings in churches, with preaching, prayer and singing, sustained the community's courage. King and others founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. Their strategy of nonviolent resistance drew on Jesus' teaching and the example of Gandhi.

King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, written in 1963 in response to white clergy who had criticised the demonstrations as untimely, is a classic of prophetic literature. He argued that unjust laws are no laws at all, that justice too long delayed is justice denied and that the church should act as a thermostat that helps to transform the mores of society, not as a thermometer that merely records the prevailing temperature of public opinion. Campaigns in Birmingham, Selma and elsewhere led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Many participants were beaten, jailed and killed; King himself was assassinated in 1968.

The movement shows the power of congregations organised for justice. It also demonstrates that prophetic witness is costly and that it requires strategy, discipline and coalition-building. Its limits and unfinished work remind us that the pursuit of justice is a long road.

25.10 Case Study: The Church and Apartheid in South Africa

South Africa's system of apartheid, formalised from 1948, was defended by some in the Dutch Reformed Church on theological grounds, while many other Christians opposed it. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared in 1982 that apartheid was a sin and that its theological justification constituted heresy, and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted the Belhar Confession, which affirms the unity of the church, reconciliation and justice, in 1982, and formally in 1986.

In 1985, a group of theologians mainly from Soweto published the Kairos Document, a prophetic challenge to the churches. It analysed three theologies: state theology, which used Romans 13 to justify the regime; church theology, which called for reconciliation without justice and avoided taking sides; and prophetic theology, which it argued was required in the moment of crisis. The document called for a theology that is biblical, specific to the situation, and oriented toward action in solidarity with the oppressed. It stimulated vigorous debate and influenced Christians elsewhere.

After the end of apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, heard testimony from victims and perpetrators and sought a path of acknowledgement and healing. Its work has been praised and criticised, but it offers a model of an attempt to combine truth, justice and mercy. Lessons from the South African story include the danger of theology used to justify oppression, the need for prophetic clarity in moments of crisis, the cost of solidarity and the importance of reconciliation after conflict.

25.11 Case Study: African Churches and the Work of Peace

African churches have contributed to peacemaking in various ways. Some examples illustrate the range.

- Uganda. Archbishop Janani Luwum and Bishop Festo Kivengere, mentioned earlier, resisted the abuses of Idi Amin's regime. Luwum's death in 1977 became a symbol of costly witness.
- Kenya. Bishop Alexander Muge of Eldoret was an outspoken critic of abuses in the late 1980s, and he died in a road accident in 1990 in circumstances that many Kenyans questioned. Church leaders in Kenya have played an important role in calling for reform.
- Mozambique. The Catholic lay community of Sant'Egidio helped to mediate the peace agreement of 1992 that ended a long civil war.

- Liberia. During the civil war, Christian and Muslim women organised together in a peace movement, sitting in public places in white clothing, praying and demanding an end to the fighting. Leymah Gbowee, a Lutheran, was a leader and later won the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkol Karman.
- Nigeria. In Kaduna, a pastor, James Wuye, and an imam, Muhammad Ashafa, who had both led militias in earlier clashes between Christians and Muslims, later became partners in peacemaking, founding the Interfaith Mediation Centre in the 1990s. Their story is a testimony to the possibility of transformation.
- Rwanda. After the genocide, church leaders and communities have worked to confront their failures, promote reconciliation and care for survivors, as Katongole and others have recorded.

These examples show the potential of faith communities to build bridges, even in the most difficult conflicts. They also show that peacemaking is slow, requires courage, depends on relationships and often goes unrecognised.

25.12 Public Theology: Frameworks and Methods

Public theology is the practice of engaging public questions in the light of the Christian faith, in a manner accessible to people of other beliefs. Its practitioners seek to contribute to the common good rather than to impose a sectarian agenda. A prophetic church may use the following framework when addressing a public issue.

1. Listen. Hear the voices of those affected, especially the vulnerable. Gather accurate information.
2. Study. Examine the causes and context, drawing on expertise from relevant fields.
3. Reflect theologically. Ask what Scripture and tradition say about the issue, and discern the principles that apply.
4. Consult. Seek the counsel of experts, other churches and civil society organisations.
5. Decide on the form of engagement. This may include public statements, pastoral letters, advocacy, direct service, partnership, education or peaceful demonstration.
6. Speak clearly and graciously. Use language that is honest, respectful and understandable. Avoid caricature of opponents.
7. Act. Back words with deeds. Offer practical help and model the change advocated.
8. Evaluate and persevere. Assess results, learn and continue.

Public statements by churches should be carefully prepared. They should distinguish between matters on which the faith speaks clearly and matters on which Christians may differ. They should avoid claiming more authority than the church possesses. And they should be consistent with the church's own conduct.

25.13 Practices of Peacemaking and Reconciliation

Peacemaking is a skill that can be learned. Churches can develop practices such as the following.

- Mediation. Trained mediators help parties in conflict to listen to each other and find solutions. Churches can train members in mediation skills, drawing on the guidance of Matthew 18.

- Dialogue. Structured conversations between groups across religious, ethnic or political lines can reduce suspicion and build trust.
- Trauma healing. People who have experienced violence need safe spaces, counselling and community. Churches can offer listening, lament and rituals of healing.
- Restorative approaches. In some situations, processes that bring offenders and victims together, with support, can lead to acknowledgement of harm, restitution and reintegration, where this is safe and voluntary. These approaches complement, but do not replace, formal justice for serious crimes.
- Youth and women. Young people are often both perpetrators and victims of violence, and women are often peacemakers. Programmes that involve them are essential.
- Education. Curricula that teach conflict resolution, history and respect can shape a peaceful generation.
- Symbols and memory. Memorials, services of remembrance and shared meals help communities to honour the past and commit to a different future.

Reconciliation is not a quick fix. It requires truth-telling, justice, repentance, forgiveness and changed structures. The church that has itself experienced reconciliation with God through Christ has resources for this work, but it must also be honest about its own divisions and failures.

25.14 Chapter Summary

- Justice and peace are grounded in the character of God and the dignity of every person.
- The church engages society through proclamation, embodiment, service, advocacy and intercession.
- The New Testament calls for respect for authority and also for resistance when authority demands what God forbids.
- Historical examples show costly and constructive prophetic witness.
- The church should address corruption, poverty, violence, dignity, creation and truthfulness, guided by principles of non-partisanship, humility and nonviolence.
- Case studies from the abolition of the slave trade, the American civil rights movement, South African resistance to apartheid and African peacemaking, together with a method for public theology, illustrate how the church bears public witness.

25.15 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How can your church embody justice and peace in its own life before speaking to society?
2. When, if ever, is civil disobedience justified for a Christian?
3. How can the church be non-partisan while still speaking about justice?
4. Which of the areas of concern in section 25.6 is most pressing in your community?
5. What can your church learn from the examples of Wilberforce, King, Bonhoeffer, Tutu and Romero?

25.16 Suggested Further Reading

- Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*.
- Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*.
- Miroslav Volf, *Public Faith in Action*.
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*.

Chapter 26: The Prophetic Church in the African Context

Christianity is not only in Africa; it is of Africa. The African church is called to speak the gospel in African voices to African realities. (Author's summary of a theme in African theology)

26.1 Introduction

Christianity has been present in Africa since the earliest centuries, in Egypt, Ethiopia and North Africa, and has grown dramatically in sub-Saharan Africa over the last century. By most estimates, Africa is now home to a larger share of the world's Christians than any other continent, and the centre of gravity of global Christianity has shifted toward the Global South. This is one of the most significant developments in the history of the church. This chapter considers what it means to be a prophetic church in the African context: the heritage of African culture and religion, the achievements and challenges of African Christianity, and the tasks that lie before African churches.

26.2 African Religious and Cultural Heritage

Long before the arrival of missionaries, African peoples had developed rich religious worldviews. Scholars such as John Mbiti, in *African Religions and Philosophy*, have shown that many African societies had a belief in a supreme God, creator and sustainer of all things, under various names. They also believed in a spiritual universe populated by lesser spirits and the ancestors, and in the interdependence of the visible and invisible worlds. Community was central: a person is a person through other persons. The southern African notion of ubuntu, and Mbiti's well-known summary, I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am, express this communal understanding of life. Hospitality, respect for elders, the importance of family and clan and a strong sense of spiritual reality shaped the African outlook.

These features have implications for the church. Where the gospel is received in African contexts, it encounters a worldview in which spiritual realities are taken seriously. This helps to explain why prophecy, healing, deliverance and spiritual power resonate so strongly. It also means that the church must engage with questions that Western theology, shaped by a more secular framework, has often neglected.

26.3 The Translation Principle and African Theology

Lamin Sanneh argued that Christianity is a translated religion: it is carried into new cultures through translation of Scripture into local languages, thereby affirming the dignity of those languages and cultures. The Bible in the mother tongue made Christianity at home in Africa. Kwame Bediako, in *Theology and Identity* and *Christianity in Africa*, argued that African Christians have the right and responsibility to interpret the gospel in light of their own heritage, and that African traditional religion can be viewed as a preparation for the gospel in a sense analogous to the way Greek thought functioned for the early church. Other African theologians have contributed in diverse ways: Mercy Oduyoye on women and theology, Kwesi Dickson on African theology and culture, Jesse Mugambi on the reconstruction of society, Tokunboh

Adeyemo and the editors of the Africa Bible Commentary on evangelical scholarship, and Ogbu Kalu on African Pentecostalism.

26.4 The Prophetic Dimension in African Christianity

As Chapter 4 showed, prophetic movements were prominent in African Christian history. William Wadé Harris, Simon Kimbangu, Garrick Braide, Isaiah Shembe and the Aladura churches of Nigeria shaped African Christianity through prophetic ministries, healing, prayer and indigenous expression. These movements were often critiqued by the missionary churches, but they represented authentic African responses to the gospel. Today the prophetic dimension continues in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which emphasise the Spirit, spiritual gifts, prophecy, healing and deliverance. Many African believers find in these churches a faith that addresses their fears and hopes directly.

26.5 Strengths of the African Prophetic Church

- Vibrant worship. Joyful, participatory and embodied worship reflects the cultural richness of Africa and expresses the Spirit's presence.
- Spiritual realism. African Christianity takes seriously the reality of spiritual forces and the power of prayer.
- Community. Churches often function as extended families, offering support to members in need.
- Missionary energy. African Christians now send missionaries to other continents, and African diaspora churches are growing in Europe and North America.
- Public engagement. In many places, churches have been among the strongest institutions of civil society, running schools, clinics and social programmes, and sometimes standing against oppressive regimes.
- Resilience. African churches have grown amidst poverty, conflict and instability, demonstrating deep faith.

26.6 Challenges for the African Prophetic Church

26.6.1 Witchcraft beliefs and accusations

Fear of witchcraft is widespread in many African societies. Accusations of witchcraft have led to the abandonment, abuse and even killing of children, the elderly and women. Some prophets and pastors have contributed to this suffering by identifying alleged witches. The gospel of Christ frees people from fear (Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 4:18), and the Bible contains no warrant for naming individuals as witches or inflicting harm upon them. Jesus welcomed children and defended the vulnerable. The church must teach clearly against such accusations, protect those who are accused, and offer pastoral care to those who are afraid.

26.6.2 The prosperity gospel

In many parts of Africa, versions of the prosperity gospel, which teaches that faith, giving and positive confession bring material wealth and health, have grown rapidly. Paul Gifford and others have documented its spread and its social influence. The teaching resonates with people's desire to escape poverty, and it appeals to biblical promises of blessing. But it is open to serious critique. It misreads texts by ignoring the broader biblical witness about suffering, contentment and the dangers of wealth (1 Timothy 6:6-10; Luke 12:15-21). It can blame the poor and the

sick for their condition. It risks turning religion into a transaction and exploiting the vulnerable for the enrichment of leaders. A prophetic church must retain a biblical understanding of blessing that includes provision and generosity, and also cross-bearing, perseverance and justice.

26.6.3 Syncretism and the question of ancestors

Many African Christians continue to consult traditional healers, diviners or ancestral rites alongside their Christian faith, especially in times of crisis. The church needs a pastoral and theological response that honours family and cultural bonds, offers a satisfying account of the spiritual realm, and is clear that Christ alone is mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). The question of the ancestors is complex. Some theologians speak of ancestors as members of the communion of saints; others warn that this blurs the distinction between the living and the dead and the sole mediation of Christ. A faithful approach will explore these questions with humility, rooted in Scripture, and avoid both dismissive attitudes and uncritical accommodation.

26.6.4 Ethnic divisions and violence

Ethnic and tribal loyalties have sometimes proved stronger than loyalty to Christ, with tragic consequences. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994, in a country with a high percentage of professing Christians, remains a sobering example. Emmanuel Katongole's *Mirror to the Church* reflects on the failure of many Christians and church leaders to resist the violence and the need for a deeper formation in the identity of the people of God. Prophetic ecclesiology insists that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). The church must be the place where ethnic hatred is renounced and reconciliation is practised.

26.6.5 Corruption, leadership and political entanglement

Corruption in public life is widespread in many African nations, and the church is not immune. Leaders have sometimes enriched themselves, cultivated personality cults or aligned themselves with powerful politicians in return for favours. A prophetic church must examine itself first, practise financial transparency and refuse to be silent in the face of corruption in society.

26.6.6 Gender and youth

Women are the backbone of African churches, yet they are often absent from decision-making. Mercy Oduyoye and other African women theologians have drawn attention to the need for dignity, voice and leadership for women. Young people, who constitute a large proportion of the African population, face unemployment, migration pressures and the lure of materialism. The church should give them meaningful roles, relevant teaching and hope.

26.6.7 Health, including HIV and AIDS

The HIV and AIDS pandemic has devastated many African communities. Churches have offered care, support and education, but some have also contributed to stigma. A prophetic church welcomes and supports people living with HIV, promotes education and compassion, and works with health professionals.

26.7 A Short History of Christianity in Africa

Christianity in Africa is far older than the missionary movements of the nineteenth century. In the first centuries after Christ, the church in Egypt flourished in Alexandria, where Clement and Origen taught and where Athanasius and Cyril later defended the faith. Egyptian monks such as Antony and Pachomius pioneered the monastic movement that shaped Christian spirituality across the world. In North Africa, the church at Carthage produced Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, whose writings have influenced Christian thought for sixteen centuries. The Donatist controversy over the lapsed and the purity of the church troubled the North African church in the fourth and fifth centuries, and its questions about the relationship between holiness and unity are still alive.

Further south, the kingdom of Aksum in what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea became Christian in the fourth century under King Ezana, through the ministry of Frumentius, a Syrian Christian who became the first bishop. The Ethiopian church developed a distinctive tradition, with the Scriptures in Ge'ez, a rich liturgy and a long history of surviving as a Christian kingdom surrounded by other faiths. In Nubia, along the Nile south of Egypt, Christian kingdoms existed for several centuries, with churches, monasteries and art that have been uncovered by archaeologists, before gradually declining in the later Middle Ages. The Arab conquests of North Africa in the seventh century and following reshaped the religious landscape, and Christianity there diminished, though the Coptic church survived in Egypt.

The Portuguese arrived on the west coast in the fifteenth century. In the Kingdom of Kongo, King Afonso I, who reigned from about 1506, embraced Christianity and sought to build a Christian kingdom, but he was dismayed by the damage done by the slave trade. In the early eighteenth century, a young Kongolese woman, Kimpa Vita, who took the baptismal name Dona Beatriz, claimed to be inspired by St Anthony and led a prophetic movement, called the Antonian movement, that sought to renew the kingdom and to Africanise Christianity. She was captured and burned as a heretic in 1706. Her story foreshadows many later prophetic movements and the tensions between African prophetic leaders and established authorities.

The modern missionary movement of the nineteenth century brought many societies to Africa, working alongside, and sometimes entangled with, colonial powers. They translated the Bible, built schools and hospitals and opposed the slave trade, but they were often paternalistic and slow to hand over leadership. The twentieth century saw the growth of independent churches, the movement toward independence and the explosive growth of African Christianity, in which the number of Christians on the continent grew from a small proportion of the population at the beginning of the century to a large share by its end. This growth continues, and Africa is now a major centre of world Christianity.

26.8 Reading the Bible in Africa

African biblical scholars have developed distinctive approaches to reading Scripture. Several features may be noted.

- Community reading. Reading the Bible is often a communal act, in which a group discusses the text and its meaning for their lives. Gerald West, working in South Africa, has developed contextual Bible study, in which ordinary readers and trained scholars read together, with the aim of speaking to local struggles.

- Inculturation hermeneutics. The Nigerian scholar Justin Ukpong proposed a method in which the African context is a factor in interpretation, so that the reader engages the text from within African culture and then evaluates the culture in light of the text.
- Postcolonial and feminist readings. Scholars such as Musa Dube have examined how biblical texts were used in colonialism, and how women's voices may be recovered.
- Narrative and oral approaches. In societies that have strong traditions of storytelling and proverbs, narratives from the Bible can be told and discussed in ways that make them live.
- The use of the Africa Bible Commentary and other African-authored resources, which bring African perspectives to the study of Scripture.

These approaches offer riches to the whole church. They also call for care. The Bible must remain the judge of culture, not simply its mirror. African readers, like all others, can be tempted to find in the text only what they want to find. The method of Chapter 2 remains relevant: attend to context, genre and the whole canon, and test interpretations within a community of faith.

26.9 Ancestors, the Dead and the Communion of Saints

The place of the ancestors is one of the most debated questions in African theology and pastoral practice. In many African societies, ancestors are regarded as members of the community who have passed into the spiritual realm and who continue to care for their families. Their blessing is sought and their displeasure feared. Rituals of libation, remembrance and consultation maintain the relationship. For African Christians, the question arises how this heritage relates to faith in Christ.

The Bible provides some guidelines. The Old Testament prohibits attempts to contact the dead through mediums and necromancers (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Saul's consultation of the medium at Endor is presented as a sign of his desperation and rebellion (1 Samuel 28). In Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man's request for Lazarus to be sent to warn his brothers is refused: they have Moses and the Prophets (Luke 16:27-31). Paul stresses that there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). On the other hand, Hebrews 11 and 12 speak of a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, the faithful who have gone before, and Revelation depicts the martyrs as aware of the events on earth (6:9-11). The Bible honours parents (Exodus 20:12) and calls for remembering the faith of earlier generations (Hebrews 13:7).

Christian traditions differ. Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches affirm the communion of saints and the intercession of the saints, while Protestants generally reject prayer to the departed. African theologians have proposed various approaches. Some, such as Charles Nyamiti and Bénédet Bujo, have suggested that Christ may be understood as an ancestor in a unique sense, the proto-ancestor, whose life gives life to his people. Critics respond that the title risks reducing Christ to a category derived from African religion and obscuring the uniqueness of his person. The question remains under discussion.

Some pastoral principles may be suggested.

1. Honour the dead with respect and gratitude. Remember them in family gatherings and funerals, telling their stories and giving thanks for their lives.
2. Decline practices that involve invocation of the dead as mediators or sources of power, while explaining the reasons with patience.

3. Offer alternative rituals that meet the need for belonging and continuity: services of remembrance, readings from Scripture, community meals and acts of charity in the name of the departed.
4. Teach the biblical doctrine of the communion of saints in Christ, the resurrection and the hope of reunion.
5. Be sensitive to the fear that families may have of offending the dead, and assure them of the sufficiency of Christ's protection.

26.10 Healing, Deliverance and the African Worldview

In many African societies, health and misfortune are understood in holistic terms that include the spiritual and the social. Illness may be attributed not only to physical causes but also to broken relationships, the displeasure of spirits or the actions of enemies. Traditional healers address these dimensions. For many Christians, the church offers a similar integrated care, with prayer, anointing, fasting and deliverance, and this explains the popularity of healing ministries.

A balanced approach recognises several truths. Spiritual realities are real, and prayer is powerful. The church should not dismiss the suffering of those who feel spiritually oppressed. But not every illness or misfortune is spiritual in origin; natural causes are real, and medical science is a gift. Mental health conditions must be recognised and treated. And methods of deliverance must be consistent with the gospel and with human dignity. In some cases, people have been confined in prayer camps, chained, deprived of food or beaten in the name of spiritual healing. Such practices are unacceptable. The New Testament shows Jesus healing with compassion and authority, not with cruelty.

Churches should adopt guidelines for healing and deliverance ministry, including training of ministers, insistence on consent, prohibition of physical force and restraint except to prevent harm, collaboration with health professionals, protection of children and vulnerable persons, and accountability. They should also cultivate a positive teaching about God's care, which reduces fear.

26.11 Poverty, Development and the Economy

Africa is a continent of great wealth in resources and in people and also one where millions live in poverty. The causes are complex: colonial history, unfair trade, corruption, conflict, debt, poor infrastructure, climate pressures and domestic policy choices. Churches are among the most trusted institutions in many places and can be a force for development.

The writers Bryant Myers, in *Walking with the Poor*, and Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, in *When Helping Hurts*, have given guidance on how churches can serve the poor without creating dependency or damaging dignity. They emphasise the distinction between relief, which provides immediate aid in emergencies; rehabilitation, which helps restore what has been damaged; and development, which works with communities to build lasting capacity. They stress that poverty is not only a lack of material resources but also a matter of broken relationships with God, self, others and the environment, and that the poor are not passive recipients but agents of their own development.

Churches can contribute through education, health care, skills training, microfinance, agricultural support, advocacy for fair policies and teaching of integrity. The campaign known as Jubilee 2000, in which churches and others around the world called for the cancellation of

unpayable debts of poor countries, is an example of church-led advocacy that contributed to debt relief. In all this, the church should avoid the temptation of paternalism, working in partnership and respecting local leadership.

26.12 Youth, Cities and Technology

Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world. Many countries have a majority under thirty. Cities such as Lagos, Nairobi, Kinshasa and Johannesburg are growing rapidly. Mobile phones and the internet are transforming communication, commerce and education. These trends present both opportunity and challenge for the church.

- **Opportunity.** Young people are energetic, creative and open to new ideas. Technology allows the spread of the gospel, theological education and Christian community across distances. Entrepreneurship is flourishing.
- **Challenge.** Unemployment and underemployment are high. Urban life can be isolating and exposes young people to temptations and pressures. Some are drawn to crime, extremist movements or the promises of fraudsters. Online content can be misleading or harmful.

Churches that wish to reach and form young people need to listen to them, give them real responsibilities, equip them with skills and values, offer mentoring and provide safe spaces to ask questions. They should help young people to think critically about information and to use technology wisely. And they should address the structural issues that limit young people's prospects, including by supporting education and economic opportunity.

26.13 Women in African Christianity

Women have been central to African Christianity. They are often the majority of church members, and they sustain congregations through prayer, hospitality, teaching and service. Women have led prophetic movements, as noted in Chapter 4. At the same time, women face many challenges: limited access to education and health care in some places, early marriage, domestic violence, harmful widowhood rites, harmful practices such as female genital cutting in certain regions, and exclusion from leadership.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, has brought together women scholars from across the continent to reflect on faith, culture and gender. Their work has highlighted the importance of both affirming African culture and criticising aspects that oppress women. A prophetic church takes seriously the dignity of women as bearers of God's image and as recipients of the Spirit's gifts. It protects them from harm, supports their education and economic participation and listens to their voices. Even among those who differ on the ordination of women, there is common ground in the condemnation of violence and the affirmation of women's gifts.

26.14 Tasks for the Prophetic Church in Africa

1. Develop contextual theology that is faithful to Scripture and rooted in African realities, drawing on the work of African scholars.
2. Strengthen biblical teaching and discipleship, so that members can discern truth and are not carried away by every wind of doctrine.
3. Confront fear and superstition with the liberating message of Christ, and protect those vulnerable to accusation.

4. Practise and teach financial integrity and reject exploitative models of ministry.
5. Promote reconciliation across ethnic, religious and political divides.
6. Advocate for justice, good governance and care for the poor.
7. Empower women and youth in ministry and leadership.
8. Care for creation, health and education.
9. Contribute to the global church, sharing African gifts and learning from others.

26.15 Chapter Summary

- African culture and religion offer a worldview open to the spiritual dimension and to community, which has shaped African Christianity.
- African theologians have developed contextual approaches rooted in translation and cultural affirmation.
- Prophetic movements and Pentecostal churches express African Christianity's vitality.
- Strengths include worship, community, spiritual realism and missionary energy.
- Challenges include witchcraft accusations, the prosperity gospel, syncretism, ethnic violence, corruption, gender inequality and health crises.
- A longer history, African ways of reading Scripture, the debate about ancestors, healing and deliverance, poverty and development, youth and cities, and the place of women deepen the African picture.

26.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What aspects of African culture can enrich the church's understanding of the gospel, and what aspects must be challenged?
2. How should the church respond to fear of witchcraft in a way that protects vulnerable people?
3. What biblical resources can answer the prosperity gospel?
4. How can the church act as a place of reconciliation across ethnic lines?
5. What role should women and young people have in leadership?

26.17 Suggested Further Reading

- John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
- Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity and Christianity in Africa*.
- Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*
- Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda*.
- Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*.
- Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*.
- Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*.

Chapter 27: Church, State and Society in Nigeria

When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. (Proverbs 29:2, author's rendering)

27.1 Introduction

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa, home to hundreds of ethnic groups and two dominant religious traditions, Christianity and Islam, along with African traditional religions. Its Christian communities are among the most dynamic on the continent. Its history includes a missionary era, an independence struggle, a civil war, long periods of military rule, the return to civilian government and persistent challenges of poverty, corruption and insecurity. This chapter reflects on the prophetic calling of the church in the specific setting of Nigeria. It is written as a contribution to discussion, not as a political pronouncement, and readers are encouraged to bring their own knowledge and experience.

27.2 A Brief History of Christianity in Nigeria

Christian missions came to southern Nigeria in the nineteenth century through the Church Missionary Society, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic bodies, among others. Freed slaves returning from Sierra Leone played an important role. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, himself a freed slave, became the first African Anglican bishop in 1864 and led translation work in Yoruba and other languages. Missionaries established schools, clinics and printing presses that contributed to education and social change, though they were also entangled with colonial power and sometimes dismissive of African culture.

From the early twentieth century, African-initiated churches such as the Aladura bodies emerged, with strong emphases on prayer, visions and healing. Later, Pentecostal and charismatic revivals, particularly from the 1970s, spread through universities and cities, leading to the growth of large denominations and ministries. Christian organisations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria, established in 1976, and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, established in the 1980s, provide platforms for cooperation and public voice.

27.3 The Constitutional and Social Context

Nigeria's Constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and states that the government shall not adopt any religion as a state religion. This secular framework is an important protection for believers of all faiths. In practice, relations between religious communities are complex, shaped by history, ethnicity, region, economic competition and politics. Religious identity has often been entangled with political identity, sometimes producing tension and violence. Scholars such as Matthew Hassan Kukah have written on the intersection of religion, politics and power in northern Nigeria, and others, such as Toyin Falola, have studied religious violence and its roots.

27.4 Pressing Challenges

- Insecurity. Insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal clashes and violence affect many parts of the country. Since around 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency in the

northeast has caused immense suffering, including attacks on churches, mosques, schools and communities. Conflicts over land between farmers and herders have also claimed many lives. Victims have included both Christians and Muslims.

- Poverty and unemployment. Despite Nigeria's resources, a large portion of the population lives in poverty, and many young people lack employment.
- Corruption. Corruption affects public services and trust in institutions.
- Governance and elections. Questions about credible elections, accountability and the delivery of public goods are persistent.
- Education and health. Infrastructure and quality in schools and health services remain uneven.
- Inequality and regional disparities. Differences in resources and opportunity feed grievances.

27.5 The Prophetic Role of the Nigerian Church

27.5.1 Speaking truthfully to power

The prophetic tradition calls the church to speak truthfully to those in authority. This includes calling for good governance, accountability, fair elections, the rule of law, the protection of lives and property and responsible use of public funds. Such speech should be informed by facts, expressed respectfully and directed toward the common good. It must apply equally to leaders of every party and region. The church must avoid being used as a platform for political propaganda or being drawn into relationships of patronage that compromise its voice.

27.5.2 Practising integrity within the church

Credibility depends on the church's own conduct. Churches that call for transparency in government must be transparent in their finances. Churches that criticise abuse of power must address abuse of power within their own ranks. The prophetic principle that judgement begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17) applies. The church should lead by example in honesty, fair labour practices, care for employees and responsible management of resources.

27.5.3 Peacemaking and interfaith relations

Nigeria's religious diversity calls for peacemaking. Jesus commands love for neighbour and love for enemies (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 10:25-37). Paul urges, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18). Christians are called to refuse revenge and to seek reconciliation. They should protect their own communities from violence, support victims, seek justice through lawful means, and defend the rights of all citizens, including those of other faiths. Peace initiatives involving Christian and Muslim leaders have emerged at various times and deserve encouragement. Dialogue does not require denying one's convictions; it requires honesty, respect and a commitment to the common good. First Peter 3:15-16 counsels giving a reason for one's hope with gentleness and respect.

27.5.4 Elections and civic responsibility

Elections present both opportunity and temptation. The church should encourage members to register, vote conscientiously, serve as observers and reject bribery, intimidation and violence. Civic education that explains the electoral process, the responsibilities of citizens and the characteristics of just leadership is a valuable ministry. At the same time, the church should be cautious about endorsing particular candidates from the pulpit. Declaring from the pulpit

that God has chosen a particular candidate, or issuing prophecies predicting election winners, is hazardous. History shows that such predictions are often wrong, may be used to manipulate voters and bring the gift of prophecy into disrepute. Biblical prophets challenged all rulers in the light of God's standards; they did not function as campaign agents. If a leader professes the Christian faith, the church should still hold that leader to the standard of Scripture.

27.5.5 Service to society

Nigerian churches already do much in education, healthcare, skills training, microfinance, orphan care and relief. These contributions should continue and be coordinated where possible with government and civil society. Churches can also help address unemployment by training young people and supporting entrepreneurship, and can care for the displaced and traumatised.

27.5.6 Challenging cultures of fear and exploitation

In a context of hardship, people may be vulnerable to exploitation by those who claim spiritual power. The church must resist and expose fraudulent practices, including selling miracles, using fear of curses to extract money, and false claims of healing. It should cooperate with lawful efforts to protect the public from harm while safeguarding the freedom of religion.

27.6 Voices from Nigerian Church History

Nigerian Christianity has a history of leaders who engaged public questions. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop, advocated for the translation of the Bible into African languages, defended the capacity of Africans for leadership and worked for the suppression of the slave trade, though he faced racism within the missionary structures and was eventually sidelined in his later years. Mary Slessor, a Scottish missionary who worked among the Efik and Igbo peoples of the Calabar region from 1876 until her death in 1915, opposed the practice of killing twin babies and cared for rejected children, becoming a respected figure among local people. Her story is a reminder that missionaries sometimes protected the vulnerable, even as they brought a European cultural framework.

In the twentieth century, prophets and leaders of the Aladura churches gave voice to a Nigerian Christianity that responded to local needs. During the civil war of 1967 to 1970, Christian bodies from various parts of the world coordinated relief efforts, including an airlift of food and medicine known as Joint Church Aid, to the people affected by famine in the region of Biafra. The war left deep scars, and the churches' role in reconciliation and care for the displaced continued afterwards.

Throughout the period of military rule that spanned much of the years from 1966 to 1999, churches were sometimes critical of the government and sometimes accommodating. The formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria in 1976 provided a platform for collective voice. Individual church leaders spoke on questions of human rights, corruption and elections. The historic record is mixed, and a candid assessment would note both courageous witness and compromise.

27.7 Interfaith Relations in Nigeria

Nigeria is home to large Christian and Muslim populations, and relations between them are of great importance to national life. Christians and Muslims share some beliefs, such as the oneness of God, creation, prophecy, and the importance of prayer, charity and moral living. They also differ profoundly on matters such as the nature of Christ, the Trinity, the cross and the

authority of Scripture. Christians should neither blur these differences nor treat their neighbours as enemies. Jesus's command to love our neighbours includes those of other faiths, and the parable of the good Samaritan makes the point forcefully.

Several principles can guide Christian engagement.

1. Know your own faith and neighbour's faith. Study the Scriptures, and learn about Islam from Muslim sources and from fair-minded scholars, not from caricatures.
2. Build friendships. Relationships of trust provide the context for honest conversation and cooperation.
3. Bear witness with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Share your faith without coercion, deceit or inducement.
4. Cooperate for the common good. Christians and Muslims can work together on health, education, peacebuilding and poverty reduction.
5. Defend religious freedom for all. The right to worship, to share one's faith peacefully and to change one's religion should be protected for everyone.
6. Resist stereotyping. No religious community is monolithic, and generalisations about the violent or the peaceful ignore the variety within each.
7. Respond to violence without retaliation. Romans 12:17-21 commands believers not to repay evil for evil but to overcome evil with good.

Bodies such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, established around 1999 with leaders from both communities, have sought to promote dialogue. Their effectiveness has varied, but the principle of joint engagement at the leadership level is sound. Local initiatives, such as the peace work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, show what can be achieved through committed individuals.

27.8 The Church, Elections and Public Office

Elections in Nigeria draw enormous attention and often generate tension. The church's role should be as a promoter of peace, truth and civic responsibility. Practical guidance includes the following.

- Encourage registration and voting, and provide information on the process in a non-partisan manner.
- Teach the biblical qualities of leadership: justice, integrity, concern for the poor, humility and accountability. Invite members to assess candidates by these criteria.
- Avoid using the pulpit to campaign. Religious leaders who endorse candidates risk dividing congregations and undermining their credibility. Rather than endorsing a candidate, they can pray for peaceful elections and fair outcomes.
- Beware of prophecies about electoral results. Such predictions are risky and are often made in return for favour. If wrong, they discredit the speaker; if right, they may be seen as favouring a candidate. Both outcomes harm the church.
- Refuse bribes and inducements. Votes and church platforms should not be for sale.
- Condemn violence and intimidation. Pastors should call for peace and discourage young people from being used as political thugs.
- Support peaceful processes for resolving disputes, including the courts.
- Accept the legitimate results with grace, and continue to pray for those in authority.

The church should also encourage members who feel called to public service. The Bible gives examples of believers who served in government, such as Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon and Nehemiah in Persia. They worked with integrity, competence and courage. Christians in public office face temptations and pressures, and their churches should support them with prayer and counsel, as well as holding them accountable. The danger is that politicians use church platforms for legitimacy, and the church uses politicians for access. Both temptations should be recognised and resisted.

27.9 Insecurity, Violence and the Church's Response

Violence has affected many communities, whether through insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal clashes or criminality. Churches, mosques, schools and markets have been targeted. Many have lost family members, homes and livelihoods. The church's response should be shaped by love, justice and truth.

1. Care for victims. Provide pastoral support, shelter, food, medical care and trauma counselling for those affected, regardless of their religion.
2. Accompany the bereaved. Funerals and memorials are acts of solidarity and witness.
3. Document and report abuses accurately. Truthful, careful documentation of attacks, deaths and displacement serves justice and counters rumour. Exaggeration and unverified claims damage credibility and can inflame tension.
4. Advocate for protection and justice. The state has a duty to protect citizens and to prosecute offenders. The church should hold authorities to account and support lawful efforts to secure justice.
5. Take sensible precautions. Congregations may develop security plans, train teams and coordinate with authorities, while avoiding the militarisation of church life.
6. Refuse revenge. Jesus' teaching to love enemies is demanding. The church should be a place where cycles of retaliation are broken.
7. Remember that suffering is shared. Muslims, Christians and others have all suffered. Acknowledging the suffering of others fosters empathy and trust.
8. Work for the causes of violence. These include poverty, inequality, marginalisation of youth, competition over land and water, impunity and manipulation of identity for political gain.

27.10 Corruption: The Church as Judge and as Participant

A prophetic stance on corruption requires honesty about the church's own involvement. Church members work in government, business and other sectors where corruption is common. Some benefit from it. Sometimes churches accept gifts from wealthy donors without asking how the wealth was acquired. At times, church leaders pursue contracts or favours from politicians, or are tempted to trade on their influence.

The Bible's teaching is clear. Exodus 23:8 forbids bribes, which blind the clear-sighted and subvert the cause of those who are in the right. Proverbs 15:27 says that whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household. Micah 6:10-12 denounces treasures of wickedness, a short ephah and dishonest scales. When tax collectors and soldiers asked John the Baptist what they should do, he told them not to collect more than they were authorised to, and not to extort money or accuse people falsely, and to be content with their wages (Luke 3:12-14). Zacchaeus, on meeting Jesus, promised to restore fourfold anything he had taken by fraud (Luke 19:8).

The church can take practical steps. It can teach integrity in all areas of life, and incorporate teaching on honesty in work and business into its discipleship. It can establish policies on donations that require transparency and refuse gifts known to come from illegal sources. It can encourage whistleblowers and protect those who report wrongdoing. It can model integrity in its own finances. It can cooperate with anti-corruption efforts and call for reforms. And it can support members who suffer for refusing to take part in corruption. The debate about whether tithes and offerings from corrupt wealth should be accepted has been vigorous. The prophetic principle is that the church cannot be bought, and that its integrity is more valuable than any gift.

27.11 Education, Health and Economic Empowerment

The church has long served Nigeria through education and health. Mission schools educated generations of leaders in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century. In the 1970s, many mission schools were taken over by state governments, and some were later returned to their original proprietors. In recent decades, churches have established private universities and secondary schools, which have expanded access to education for many, though fees can put them beyond the reach of the poor. Church-run hospitals and clinics continue to serve communities, especially in rural areas.

A prophetic church can strengthen its contribution in these areas. It can ensure that its educational institutions are marked by integrity, quality, affordability and concern for the poor. It can cooperate with government to improve public education and health. It can provide scholarships and vocational training. It can promote literacy, including adult literacy. It can support savings groups and cooperatives, of which traditional rotating savings associations such as the Yoruba *esusu* are an example. It can encourage agricultural improvement and entrepreneurship. It can teach financial literacy and help members avoid exploitative lending. It can advocate for policies that improve the lot of the poor. And it can foster a culture of work and generosity in which no one is left behind.

27.12 A Framework for Church-State Relations in Nigeria

1. Respect for the state's legitimate role. Believers should obey the law, pay taxes and honour authorities, praying for them.
2. Independence of the church. The church's mission must not be controlled by the state or by political patrons.
3. Freedom of religion for all. The church defends the right of all citizens to worship and to share their convictions peacefully.
4. A prophetic distance. Close relationships with leaders may offer opportunities for influence, but the church must retain freedom to speak truth.
5. Cooperation for the common good. In areas such as health, education, disaster relief and peacebuilding, partnership with government and other groups can be beneficial.
6. Non-violence and the rule of law. Grievances should be pursued by lawful, peaceful means.
7. Solidarity with the suffering. The church stands with victims of violence and injustice regardless of their identity.

27.13 Hope for Nigeria

Jeremiah's counsel to seek the welfare of the city invites Christians to invest in the good of their nation. The church believes that God cares for Nigeria and desires its flourishing. Hope is not naive optimism but confidence that God works through faithful communities. The church can contribute by forming citizens of character, modelling reconciliation, serving the needy and speaking truth. In a nation of great diversity and great potential, the prophetic church has an opportunity to be a sign of what a just and peaceful society might look like.

27.14 Chapter Summary

- Christianity in Nigeria has a rich history of missions, African-initiated churches and Pentecostal revival.
- The Constitution provides for religious freedom, and the context is marked by religious diversity and complex relationships.
- The nation faces insecurity, poverty, corruption and governance challenges.
- The prophetic church speaks truthfully to power, practises integrity, makes peace, promotes civic responsibility, serves society and resists exploitation.
- A framework of respect, independence, freedom, prophetic distance, cooperation, non-violence and solidarity can guide church-state relations.
- Voices from Nigerian history, interfaith relations, elections, insecurity, corruption, and education and health provide specific areas for application.

27.15 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How can churches speak to the nation's challenges without becoming partisan?
2. What are the risks of election prophecies, and how should churches handle them?
3. What concrete steps can Christians take to build peace with neighbours of other faiths?
4. How can churches model transparency and accountability in their own affairs?
5. What forms of service could your church offer to its community?

27.16 Suggested Further Reading

- Matthew Hassan Kukah, Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria.
- Toyin Falola, Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies.
- J. D. Y. Peel, Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction.
- Paul Gifford, African Christianity: Its Public Role.
- Lamin Sanneh, Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa.

Chapter 28: Mission, the Global Church and Ecumenical Engagement

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9, author's rendering)

28.1 Introduction

A prophetic church is a sent church. It does not exist for itself but for the sake of the world to which God sends it. Part VII has considered the church's engagement with justice, with the African continent and with Nigeria. This final chapter widens the lens to the global scene: the mission of the church, the shift of Christianity's centre of gravity, the relationships among churches and the call to unity. It asks what it means for the prophetic church to participate in God's mission to the world.

28.2 The Mission of God

Mission begins with God. The term *missio Dei*, the mission of God, expresses the conviction that God is a sending God: the Father sends the Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit, and the Father, Son and Spirit send the church. Christopher Wright, in *The Mission of God*, argues that the whole Bible can be read as the story of God's mission to bless the nations through Abraham's seed and ultimately through Christ. The church does not own mission; it participates in what God is doing.

The prophetic books anticipated this global horizon. Isaiah envisaged the Servant as a light to the nations. Jonah was sent to Nineveh. Jesus' last words to his disciples in Acts 1:8 set out an expanding circle of witness: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. The vision of Revelation 7:9, with its multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, is the final goal.

28.3 Holistic Mission

The church's mission includes the proclamation of the gospel, the making of disciples, the planting of churches, the service of the needy and the pursuit of justice. The Lausanne Covenant of 1974, issued by an international gathering of evangelicals, affirmed both evangelism and social responsibility as part of the Christian duty. The later Cape Town Commitment of 2010 spoke of integral mission, in which word and deed belong together. The Old Testament prophets and the ministry of Jesus support this holistic view. Jesus preached the kingdom and healed the sick; he announced good news to the poor and fed the hungry. A prophetic church refuses a false choice between saving souls and serving society.

28.4 The Shift to the Global South

Historians such as Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh and Philip Jenkins have documented a remarkable shift in the demographics of world Christianity. In 1900, the majority of Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, the majority live in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The centre of gravity has moved south. Christianity is now more diverse, more multicultural and more oriented to the experience of the global majority than at any previous time.

This shift has implications. African, Asian and Latin American churches are becoming senders as well as receivers of missionaries. Nigerian churches, for example, have established congregations in Europe, North America and elsewhere, including the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which has planted churches in many countries. Migration has brought Christians from the Global South into Western cities, enriching the church and contributing to renewal. Sometimes this is described as reverse mission. It challenges older assumptions about who the missionaries are and where the church is strong.

28.5 Partnership, Power and Money

Global mission raises questions of power and resources. Historically, missionary work often accompanied colonial expansion and carried paternalistic attitudes. Today, wealthy churches continue to hold financial advantage, which can distort relationships. Principles for healthy partnership include mutuality, respect for local leadership, transparency about money, long-term commitment, avoidance of dependency and willingness to learn from one another. Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem was an expression of reciprocal partnership between Gentile and Jewish believers (Romans 15:25-27). Churches in the Global South should likewise avoid paternalism toward their own neighbours and resist the temptation to replicate patterns of dominance.

28.6 Contextualisation and Faithfulness

Taking the gospel to new cultures requires discernment. Contextualisation seeks to express the gospel in forms intelligible and relevant to the receiving culture, without compromising its content. Paul's address on the Areopagus, in which he quoted Greek poets and spoke of the unknown god, is a model. Yet contextualisation has its risks, from irrelevance on one side to syncretism on the other. The prophetic church must engage cultural forms critically, affirming what is good, purifying what is distorted and rejecting what is contrary to Christ.

28.7 Unity and Ecumenical Engagement

Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, so that the world may believe that the Father sent him (John 17:21). Paul urges the Ephesians to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, since there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:3-6). Yet the church is divided by denomination, doctrine, ethnicity, language and style. These divisions weaken its witness.

Ecumenical movements have sought to heal divisions. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 is often seen as an important starting point for modern ecumenism. The World Council of Churches was founded in 1948 and includes many Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant and other churches. The Lausanne Movement, the World Evangelical Alliance and other bodies provide platforms for evangelical cooperation. Dialogue between Pentecostals and the Roman Catholic Church has been ongoing since 1972. Many Pentecostal and charismatic leaders have historically been wary of ecumenical bodies, fearing doctrinal compromise, while others have valued cooperation.

A prophetic ecclesiology recognises both the importance of unity and the importance of truth. The church should seek visible unity wherever possible, cooperate in mission, service and

public witness, and engage in honest theological dialogue, without surrendering the gospel. Spiritual unity is a gift, and its visible expression is a task. Divisive attitudes, competition between ministries and the exaltation of leaders over Christ contradict the prophetic call.

28.8 Witness among Religions and Persecution

The church lives alongside people of other faiths and none. A prophetic approach calls for respectful engagement, willingness to listen and readiness to give an account of hope (1 Peter 3:15). It rejects coercion and deceit in evangelism and honours the freedom of conscience. It also calls for solidarity with the persecuted. Millions of Christians around the world suffer discrimination, imprisonment, displacement and death because of their faith, and the church is urged to remember those in prison as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated as though in their place (Hebrews 13:3). The church is equally called to stand for the rights of others who are persecuted for their convictions.

28.9 New Frontiers of Mission

- Digital mission. The internet and social media offer opportunities for evangelism, teaching and fellowship, together with risks of superficiality, misinformation and celebrity culture.
- Urbanisation. Rapid growth of cities requires new models of church planting, ministry among the poor and engagement with diverse populations.
- Migration and refugees. Displaced peoples need welcome and care, and migrants are also bearers of mission.
- Youth and generational transmission. Reaching and retaining younger generations is a vital challenge.
- Creation and climate. Mission includes care for the earth in light of its effect on the poor and its status as God's creation.
- Unreached peoples. Many communities still have limited access to the gospel in their language.

28.10 Biblical Models of Mission

The Bible presents several models for understanding mission.

- Abraham: go and be a blessing. The call to leave one's country, with the promise that all the families of the earth will be blessed through his offspring, is the first great missionary charge (Genesis 12:1-3).
- Joseph: faithful presence in a foreign court. Joseph served Pharaoh with wisdom and integrity and became the means of preserving life for many nations (Genesis 41 and 45:5-8).
- Jonah: the reluctant missionary. Sent to preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, he ran the other way. His story reveals God's concern for outsiders and the narrowness of the prophet's heart.
- The Servant: a light to the nations. Isaiah's Servant is called to bring justice and salvation to the ends of the earth, through suffering.
- Jesus: the sent one. Jesus described his mission in terms of being sent by the Father to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and he sent his disciples as the Father had sent

him (John 20:21). His mission was incarnational: he entered human life, took the form of a servant and lived among us.

- The seventy-two: vulnerable witnesses. In Luke 10, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him, like lambs among wolves, carrying no money bag, relying on hospitality, bringing peace and healing and proclaiming that the kingdom of God had come near.
- Paul: pioneer and pastor. His journeys, letters and relationships show a missionary who planted churches, trained leaders and cared for those he led.
- The Antioch church: a sending congregation. It listened to the Spirit, released its best leaders and supported their work.

The commission appears in various forms across the Gospels and Acts: Matthew 28:18-20, with its call to make disciples of all nations; Mark 16:15, to proclaim the gospel to the whole creation; Luke 24:46-49, with repentance and forgiveness to all nations; John 20:21, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you; and Acts 1:8, witnesses to the end of the earth. Together they show that mission is rooted in the authority of the risen Christ, empowered by the Spirit and directed to all peoples.

28.11 A Short History of Christian Mission

The church has been a missionary movement from the beginning. In the first centuries, the gospel spread through the networks of the Roman Empire and beyond its borders, through merchants, soldiers, slaves, teachers and travellers. The church grew despite persecution. In the seventh century, a Syriac Christian named Alopen arrived in China, and a church existed there for some time. Monastic missionaries carried the gospel to Ireland, Britain and across Europe. Franciscans and Dominicans in the Middle Ages travelled widely. In the sixteenth century, Jesuits such as Francis Xavier took the gospel to India, Japan and elsewhere.

The Protestant missionary movement gained momentum from the eighteenth century. The Moravians sent missionaries from Herrnhut to the Caribbean and Greenland from 1732. William Carey, a cobbler and Baptist minister, sailed to India in 1793, urging that the church use means for the conversion of the heathen. In the nineteenth century, societies proliferated: the Church Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society, the Basel Mission and many others. Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in 1865 with an emphasis on reaching the interior. David Livingstone explored Africa, opposed the slave trade and popularised the slogan of Christianity, commerce and civilisation, a formula that reveals both the humanitarian hopes and the cultural assumptions of the age.

The relationship between missions and colonialism was complex. Missionaries sometimes benefited from colonial protection and often shared colonial attitudes. They sometimes criticised colonial abuses and defended local people. They contributed to education, medicine, the abolition of the slave trade and the preservation of languages through translation. They also sometimes destroyed or disparaged local culture. Historians continue to debate the balance. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 marked a high point of missionary optimism and the start of the ecumenical movement. After the Second World War, the era of decolonisation changed the landscape; mission-founded churches became self-governing, and the leadership of the church moved to the Global South. Today, mission is from everywhere to everywhere.

28.12 Mission from Africa and Nigeria

African Christians are now significant participants in global mission. African missionaries serve in Europe, Asia, the Americas and other parts of Africa. Nigerian churches, including Pentecostal and older denominations, have sent missionaries and planted congregations in many countries. The Evangelical Missionary Society of ECWA, which began in the mid-twentieth century, has sent Nigerians to other parts of Africa. The Redeemed Christian Church of God has planted congregations in numerous countries and is among the churches with an international presence. Diaspora communities in Europe and North America include many African believers who not only maintain their faith but also reach out to their neighbours.

Mission-sending churches in Africa face particular challenges. These include limited financial resources, the need for cross-cultural training, the importance of understanding other cultures and religions, the risks of exporting cultural forms along with the gospel and the need for partnership. Good practice includes the following.

1. Clear calling and sending. Missionaries should be recognised by their home church after testing, as at Antioch.
2. Thorough preparation. Training in Scripture, mission, language, culture and spiritual formation should precede departure.
3. Reliable support. Churches should commit to the financial and prayer support of those they send, and not leave them to fend for themselves.
4. Accountability and care. Missionaries need a sending body and a field team to whom they are accountable and who care for their well-being, including their families.
5. Partnership with local churches. The goal is to serve the local church, not to replace it.
6. Care for re-entry. Those who return from the field need support to readjust.
7. Attention to the unreached. Many peoples and languages still lack a viable Christian presence, and missionaries should be directed to the places of greatest need as well as the most familiar.

28.13 Bible Translation and Mother Tongues

The translation of Scripture into the languages of the people is at the heart of the Christian mission, as Lamin Sanneh has insisted. Pentecost itself affirms that the gospel is for every language. Today, the Bible in whole or part has been translated into more than a thousand languages, but there are many more languages without any Scripture. Organisations such as the Bible societies and Wycliffe Bible Translators, together with African institutions, are involved in translation, and the process increasingly draws on mother-tongue speakers.

The history of Yoruba shows the potential of translation. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who had himself been enslaved and rescued, led the translation of the Yoruba New Testament, and the complete Yoruba Bible was published in 1884. The availability of the Bible in Yoruba shaped the language, strengthened literacy and gave Yoruba Christians a foundation for faith. Similar stories could be told for many other languages.

Translation work in Nigeria, with its hundreds of languages, remains incomplete. Churches can support it through prayer, funding and the recruitment of capable translators. They can also encourage the use of Scripture in mother tongues in worship and teaching, even where English or another language is the dominant medium. Audio and video recordings, digital tools and

mobile phone applications have opened new avenues, especially for those who cannot read. The translation of the Bible is a prophetic act, affirming the dignity of every people and language.

28.14 Witness in a Plural World

The church lives alongside people of many faiths. Theologians have described three broad positions on the relation of Christianity to other religions, following a typology popularised by Alan Race: exclusivism, which holds that salvation is only through explicit faith in Christ; inclusivism, which holds that salvation is through Christ alone but may reach people who have not heard of him explicitly; and pluralism, which holds that all religions are different valid paths to the divine. Each position appeals to Scripture. Texts such as John 14:6, I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me, and Acts 4:12, there is salvation in no one else, are central for exclusivists and inclusivists. Acts 17 and Romans 1 and 2, which speak of God's self-disclosure to all and of the conscience, are sometimes cited in discussions of how God deals with those who have not heard.

This book holds to the uniqueness and universal significance of Jesus Christ, while recognising that Christians differ about the fate of those who have not heard, and that God's justice and mercy are not ours to determine. The practical stance of the church is therefore what Lesslie Newbigin called confident humility: confidence in the gospel, humility in the manner of its presentation. In practice, this means loving neighbours of all faiths, listening to them, sharing the good news with courtesy, rejecting coercion, defending freedom of conscience, seeking the common good and trusting that God is at work.

Converts from other faiths may face severe consequences, including family rejection, loss of livelihood and sometimes violence. The church has a responsibility to receive them with love, to provide support and to help them navigate their new life. Care for such believers is a mark of authentic mission.

28.15 The Persecuted Church and Global Solidarity

Scripture teaches that the body of Christ is one, and when one member suffers, all suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). The letter to the Hebrews urges believers to remember those in prison as though in prison with them and those who are mistreated as though being mistreated yourselves (Hebrews 13:3). In the contemporary world, Christians in many countries suffer discrimination, imprisonment, displacement and death. The global church has a duty of solidarity.

Solidarity may take several forms. Prayer is the first and fundamental form, and persecuted Christians often ask for prayer for faithfulness and for their persecutors. Relief for displaced families and survivors, legal assistance for those imprisoned and advocacy with governments and international bodies may all be appropriate. Truthful reporting is essential: stories of persecution should be accurate, free from exaggeration and sensitive to the safety of those concerned. Care must also be taken to avoid actions that increase danger to local believers. Finally, solidarity extends beyond one's own community. Christians who campaign for the rights of persecuted believers should also defend the rights of others who suffer for their convictions, for consistency and credibility. The church's concern for justice is universal.

28.16 Implications for Prophetic Ecclesiology

1. The church is by nature missionary. Its identity and activity are bound to God's mission.
2. Mission is holistic, uniting proclamation and justice.
3. The global church is a family. The strength of one part is the gift of all, and the suffering of one is the concern of all.
4. Partnership requires humility, transparency and mutuality.
5. Faithful contextualisation roots the gospel in each culture while testing cultural forms by Scripture.
6. Unity is part of the church's witness and should be pursued actively, in truth and love.

28.17 Chapter Summary

- Mission is God's, and the church participates in it as a sent community.
- Holistic mission joins word and deed, evangelism and justice.
- The centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the Global South, with new patterns of mission.
- Healthy partnership requires attention to power, money and mutual respect.
- Contextualisation, unity, interfaith witness and solidarity with the persecuted belong to the church's global calling.
- Biblical models, a short history of mission, mission from Africa and Nigeria, Bible translation, witness in a plural world and global solidarity complete the picture.

28.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does your church participate in God's mission beyond its own community?
2. What does the global shift of Christianity teach about the church's identity and future?
3. How can partnerships between richer and poorer churches avoid dependency and paternalism?
4. What obstacles prevent unity among Christians in your region, and how might they be addressed?
5. How can the church bear witness to Christ among neighbours of other faiths with both conviction and respect?

28.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*.
- Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.
- Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.
- Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.
- David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.
- Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*.
- The Lausanne Covenant (1974) and The Cape Town Commitment (2010).

Part VIII: Challenges and the Future

Chapter 29: False Prophecy, Abuse and Spiritual Manipulation

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (Matthew 7:15, author's rendering)

29.1 Introduction

Chapters 19 and 20 offered criteria for testing prophecy and a theology of accountable authority. This chapter turns to the problem itself. How does false prophecy arise? What forms does it take? How does manipulation work on the hearts and minds of sincere people? And how should the church respond to those who have been harmed? The subject is painful, and it must be handled with care. Yet silence does not protect the church; it protects abusers. A prophetic church tells the truth about its own failures.

29.2 The Biblical Portrait of False Prophecy

Scripture identifies several kinds of false prophecy.

- Prophecy in the name of other gods (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20; 1 Kings 18). This is the most basic form: leading people away from the Lord.
- Lying prophecy that claims the Lord's name falsely (Jeremiah 14:14; 23:25-32). These prophets say, I have dreamed, yet the Lord did not send them.
- Prophecy shaped by the wishes of the powerful (1 Kings 22). The four hundred prophets told Ahab what he wanted to hear.
- Prophecy that flatters and offers false peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 28; Ezekiel 13:10). The false prophets healed the wound of the people lightly.
- Prophecy for hire (Micah 3:5, 11; Numbers 22 to 24 on Balaam). The prophets divine for money.
- Prophecy that denies Christ or the apostolic gospel (1 John 4:1-3; 2 Peter 2:1; Galatians 1:8-9).
- Prophecy that promotes immorality (Revelation 2:20; Jude 4). Jezebel at Thyatira taught believers to practise sexual immorality.

The Acts of the Apostles adds vivid cases of counterfeit spiritual power. Simon the magician in Samaria was amazed by the signs he saw and tried to buy the power of the Spirit with money; Peter rebuked him sharply (Acts 8:9-24). Elymas the magician opposed the gospel before the proconsul on Cyprus and was struck blind (Acts 13:6-12). A slave girl with a spirit of divination earned her owners large profits by fortune-telling; Paul freed her, and the owners, seeing their income vanish, stirred up opposition (Acts 16:16-19). The sons of Sceva tried to use the name of Jesus as a formula and were overpowered (Acts 19:13-16). These stories reveal recurring features of counterfeit ministry: love of money, manipulation of power as a technique, and the treatment of the name of Jesus as a tool rather than a person to be obeyed.

29.3 How Deception Works

It is tempting to think that only foolish or weak people are deceived by false prophets. In reality, deception works on people of every kind because it exploits ordinary and often admirable human needs and tendencies. Understanding these dynamics is a form of pastoral wisdom.

- The need for certainty. People in crisis long for clear answers about illness, unemployment, childlessness, marriage or safety. A confident voice that claims to know can be deeply attractive.
- Charisma and authority. Persons who project confidence, warmth and spiritual power can create strong attachment. Once a leader is regarded as God's chosen channel, questioning feels like doubting God.
- Social proof. When many in the room accept a claim, individuals find it hard to dissent. Testimonies of healing or success are circulated, and failures are quietly ignored.
- Selective confirmation. A few accurate statements are remembered while many inaccurate ones are forgotten. General statements that fit nearly anyone feel personal.
- Sunk cost and loyalty. People who have given money, time and reputation to a ministry may find it painful to admit error. They may defend a leader to avoid the grief of disillusionment.
- Fear. Warnings of curses, death, failure or demonic attack create anxiety, and anxious people become dependent on the one who claims to offer protection.
- Isolation. As members are discouraged from outside relationships, they lose the voices that could offer perspective.
- Gradual escalation. Abusive systems rarely begin with extreme demands. Small requests, small compromises and small silences build a pattern that feels normal by the time it has become harmful.

29.4 The Slide from Gift to Abuse

Many cases of spiritual abuse follow a recognisable trajectory. It often begins with a genuine gift and sincere calling. As the ministry grows, praise accumulates and the leader becomes a public figure. The ministry's success is taken as proof of divine approval. Accountability structures weaken, because the leader is too important or too busy to be questioned. Close advisers become dependent on the leader for position or income and learn that disagreement is costly. Secrecy increases. Demands for loyalty are framed in spiritual terms: touch not the Lord's anointed. Eventually, financial irregularities, sexual misconduct or coercive control emerge, and those who raise concerns are silenced, shamed or expelled. When exposure comes, the damage extends beyond the victims to families, congregations and the public reputation of the gospel.

The point of describing this slide is not to cast suspicion on every gifted leader but to encourage early intervention. The earlier a church recognises warning signs and strengthens accountability, the more likely it is to protect both the leader and the flock.

29.5 Specific Forms of Counterfeit and Harmful Practice

- Date-setting. Predictions of the exact time of Christ's return, in defiance of Jesus' words that no one knows the day or hour (Matthew 24:36), have a long record of

failure. In 1844, thousands of followers of William Miller in the United States expected the return of Christ and experienced what became known as the Great Disappointment. In 2011, a US broadcaster, Harold Camping, publicly predicted the end of the world on May 21 and then on October 21, and neither occurred. Such episodes damage faith and discredit the church.

- Prophecies of personal fortune for money. Offers of prophetic words in exchange for gifts, or claims that the size of a gift determines the size of a blessing, are forms of simony and fraud.
- Prophecy used to control relationships. Telling a person whom to marry, or declaring that a marriage must end, or that a person's spouse is a spiritual enemy, is a serious abuse.
- Naming of witches and demons. Accusing individuals, especially children and elderly women, of causing harm by witchcraft has led to rejection, violence and death. It has no foundation in the teaching of Jesus.
- False healing claims. Claims that medical treatment is unnecessary or faithless, or the staging of healings, can put lives at risk. Sufferers who are not healed are sometimes blamed.
- Sexual exploitation. Using claims of divine instruction, prophetic anointing or spiritual cleansing to obtain sexual access is predation and often a crime.
- Cultic extremes. At the far end of the spectrum, charismatic leaders claiming exclusive divine authority have led followers to ruin. The mass deaths at Jonestown in Guyana in 1978, under the leader of the Peoples Temple, who claimed prophetic power, remain a terrible warning of the consequences of surrendering conscience to a human being.

29.6 The Harm to Victims

Victims of spiritual abuse may suffer a range of harms: loss of financial resources, damaged relationships, anxiety, depression, shame, confusion about God, loss of trust in the church and difficulty making independent decisions. Because the abuse was committed in God's name, many find that their image of God has been distorted. The experience of leaving may involve grief for the lost community, fear of divine punishment and sometimes social ostracism. Ezekiel's rebuke of the shepherds speaks to this wound: you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured (Ezekiel 34:4).

29.7 Responding to Victims

1. Listen without defensiveness. Believe the person's account as a starting point, and take it seriously. Do not rush to protect the reputation of the church or the leader.
2. Prioritise safety. Where there is risk of harm, especially to children or vulnerable adults, take immediate protective action. Report crimes to the proper authorities.
3. Provide pastoral and professional care. Offer spiritual support, but also encourage access to counselling, medical help and legal advice where needed.
4. Avoid blaming the victim. Do not suggest that the person was naive, rebellious or lacking in faith.
5. Rebuild trust slowly. Healing can take years. Allow questions, doubts and anger. Reintroduce spiritual practices gently.

6. Act on what is learned. Make changes in policy and leadership to prevent recurrence.

29.8 Responding to the Offending Leader and the Church

Leaders found to have engaged in abuse must face consequences. Appropriate steps may include removal from ministry, cooperation with legal processes, restitution where harm has been done and, if there is genuine repentance, a long and supervised process of restoration. Repentance is demonstrated in confession, acceptance of consequences, humility and changed behaviour over time, not in tearful statements alone. The congregation will need honest communication about what happened, within the limits of confidentiality and law, together with opportunities to grieve, to ask questions and to receive care.

The church as a whole must examine the structures and cultures that allowed abuse to flourish. Why were warnings ignored? Why did members feel unable to speak? What incentives encouraged silence? Corporate repentance, public where appropriate, is a mark of a church that takes both the gospel and justice seriously.

29.9 Speaking About False Prophecy with Charity

Not every mistaken prophecy is fraud, and not every error is malicious. Sincere people make errors, and God is gracious. A distinction should be made between honest mistake, careless speech, self-deception and deliberate deceit. Responses should be proportionate. At the same time, the church must not be so tolerant that it permits harm to continue. Love for the flock requires firmness toward wolves. Judging motives is delicate; focusing on observable fruit, conduct and conformity with Scripture is wiser. The attitude commended by Paul toward opponents is that the servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

29.10 Preventive Practices

1. Teach members the Scriptures so that they can recognise falsehood.
2. Make accountability structures real, with independent members and clear complaints procedures.
3. Emphasise the priesthood of all believers, so that no leader is treated as a mediator between believers and God.
4. Foster a culture where questions are welcomed and dissent is not punished.
5. Be transparent about finances and decision-making.
6. Provide safeguarding training and policies and follow them.
7. Encourage leaders to receive pastoral care, supervision and rest.
8. Cooperate with other churches and associations for mutual oversight.

29.11 Composite Case Studies

The following five cases are composite illustrations. They are not accounts of real churches or persons, but they reflect patterns reported in many places. Readers may use them for discussion, applying the framework of Chapters 19 and 20 and the warning signs described in this chapter.

Case A: The anointed items

A well-known preacher sells bottles of anointing oil, cloths and stickers to followers, claiming that they carry protection from sickness, theft and failure. Those who buy more are promised greater blessing. Followers who suffer misfortune are told that they have not used the items with enough faith. Warning signs: the sale of spiritual goods, promises of protection tied to payment, and blaming of the sufferer. Response: leaders and members should recall Peter's rebuke to Simon and the apostolic refusal to sell spiritual gifts, call for transparency, and, where fraud is involved, report to the authorities.

Case B: The isolating community

A fast-growing group is led by a charismatic founder who teaches that outsiders, including family members and other churches, are spiritually dangerous. Members are encouraged to live together, give all their income to the community and obtain permission for major decisions. Those who raise doubts are shamed in public meetings. Warning signs: isolation, control of information and decisions, financial demands, punishment of dissent. Response: a church that discovers such a pattern should encourage members to keep contact with family, to seek outside advice and to consult a trusted pastor or counsellor. Wider church bodies should consider assessing the group and, if necessary, issuing a warning.

Case C: The covering

A senior pastor tells young women in his ministry that, as their spiritual covering, he must be able to know their most private matters, and that physical contact is a way of imparting blessing. Some report feeling uncomfortable but are told they are resisting the Spirit. Warning signs: use of spiritual language to justify intimacy and secrecy, pressure and shaming. Response: this is sexual exploitation under the guise of ministry. Anyone aware of it should report it to the church's oversight body and, as appropriate, to the police. The pastor should be removed from ministry pending investigation, and survivors supported with care and confidentiality.

Case D: The failed prediction

A prophet announces that a certain event will occur on a specified date. Followers sell property or leave jobs in preparation. When the date passes with no event, the prophet declares that the prediction was a test of faith or was misunderstood, and sets a new date. Warning signs: date-setting, major sacrifices based on a prediction, and the refusal to acknowledge error. Response: churches should teach clearly that Jesus said no one knows the day or hour, and should help those who have suffered losses. The prophet should be called to repent publicly.

Case E: The witch-finding

A pastor declares that the reason for the death of several members in a community is witchcraft practised by children. Several children are identified, beaten and driven from their homes. Warning signs: accusations against vulnerable persons, violence, and the appeal to prophetic insight as evidence. Response: immediate action is needed to protect the children, report to the police and child protection services, and bring them into safe care. The church must teach clearly that such accusations are contrary to the gospel, and the pastor should be disciplined and, where the law has been broken, prosecuted.

29.12 Historical Cases and Their Lessons

History offers sobering examples of prophetic claims that led to disaster. Several have been mentioned already: the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster, the Millerite disappointment, Jonestown and the date-setting of Harold Camping. Others deepen the picture.

- The Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856 and 1857. A young woman named Nongqawuse reported messages from ancestors telling the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape to destroy their cattle and crops, promising that the dead would then rise and the colonisers would be swept into the sea. Many obeyed, and the resulting famine killed tens of thousands and shattered the community. This was not a Christian movement, but it illustrates how prophecy combined with desperation and political stress can lead to catastrophe. It also shows how leaders of the society who disagreed were overridden.
- The Ugandan sect at Kanungu. In March 2000, hundreds of members of a doomsday sect, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, died in a fire in a church building, and further bodies were found in the area. The movement had arisen in a Catholic context and was led by figures who claimed revelations from the Virgin Mary and predicted the end of the world. Its story involves secrecy, isolation, and the manipulation of apocalyptic fears.
- The Lumpa Church in Zambia. As noted in Chapter 4, the church founded by Alice Lenshina clashed with the government in 1964, leading to the deaths of hundreds. The case is complex, as it involved political tensions, but it illustrates the dangers when a religious movement and a state come into violent conflict.

The lessons are consistent. Apocalyptic predictions combined with isolation, charismatic authority and the sacrifice of normal life have an alarming record. Early intervention, education and the maintenance of ties between members and the wider community are important preventives. At the same time, the church must not overreact by treating every apocalyptic or charismatic movement as dangerous. The great majority are not. The key is to look for the specific patterns of control and harm.

29.13 The Dynamics of Coercive Control

Social psychologists have studied how groups exercise powerful influence over their members. Robert Jay Lifton, in his study of thought reform, identified features that tend to be present in totalistic environments, including milieu control (restriction of communication and information), manipulation that presents events as mystically ordained, demands for purity, a cult of confession, a sacred science that places the group's doctrine beyond question, loading the language with jargon that stops thought, the subordination of the person to doctrine and the doctrine that those outside the group have no right to exist in the same way. Steven Hassan has developed a model that considers control of behaviour, information, thought and emotion. These frameworks do not prove that a group is harmful, and they should not be applied lightly, but they can help to identify patterns of concern.

A healthy community differs in several respects.

- It welcomes questions and permits dissent.
- It respects members' freedom to come and go, to seek outside advice and to maintain relationships with family and friends.
- It is transparent about its finances, leadership and beliefs.

- It does not demand that members surrender their possessions, conscience or judgement.
- It treats leaving members with respect, without shunning or vilifying them.
- Its leaders are accountable and acknowledge their limits.
- It encourages members to grow in maturity and independence.
- It points beyond itself to Christ.

29.14 Recovery and Healing for Survivors

People who have been through spiritual abuse need time, patience and appropriate help in order to recover. The path is not the same for everyone, but several elements are commonly helpful.

1. Safety. A person needs to be physically and emotionally safe, with freedom from ongoing contact with the abuser if this is a source of harm.
2. Acknowledgement. It is often a relief to have the experience named and believed. Professional counsellors with experience of spiritual abuse can help.
3. Grief. Survivors often grieve the loss of community, identity, time and trust. Space for lament is essential.
4. Rebuilding relationships. Friends, family and a trustworthy church can provide a new network of support.
5. Reclaiming Scripture and prayer. Some survivors find that texts and practices associated with the abuse are painful. They may need to rediscover Scripture and prayer slowly, with help, and may benefit from reading biblical passages that portray God as a shepherd who seeks the lost and heals the broken, such as Ezekiel 34 and Psalm 23.
6. Practical help. Legal advice, financial counselling and assistance with housing and employment may be needed.
7. Time. Healing is a process, and setbacks are normal.

Family members and friends can help by listening without judgement, resisting the urge to say I told you so, avoiding pressure to forgive or return and being patient. The prophet Isaiah says of the Servant that a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench (Isaiah 42:3). That is the pattern of care the church is called to follow.

29.15 The Responsibility of the Wider Church and Society

False prophecy and abuse are not only the concern of individual congregations. Wider church bodies have responsibilities.

- Set standards. Associations and denominations can adopt codes of conduct for ministers, covering doctrine, ethics, finances and safeguarding.
- Provide complaint mechanisms. Members of affiliated churches should be able to bring concerns to the wider body.
- Share information appropriately. Where a minister has been removed for misconduct, other churches should be able to learn of this when considering appointments, subject to law and fairness.
- Offer training and support. Many cases arise from ignorance and isolation, which training and fellowship can reduce.

- Speak publicly. When a scandal occurs, church leaders should respond honestly, without minimising harm or protecting reputation at the expense of truth.
- Cooperate with civil authorities. Where crimes are alleged, the church must not obstruct the course of justice.

Society too has a role. Laws against fraud, abuse and exploitation apply to religious leaders as they do to others. Governments must balance freedom of religion with the protection of citizens, and the church should support lawful efforts to prevent harm while resisting attempts to suppress genuine religious freedom. The media can play a valuable role in exposing wrongdoing, though sensationalism and generalisation should be avoided. Civil society organisations, including those working with survivors, deserve support.

29.16 Guarding Our Own Hearts

It is easy to apply the lessons of this chapter to others and forget to apply them to ourselves. Scripture warns, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12), and urges, above all else, guard your heart, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23). The psalmist prays, search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

Leaders may use questions like these for self-examination.

1. Why do I minister? Do I serve out of love for Christ and people, or from a need to be admired, needed or in control?
2. How do I respond when I am criticised or contradicted?
3. Do I have people who know me well and are free to tell me the truth?
4. How do I handle money, and is my conduct transparent?
5. Are there areas of my life that I hide?
6. Do I take the Sabbath seriously, and do I care for my own health and family?
7. Do I treat those under my authority as people to serve or as instruments to use?
8. Am I willing to be accountable to others, even when it is inconvenient?

Members may ask similar questions. Do I follow Christ or a personality? Do I test what I hear? Do I place unquestioning trust in any human being? Am I seeking a shortcut to blessing or the way of discipleship? Do I allow my conscience to be overridden? A church of mature believers, who each take responsibility to follow Jesus, is the best protection against error.

29.17 Chapter Summary

- Scripture portrays several types of false prophecy, including those who lead to other gods, lie in the Lord's name, flatter the powerful, prophesy for money, deny Christ or promote immorality.
- Deception exploits legitimate human needs: certainty, belonging, hope and fear.
- Abuse often follows a progression from gift to platform to unaccountable power to control.
- Harmful practices include date-setting, prophecy for money, control of relationships, witchcraft accusations, false healing claims and sexual exploitation.
- The church must care for victims, hold offenders accountable, examine its own culture and adopt preventive practices.

- Composite cases, historical examples, the dynamics of coercive control, paths of recovery, the responsibility of the wider church and personal self-examination apply these lessons.

29.18 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which of the dynamics of deception in section 29.3 have you seen at work in churches?
2. How should a church respond when allegations are made against a gifted and popular leader?
3. What is the difference between an honest prophetic mistake and false prophecy?
4. How can congregations support people who have left abusive ministries?
5. What structural changes would help your church guard against the slide described in section 29.4?

29.19 Suggested Further Reading

- Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse.
- David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse.
- Diane Langberg, Redeeming Power.
- William Tabbernee, Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments.
- Jack Deere, Surprised by the Voice of God.
- Paul Gifford, African Christianity: Its Public Role.

Chapter 30: Commercialisation and the Prosperity Culture

Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare. (1 Timothy 6:6-7, 9, author's rendering)

30.1 Introduction

Few issues provoke as much discussion in the contemporary church, especially in Africa, as the relationship between faith and money. On one side stand the teachings commonly called the prosperity gospel, which assure believers that faith, giving and positive confession will bring wealth and health. On the other side are critics who see in such teaching a distortion of the gospel and a tool of exploitation. This chapter examines the theology and practice of money in the church with a view to a biblically balanced approach. It addresses the commercialisation of ministry, the claims of prosperity teaching, and the shape of a faithful theology of blessing, work, wealth and generosity.

30.2 What the Bible Teaches About Wealth

The Bible's teaching on wealth is not simple. On the one hand, material blessing is celebrated as God's gift. The creation is called good. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, David and Solomon were wealthy. The law promised abundance for obedience (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). Wisdom literature affirms that diligent hands bring wealth (Proverbs 10:4). Paul commands the idle to work and the thief to labour honestly so as to have something to share with the needy (Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). Poverty is not a virtue in itself; the Bible regards poverty caused by injustice as an evil to be remedied.

On the other hand, Scripture is deeply suspicious of wealth as a spiritual danger. Proverbs prays, give me neither poverty nor riches, lest I be full and deny you (Proverbs 30:8-9). Jesus warned, take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (Luke 12:15), and told the story of the rich fool. He said that no one can serve two masters, God and money (Matthew 6:24), and that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:23-25). James denounces rich landowners who defraud their workers (James 5:1-6). Paul warns that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils (1 Timothy 6:10), and that godliness with contentment is great gain. The rich young ruler was told to sell what he had, give to the poor and follow Jesus (Mark 10:17-22).

The biblical balance is therefore this: wealth is a gift to be stewarded and shared, not an idol; work is honourable; poverty caused by injustice is an offence; generosity is central; contentment is a virtue; and the pursuit of riches at the expense of discipleship is perilous.

30.3 Giving in the Scriptures

The practice of giving is central to biblical faith. The law instituted tithes and offerings for the support of the priests and Levites, the temple, festivals and the poor (Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:21-24; Deuteronomy 14:22-29). Malachi 3:8-10 accuses Israel of robbing God in tithes and offerings and invites them to test God by bringing the full tithe into the storehouse.

Jesus affirms the tithing of herbs while insisting that justice, mercy and faithfulness are the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23). The letter to the Hebrews refers to Abraham giving a tenth to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7). The New Testament does not command a fixed percentage for Christians, but it describes generous, voluntary and proportionate giving. Paul writes that each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). The Macedonian churches gave out of extreme poverty with abundant joy (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Christians are urged to give for the support of those who teach, for the relief of the poor and for the spread of the gospel.

Churches differ on whether the tithe remains obligatory. Many Christians regard it as a helpful guide or minimum standard; others regard it as a binding principle; others emphasise freewill giving. Whatever the position, no one should be coerced or manipulated into giving, and no one should be told that their salvation, healing or protection depends on a particular donation.

30.4 The Prosperity Gospel: Description

The term prosperity gospel covers a range of teachings, which scholars trace to twentieth-century North American movements, including the Word of Faith movement associated with figures such as E. W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin, as well as healing evangelists and later televangelists. It has spread widely across Africa, Asia and Latin America, and in Nigeria it has been taken up by many large ministries. Kate Bowler's *Blessed* and Paul Gifford's writings on African Christianity offer detailed studies. Core ideas often include the following.

- God wants believers to be healthy and wealthy, and this is part of the atonement.
- Faith is a force activated by positive confession, so that spoken words can create reality.
- Giving, especially to the ministry, functions as a seed that will bring a multiplied harvest.
- Poverty and sickness are signs of spiritual weakness, sin or demonic oppression.
- The anointed man of God is a channel of blessing, and honouring him through gifts unlocks divine favour.

Prosperity teaching appeals to biblical texts such as 3 John 2, which wishes that you may prosper and be in health, Malachi 3:10, Mark 11:23-24, John 10:10, Galatians 3:13-14 and Deuteronomy 28.

30.5 The Prosperity Gospel: Assessment

A fair assessment recognises what is true and what is false.

30.5.1 What may be affirmed

- God cares about the whole person, including bodily and material needs. The gospel is not merely about the soul.
- Poverty is not to be romanticised, and believers should seek to overcome it through work, education, enterprise and justice.
- Generosity is a mark of faith and is blessed. God promises to supply the needs of those who give (Philippians 4:19).
- The movement has often given hope to people in despair, motivated entrepreneurship and fostered a positive outlook.

30.5.2 What must be challenged

- Exegesis. Prosperity teachers frequently misread texts. Third John 2 is a customary greeting, not a promise of wealth. Malachi 3 addressed a specific covenant community. Deuteronomy 28 concerns national covenant blessings in Israel's land. Galatians 3:13-14 identifies the blessing of Abraham with the Spirit, not material wealth. Second Corinthians 8:9 speaks of Christ becoming poor so that we might become rich, but the context is generosity within the church, not a promise of personal riches.
- The cross and suffering. The New Testament repeatedly links discipleship with suffering, persecution and self-denial (Mark 8:34; Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12-16). Paul learned to be content in plenty and in hunger (Philippians 4:11-13). Jesus himself had nowhere to lay his head. A message that excludes suffering from the Christian life contradicts the evidence of Scripture.
- Blaming the poor and sick. To suggest that poverty or illness results from lack of faith adds cruelty to suffering and ignores structural injustice, which the prophets condemned.
- A transactional view of God. When giving is treated as a purchase of blessing, God becomes a vending machine and faith is reduced to technique. This resembles the error of Simon in Acts 8.
- Exploitation. Poor believers are sometimes pressed to give sacrificially to enrich leaders who live in luxury. This is the pattern the prophets condemned in shepherds who feed themselves (Ezekiel 34) and that Paul condemned in those who suppose that godliness is a means of gain (1 Timothy 6:5).
- Idolatry of success. The measure of the Christian life becomes visible prosperity, a standard very different from the cross.
- Neglect of justice. A gospel focused on personal wealth tends to overlook the structural causes of poverty and the call to confront corruption, inequality and exploitation.

30.6 Commercialisation of Ministry

Beyond prosperity theology as such, many churches face the broader problem of commercialisation: the treatment of ministry as business. Warning signs include the sale of spiritual goods such as anointing oil, handkerchiefs, water, stickers or prayer cloths with promises of protection or blessing; fees for prophetic consultation, counselling or deliverance; ministry branding that emphasises the leader's image above the gospel; competition between ministries for market share; pressure for ever-larger offerings; and the use of manipulative fundraising techniques.

Not everything that involves money is commercialisation. Churches need funds. Authors may sell books, musicians may sell recordings, and ministries may operate legitimate enterprises. Paul accepted gifts and also worked as a tentmaker. The line is crossed when spiritual blessing is sold, when the poor are exploited, when the leader's lifestyle is financed by pressure rather than free generosity, or when the message is shaped by what increases income. Acts 19:11-12 tells of handkerchiefs and aprons carried from Paul to the sick, but nothing suggests that they were sold. Peter's response to Simon, may your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money (Acts 8:20), remains the apostolic standard.

30.7 Ethics of Church Finance

1. Teach giving as worship and as a response to grace, not as a transaction.
2. Prohibit coercion. No member should be shamed, threatened or promised miracles in exchange for money.
3. Maintain transparent accounts, subject to independent examination and available to members.
4. Set leaders' remuneration through a body that includes independent members, with a reasonable and proportionate level of compensation.
5. Avoid personal control over church assets. Property and funds should be held by properly constituted trustees for the church's purposes.
6. Direct a significant portion of resources to mission, compassion and justice.
7. Avoid conflicts of interest in contracts and appointments.
8. Comply with law and cooperate with lawful oversight.
9. Practise simplicity of lifestyle among leaders, remembering that the servant is not above his master.

30.8 Toward a Faithful Theology of Blessing

The antidote to false teaching is not a gospel that ignores material life but one that places it within the larger story of God's kingdom. A biblically faithful theology of blessing includes the following convictions.

1. God is the generous giver of every good gift (James 1:17), and believers can pray for daily bread, health and provision.
2. Blessing is for the sake of others. Abraham was blessed to be a blessing (Genesis 12:2). Wealth is a trust to be used for the common good.
3. Work is a calling, and honest labour, enterprise and skill are honoured. Believers are encouraged to develop their gifts, pursue education and create value.
4. Poverty has many causes, including injustice. The church must care for the poor, challenge unjust systems and support practical means of empowerment, such as skills training, savings groups, cooperatives and fair employment.
5. Suffering is not a sign of God's absence. God is present in the pain of his people and uses it for their growth and for his purposes.
6. Contentment is a Christian virtue, not a lack of ambition. Believers can strive for improvement without being enslaved to desire.
7. Treasure in heaven is more valuable than treasure on earth (Matthew 6:19-21). Faithfulness, not affluence, is the measure of success.

30.9 The Nigerian Context

In Nigeria, where poverty and unemployment are widespread, the lure of promises of quick wealth is strong. Churches have a responsibility to provide hope that is real. This includes practical programmes of financial literacy, vocational training, small-business support and mutual aid. It also includes teaching that integrity in business, honesty in taxes and refusal of bribery are forms of discipleship. Pastors who model modest, transparent living build credibility. At the same time, the church should not despise those who prosper by honest means,

but should encourage them to use their resources generously. Wealthy believers have a particular calling to be generous and to use their influence for the good of their society.

30.10 Composite Case Studies in Church Finance

These four cases are composite illustrations. They are intended for reflection and discussion.

Case A: The building project

A church embarks on an ambitious building project that costs far more than its members can afford. The pastor announces that God has promised a magnificent sanctuary and that faithful members will give sacrificially. Members take loans or sell possessions to contribute. The project stalls, and the pastor blames lack of faith. Analysis: Luke 14:28 teaches the wisdom of counting the cost. Vision for a building may be legitimate, but it must be tested and planned prudently, with transparent budgeting, realistic timelines and no pressure that places members in debt. When the project fails, the leaders bear responsibility.

Case B: The pastor's lifestyle

A pastor lives in a large house, drives expensive cars and travels abroad frequently, while many members struggle to pay school fees. When asked about this, he says that God has blessed him and that questioning him is a sign of envy. Analysis: Scripture does not forbid leaders from enjoying God's blessings, but it demands integrity, transparency and sensitivity to the poor. The leadership board should know the sources of the pastor's income and its compatibility with the church's finances. A leader who refuses to explain his finances should not be shielded from questions. The principle of 1 Peter 5:2-3 is that elders should not be motivated by shameful gain or lord it over the flock.

Case C: The seed offering

At a revival meeting, a visiting speaker tells the audience that anyone who plants a seed offering of a large amount will receive a breakthrough within a week, and that those who give nothing will remain in poverty. Many give beyond their means. Analysis: the speaker has attached a promise to a gift in a way that Scripture does not support and has used pressure. This is manipulation. The church hosting the meeting has a duty to protect its members and should refuse to host such speakers. Members who have given should be counselled and, where appropriate, helped.

Case D: The church business

A church establishes a business to generate income, such as a school, a printing press or a farm. Over time the business becomes the main source of funds, and some members are employed in it. Questions arise about wages, profit, ownership and the role of the pastor in the business. Analysis: church-owned enterprises can be legitimate and beneficial, creating employment and funding ministry. They require clear governance, separation between the church's spiritual leadership and business management where possible, fair employment practices, compliance with the law, and transparency about profits and use. Churches should seek professional advice.

30.11 Work, Stewardship and Enterprise

The Bible's account of work is positive. Humanity is created in God's image and commissioned to rule and to cultivate (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). The Proverbs commend diligence and warn against laziness (Proverbs 6:6-11), and Proverbs 31 describes a capable woman who buys a field, plants a vineyard, trades and gives to the poor. Jesus told the parable of the talents, praising the servants who put resources to work (Matthew 25:14-30). Paul worked as a tentmaker and told the Thessalonians that anyone unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Martin Luther and John Calvin taught that all honest work is a vocation or calling, in which one serves God and neighbour. The idea has transformed attitudes to everyday work.

A prophetic church affirms the dignity of work, including manual labour, trade, farming, the professions, domestic work and enterprise. It encourages members to do their jobs with excellence and honesty, to treat employees and customers fairly, to pay taxes (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:6-7) and to see their work as service to God. Marketplace ministry, sometimes called business as mission, explores how businesses can serve communities and bear witness to Christ. Businesses can create jobs, provide goods and services, and show integrity in contexts of corruption.

The Bible also sets limits. Honest weights and measures are required (Proverbs 11:1). Wages must be paid promptly (Leviticus 19:13). The poor must not be exploited through loans (Exodus 22:25). Profit-seeking must not displace love of God and neighbour. The Sabbath reminds us that we are not defined by productivity. A culture of hustle that makes success an idol is contrary to the gospel as surely as laziness is.

Savings groups and cooperatives are well known in Africa. The Yoruba *esusu* or *ajo*, in which members contribute regularly to a common pool and take turns receiving the whole, has parallels in many communities. Churches can encourage such groups, provide teaching on financial management and help ensure that they are trustworthy. They can also link members to credit unions or microfinance institutions that charge fair rates.

30.12 Debt, Poverty and the Church's Economic Witness

Debt is a major cause of suffering. The Bible recognises the burdens of debt. Proverbs says that the borrower is the slave of the lender (Proverbs 22:7). Paul urges believers to owe no one anything, except to love each other (Romans 13:8). The law of Israel provided for the periodic release of debts and the return of land (Deuteronomy 15; Leviticus 25), and Nehemiah condemned the nobles who were exacting interest from their poor brothers (Nehemiah 5). The prophets denounced those who sell the needy for a pair of sandals.

Churches can respond to debt in practical ways.

- Teach financial literacy, including budgeting, saving, avoiding unnecessary debt and understanding loan terms.
- Help members facing debt through counselling, negotiation with creditors and, in some cases, assistance funds.
- Avoid placing members in debt for church projects.
- Warn against exploitative lenders and fraudulent investment schemes. Many people have lost their savings to schemes that promise quick returns, and churches have sometimes been used to promote them. Leaders should check the credentials of any scheme and refuse to promote those that are unverified.

- Establish benevolence funds to help members in crisis, administered transparently. The early church shared with anyone in need (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35).
- Advocate for policies, such as fair lending regulations and debt relief for poor countries.

Corbett and Fikkert's distinction between relief, rehabilitation and development applies. In an emergency, relief is appropriate, but long-term assistance should aim at restoring capacity and dignity. Charity that creates dependency harms the recipient. The aim is to help people to flourish.

30.13 Giving as Worship: A Pastoral Theology

Giving is an act of worship. The proverb says, honour the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce (Proverbs 3:9). Paul's extended discussion of the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8 and 9) offers principles that can guide churches today.

1. Giving flows from grace. The Macedonians gave because they first gave themselves to the Lord (8:5). Christ became poor for our sake (8:9).
2. Giving is willing. If the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have (8:12).
3. Giving is proportionate and aims at fairness. The goal is not that others be eased and you burdened, but that there be fairness (8:13-14).
4. Giving is accountable. Paul arranged for trusted representatives to carry the gift, so that no one should blame him (8:19-21).
5. Giving is cheerful and voluntary. God loves a cheerful giver (9:7).
6. Giving brings thanksgiving to God. The ministry of this service overflows in many thanksgivings to God (9:12).

When teaching about giving, pastors should do so openly and biblically, without manipulation or pressure. They may share their own practice. They should explain how funds are used and thank donors. They should include teaching on giving of time and skills as well as money. They should not embarrass those who cannot give. And they should avoid associating giving with promises of material return that Scripture does not make. Some churches teach tithing as a normative standard; others encourage proportionate giving; all should insist on freedom and cheerfulness.

30.14 A Pastoral Response to Prosperity Teaching

Many sincere believers are attracted to prosperity teaching and may have invested heavily in it. A harsh response may drive them away or harden their position. A pastoral approach may include the following.

1. Listen with respect. Find out what attracted the person to the teaching. Often there is a deep longing for hope, security or change. Acknowledge the legitimacy of the longing.
2. Affirm what is true. God does care for our material needs, and generosity is blessed.
3. Ask questions. How does this teaching explain the suffering of faithful believers in the Bible and today? How does it understand the cross? Who benefits from it?
4. Study Scripture together. Read passages such as Philippians 4:10-13, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Hebrews 11:32-40 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, which present a fuller picture.

5. Share stories of faithful believers who suffered and of those who prospered and used their wealth to serve.
6. Offer practical help. If the person has lost money or fallen into debt, help them with advice and support.
7. Avoid ridicule. Pray for the person and walk with them patiently.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of men and women of faith who conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, shut the mouths of lions, and also of others who were tortured, suffered mocking and flogging, wandered in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:33-38). Both are described as people of faith. A gospel that includes only the first group is an incomplete gospel.

30.15 Toward a Culture of Contentment and Generosity

The antidote to the love of money is not merely the avoidance of error but the cultivation of a different way of life. Paul spoke of learning the secret of being content in any and every circumstance, whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or need (Philippians 4:11-13). The writer to the Hebrews says, keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Paul instructs Timothy to charge the rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy, and to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Practices that help include the following.

- Thanksgiving. Regular thanks for what one has dissolves envy.
- Simplicity. Choosing to live with less than one could afford frees resources for others and reduces the hold of possessions.
- Budgeting and planned giving. Deciding in advance how much to give turns generosity from impulse into habit.
- Hospitality. Sharing meals and homes builds community and breaks down isolation.
- Sabbath. Resting from work and consumption affirms that life is more than productivity.
- Fasting from consumption. Periodically abstaining from purchases, media or luxuries creates space for prayer and giving.
- Leader modelling. Pastors and leaders who live modestly and give generously set the tone.
- Teaching children about money. Early habits of saving, giving and honest work shape character.
- Care for creation. Contentment includes recognising the limits of the earth and taking responsibility for its health.

A church marked by contentment and generosity is a powerful witness in a world dominated by acquisition. It shows that life is not in the abundance of possessions, and that there is a better treasure, which cannot be taken away.

30.16 Chapter Summary

- The Bible affirms material blessing, honest work and generosity, while warning against the love of money and the exploitation of the poor.

- Prosperity teaching contains elements of truth about God's care and the value of giving, but it misreads Scripture, minimises suffering, blames the poor and can become a means of exploitation.
- Commercialisation of ministry includes the sale of spiritual goods, pressure for gifts and the treatment of ministry as business.
- Ethical church finance requires transparency, non-coercion, independent oversight and proportionate remuneration.
- A faithful theology of blessing locates wealth within stewardship, justice, contentment and the cross.
- Case studies, a theology of work and enterprise, attention to debt, giving as worship, a pastoral response to prosperity teaching and a culture of contentment make the theology practical.

30.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which elements of prosperity teaching might be affirmed, and which must be challenged?
2. How can a church teach giving as worship while preventing coercion?
3. What financial practices would make your church a model of transparency?
4. How should a church respond to a leader whose lifestyle seems inconsistent with the gospel?
5. What practical programmes could your church offer to help members escape poverty with dignity?

30.18 Suggested Further Reading

- Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*.
- Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*.
- Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*.
- Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.
- Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.

Chapter 31: Renewal, Repentance and Reformation

Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. (Joel 2:12-13, author's rendering)

31.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have been honest about the church's failures. A book on prophetic ecclesiology that told only of triumphs would be a false prophecy. Yet the prophets never ended with condemnation alone. They called for repentance and promised renewal. The church confesses itself to be a community that is always in need of reform, in the Latin phrase widely associated with the Reformed tradition, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, the church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God. This chapter considers the biblical patterns of renewal, learns from historical revivals and proposes an agenda of repentance and reform for the church today.

31.2 Biblical Patterns of Renewal

Scripture records many episodes of national and communal renewal. Several share common elements.

- Josiah's reform (2 Kings 22 and 23). The rediscovery of the book of the law led the king to tear his clothes, inquire of the Lord through the prophet Huldah, renew the covenant publicly and remove idolatry from the land. The recovery of the word was the spark.
- Nehemiah 8 and 9. Ezra read the law before the assembled people from early morning until midday, the Levites explained its meaning, the people wept, celebrated and then gathered in fasting and sackcloth to confess their sins and the sins of their fathers. They renewed the covenant in writing. Hearing, understanding, confession and commitment are the pattern.
- Nineveh (Jonah 3). The people believed God, proclaimed a fast and turned from their evil ways, and God relented.
- Joel 2. A call to return with all the heart, to gather the assembly, to weep between the porch and the altar. Following repentance comes the promise of restoration and the outpouring of the Spirit.
- Pentecost and its aftermath. The preaching of the word, conviction, repentance and baptism, the gift of the Spirit and a transformed community (Acts 2).
- The letters to the seven churches. The repeated command is to repent, to remember, to return and to hold fast (Revelation 2 and 3).

From these examples, we can discern a pattern: the word of God is recovered; the people are convicted of sin; they repent with confession, mourning and a change of life; they renew their commitment to the Lord; they restore justice and worship; and they experience the presence and blessing of God. Renewal is God's work, yet it takes place through human responses.

A frequently quoted verse is 2 Chronicles 7:14: if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Its original setting was

Solomon's dedication of the temple and God's covenant with Israel. It should not be applied to any modern nation as though it were a direct promise to that nation. Yet the principle it expresses is consonant with the whole prophetic tradition: God calls his own people to humble repentance, and he is ready to forgive.

31.3 Lessons from Revivals

The history of the church includes many revivals, periods when the presence of God was powerfully experienced, many came to faith and the life of the church was renewed. Examples include the Reformation, the Pietist awakening, the Evangelical Revival under John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, the Great Awakenings in North America, the Welsh Revival of 1904 and the Pyongyang revival in Korea in 1907. In East Africa, the Balokole movement or East African Revival, which began in the 1930s in Rwanda and Uganda and spread to neighbouring countries, emphasised confession of sin, fellowship and a life of walking in the light. In Nigeria, the revival under Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1930 and the university campus revivals of the 1970s were pivotal.

Jonathan Edwards, who observed the awakenings of the 1730s and 1740s, wrote on the Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God. He argued that genuine revival is recognised by its fruit: the exaltation of Jesus, opposition to sin and worldliness, increased reverence for Scripture, and love for God and others. He cautioned that unusual bodily manifestations or emotional intensity are not by themselves proof for or against a work of God. Revivals can be marred by pride, division and excess, and later generations must examine them critically.

Several lessons emerge. Revival is not manufactured; it is sought through prayer and humility. It is accompanied by conviction of sin and a new love for Scripture. It produces ethical change: restitution, reconciliation and generosity. It often begins among ordinary people. It is vulnerable to institutionalisation and corruption, and its fruit must be conserved by discipleship and sound structures.

31.4 Repentance as the Heart of Renewal

Repentance, in the biblical sense, is a turning of the whole person toward God. It includes acknowledgement of sin, sorrow, confession, abandonment of the sin and, where possible, restitution. The case of Zacchaeus illustrates the last point: if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold (Luke 19:8). Repentance concerns both individual and corporate sin. The prophets confessed the sins of the nation as their own: Daniel prayed, we have sinned and done wrong (Daniel 9:5). For the church today, corporate repentance could include confession of sins such as tolerance of abuse, complicity in injustice, greed, division, pride and neglect of the poor. Such confession should be specific, honest and accompanied by action.

31.5 An Agenda for Reform

The following agenda is offered for discussion and local adaptation.

1. Recover the primacy of Scripture. Place the reading, preaching and study of the Bible at the centre of church life, and equip every believer to read it well.
2. Renew the practice of prayer, including corporate repentance and intercession for the nation.

3. Strengthen discernment. Establish clear procedures for weighing prophetic words and teachings, and teach the criteria of Chapter 19.
4. Reform leadership. Build plural, accountable leadership structures, set clear qualifications, plan for succession and protect against abuse of power.
5. Clean up finances. Adopt transparent practices, independent oversight and ethical fundraising.
6. Protect the vulnerable. Implement safeguarding policies and respond promptly and compassionately to complaints.
7. Pursue justice and compassion. Engage in practical service, advocacy and peacemaking.
8. Deepen discipleship. Invest in teaching, mentoring and the formation of character, especially among young people.
9. Seek unity. Work with other churches for the common good and mission, and resist rivalry.
10. Renew mission. Recover the sense of being sent, with attention both to evangelism and to social transformation.
11. Embrace humility. Welcome criticism, admit failure and depend on the grace of God.

31.6 The Role of Ordinary Believers

Renewal is not only the task of leaders. Ordinary believers can contribute by praying, studying Scripture, practising integrity at home and work, serving the needy, encouraging leaders, asking honest questions, supporting accountability and sharing the gospel. Many of the greatest movements of renewal began with a handful of people who were willing to take God at his word.

31.7 Hope in the Midst of Failure

The history of Israel and the church shows that God does not abandon his people. The Lord who disciplines also restores. The remnant theme assures us that God preserves a faithful people and uses them to renew the whole. The promise of Jesus that he will build his church, and that the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it, undergirds confidence. The church is not saved by its own virtue but by the grace of Christ, and it moves forward not in self-confidence but in repentant hope.

31.8 Case Study: Josiah's Reform and Its Limits

The reform of King Josiah is one of the most thorough renewals in the Old Testament, and it repays closer study. The young king, in the eighteenth year of his reign, ordered repairs to the temple, during which the high priest Hilkiah found the book of the law (2 Kings 22). When it was read to Josiah, he tore his clothes and sent a delegation to consult the prophetess Huldah, who confirmed that judgement was coming on the nation but that Josiah would be spared because his heart was responsive and he humbled himself. The king gathered the people, read the book of the covenant to them and led them in renewing the covenant. He removed the objects of Baal worship from the temple, did away with the idolatrous priests, destroyed the high places throughout the land and celebrated a great Passover, such as had not been kept since the days of the judges (2 Kings 23). The text praises him: before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might.

Yet the story has a sobering sequel. Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo in 609 before Christ, and within a generation the kingdom collapsed. The prophet Jeremiah, who was active during Josiah's reign, assessed the reform with a mixture of appreciation and doubt. He declared that treacherous Judah did not return to the Lord with her whole heart, but in pretence (Jeremiah 3:10). He noted that the people continued to trust in the temple and to practise injustice (Jeremiah 7). The reform altered institutions, but it did not transform hearts.

The case holds several lessons for renewal in the church. The recovery of Scripture is the right place to begin. A leader who is humble and responsive to the word can set an example. Reform must be thorough, tackling idols and structures. Yet renewal imposed from the top without a corresponding change of heart in the people will not last. The prophets looked to a deeper renewal, a new covenant, in which the law would be written on the heart. The church's task is to cultivate the deeper change that only the Spirit can bring.

31.9 Case Study: The East African Revival

The East African Revival, known in Luganda and Kinyarwanda as the movement of the Balokole, the saved ones, began in the 1920s and 1930s among Anglican communities in Rwanda and Uganda and spread to Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and beyond. Its early leaders included Joe Church, a British medical missionary, and Simeon Nsibambi, a Ugandan lay leader, whose friendship across racial lines was a feature of its beginning. Participants emphasised repentance, public confession of sin, the assurance of salvation through the blood of Christ and a life of walking in the light, taking up the language of 1 John 1:7. They met in fellowship groups for testimony and prayer, and many found reconciliation across tribal and racial barriers.

The revival had profound effects. It changed the lives of many individuals, healed broken relationships, brought enemies together and trained a generation of Christian leaders, including Festo Kivengere, who later became a prominent bishop and a critic of the Amin regime. Its influence reached into the political and social life of the region. It also exemplified some difficulties. Its emphasis on personal holiness could produce a rigid moralism and spiritual pride. Tensions arose with church authorities who regarded the movement as a threat to order, and some participants withdrew from official structures. Divisions occurred within the movement itself. In later decades, the movement faced the challenge of generational transmission. Scholars have studied it extensively, as in the volume edited by Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood.

The East African Revival offers a model of renewal that is lay-led, centred on repentance and confession, cross-cultural and attentive to reconciliation. It also reminds churches that renewal movements and institutions need each other, and that both must remain humble.

31.10 Case Study: The Welsh and Korean Revivals

The Welsh Revival of 1904 and 1905, associated with a young former miner, Evan Roberts, swept through Wales in a matter of months. Meetings marked by congregational singing, prayer, confession and testimony lasted late into the night. Churches filled, and observers reported changes in public behaviour. The revival was short-lived, and its leader withdrew from public ministry within a few years, but it influenced revival movements across the world, including in India, Korea and the early Pentecostal movement.

In Korea, a revival that began in 1907 in Pyongyang, among Presbyterian and Methodist congregations, featured public confession of sin and reconciliation. Missionaries and Korean Christians together experienced a deep sense of conviction and a new commitment to prayer, Bible study and evangelism. The Korean church developed distinctive practices, including daily early-morning prayer meetings and prayer mountains. In the decades that followed, the church grew substantially, and Christians took a prominent part in resistance to Japanese colonial rule, suffering persecution, and in later years supported efforts for democracy and social change. The movement has also been criticised for various excesses and divisions in later years.

Both revivals illustrate the central place of confession and prayer, the way in which renewal can cross cultural lines, and the fact that revival, once experienced, needs to be conserved through teaching and structures.

31.11 Renewal in the Local Church: A Practical Path

Many pastors and members long for renewal in their own congregations but do not know where to begin. The following path is offered as an illustration, not a formula.

1. Begin with prayer and personal repentance. Leaders and members should first examine their own hearts.
2. Listen. Gather information about the church's condition: its strengths, wounds, fears and hopes. Listen to the quiet voices as well as the loud.
3. Gather a core. A small group of committed believers can pray, study and plan together. Jesus began with twelve.
4. Return to the word. Plan a season of Bible study and preaching that addresses the heart of the gospel and the church's own life.
5. Practise corporate repentance. Hold a service or series of services of confession, reconciliation and recommitment.
6. Identify specific changes. Renewal should result in concrete steps: restoring broken relationships, correcting financial practices, strengthening discipleship, increasing service to the community.
7. Communicate clearly and patiently. Explain what is happening and why, and invite everyone to participate.
8. Expect resistance. Some will fear loss of familiar ways, and others will want faster change. Approach conflict with humility and grace.
9. Celebrate progress. Give thanks for what God does.
10. Persevere. Renewal takes years, not weeks. Plan for the long term, and do not be discouraged by setbacks.

31.12 Learning from One Another: Renewal across Traditions

No tradition possesses all that the church needs, and each has strengths that others can receive. The ecumenical idea of receptive ecumenism, associated with Paul Murray and others, suggests that churches should approach each other asking, what can we learn and receive from you? Some examples may illustrate.

- From liturgical traditions: rhythm, depth, the use of the Christian year, the beauty of reverence and the memory of the church.

- From evangelical traditions: a high view of Scripture, clarity about the gospel and zeal for evangelism.
- From Pentecostal and charismatic traditions: expectation of the Spirit, vibrant worship, boldness in witness and attention to healing.
- From Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions: a sense of the communion of saints, sacramental life, contemplative prayer and social teaching.
- From African-initiated churches: a holistic spirituality, strong community, prayer and indigenous worship.
- From historic peace churches: commitment to nonviolence and simplicity.
- From the Black church tradition: a combination of worship and justice, with a deep understanding of suffering and hope.

In a country like Nigeria, with a rich variety of Christian traditions, this approach can foster humility and mutual enrichment. It resists the competitive spirit that sees other churches as rivals and cultivates the recognition that all belong to the one body of Christ.

31.13 Obstacles to Renewal

Renewal faces many obstacles, and recognising them helps to address them.

- Complacency. Where a church is comfortable, there may be little desire for change.
- Pride. The belief that we have nothing to learn closes the door to correction.
- Fear of change. People tend to cling to what is familiar.
- Factionalism. Division over personalities or practices can paralyse a church.
- Self-interest among leaders. Those who benefit from the status quo may resist reform.
- The entertainment mentality. Where church is viewed as a show, calls to repentance may seem unwelcome.
- Cynicism. Past disappointments can leave people wary of new initiatives.
- Exhaustion. Overworked leaders and volunteers may have no energy for renewal.
- Spiritual opposition. The New Testament acknowledges that the church faces opposition from the evil one. Prayer and perseverance are needed.

The apostle encourages, let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9). The remedy for these obstacles is not a technique but a deeper reliance on the Lord of the church, who promised to build it.

31.14 Sustaining Renewal

Many movements of renewal begin with fire and then fade. Max Weber's observation of the routinisation of charisma is borne out by church history. How can renewal be sustained? Several practices help.

1. Keep the word and prayer central. Renewal that depends on a personality or a method will decline when the personality leaves or the method grows stale.
2. Build community. Relationships of mutual care and accountability sustain commitment.
3. Develop leaders. A movement that lacks a pipeline of leaders cannot survive.
4. Preserve memory. Tell the stories of what God has done, so that the next generation knows.

5. Keep mission before the church. A church that turns inward loses its vitality.
6. Maintain rhythms of renewal. The Christian year, with seasons such as Advent and Lent, provides regular opportunities for repentance, reflection and celebration. Retreats, days of prayer and sabbaticals serve the same function.
7. Remain open to correction. A church that accepts its need for ongoing reform is less likely to harden.
8. Hand on the faith to the next generation, intentionally and lovingly.

The letter to the Hebrews encourages: let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). Renewal is not a sprint but a long journey, sustained by looking to Jesus.

31.15 Chapter Summary

- Scripture records patterns of renewal centred on the recovery of the word, conviction, repentance, renewal of covenant and restoration of justice and worship.
- Historical revivals, including African ones, teach that true revival is marked by exaltation of Christ, conviction of sin and lasting fruit.
- Repentance, individual and corporate, is the heart of renewal and includes restitution.
- An agenda for reform includes Scripture, prayer, discernment, accountable leadership, financial integrity, safeguarding, justice, discipleship, unity, mission and humility.
- Ordinary believers have a part in renewal, and hope rests in God's faithfulness.
- Case studies of Josiah, the East African Revival and the Welsh and Korean revivals, a practical path for local churches, learning across traditions, obstacles to renewal and ways of sustaining it complete the chapter.

31.16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which biblical pattern of renewal speaks most directly to your church?
2. What marks would you look for to judge whether a revival is genuine?
3. What are some specific sins that your church might need to confess corporately?
4. Which item in the agenda for reform is most urgent in your setting?
5. What can you do personally to contribute to the renewal of your church?

31.17 Suggested Further Reading

- Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*.
- J. Edwin Orr, various works on the history of evangelical awakenings.
- Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*.
- Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*.
- Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (eds.), *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*.
- Michael L. Brown, *Revolution in the Church*.

Chapter 32: The Eschatological Church and the Prophetic Future

*The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let the one who hears say, Come. Amen.
Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:17, 20, author's rendering)*

32.1 Introduction

Prophecy, in its deepest sense, is oriented toward the future that God has promised. The Old Testament prophets looked for the day of the Lord, the new covenant, the Messiah and the renewal of creation. The New Testament announces that the Messiah has come, and that his return in glory will bring the consummation of all things. A prophetic ecclesiology therefore ends where Scripture ends, with eschatology, the doctrine of the last things. The church is an eschatological community: it lives from the future and toward the future. This final chapter considers what it means for the church to live between the first and second comings of Christ, how it should relate to teachings about the end times, and what hope sustains it.

32.2 The Church Between the Times

Chapter 10 noted that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus but awaits its consummation. The church lives in this overlap of the ages. It has received the Spirit as a down payment or guarantee of the inheritance to come (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Corinthians 1:22). It already tastes the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:5), yet groans along with creation, waiting for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:22-23). This tension explains why the church celebrates and laments, rejoices in the victory of Christ and prays for his kingdom to come. A church that forgets the already becomes despairing; a church that forgets the not yet becomes triumphalist.

32.3 The Return of Christ

The hope of Christ's return is a central conviction of the New Testament. At the ascension, angels declared that this same Jesus will come in the same way as you saw him go (Acts 1:11). Paul comforted the Thessalonians with the assurance that the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, the dead in Christ will rise, and believers will be with the Lord for ever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Jesus himself taught, concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Matthew 24:36), and told his disciples that it was not for them to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority (Acts 1:7). The right response to the promise of his return is not speculation but watchfulness and faithful service.

Jesus' parables in Matthew 24 and 25 shape this ethic of waiting. The faithful servant is the one found doing his master's work when the master returns. The wise virgins keep their lamps supplied with oil. The faithful servants invest their talents. The sheep are those who fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned. Watchfulness is not idle gazing at the sky but practical obedience.

32.4 Views of the Last Things

Christians hold differing views on the sequence of last events, especially regarding the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20. Premillennialists expect the return of Christ before a literal or symbolic thousand-year reign. Amillennialists understand the millennium as the present age of Christ's reign through the church. Postmillennialists expect a period of gospel success before Christ returns. Within premillennialism, further debates concern the timing of the rapture and the tribulation. Sincere, Bible-believing Christians hold each of these views. A prophetic ecclesiology need not resolve the debates. Its priority is to affirm what all share: Christ will return, the dead will be raised, judgement will occur, evil will be defeated and God will make all things new. The church should avoid making secondary matters tests of fellowship and should resist the temptation to identify current events with specific end-time prophecies with certainty.

32.5 The Danger of Sensationalism

Chapter 29 noted the record of failed date-setting. Churches in every age have been tempted to read the signs of the times in ways that confirm their expectations: identifying a particular political leader as the antichrist, linking wars and disasters to precise prophetic timetables, or announcing that the end will occur in a particular year. Such speculation has repeatedly been proven wrong, and it often fosters fear, passivity or neglect of present responsibilities. Jesus told his disciples to discern the signs of the times (Matthew 16:3), but he also warned against being led astray by those who say, the time is at hand (Luke 21:8). Discerning the times means interpreting events in light of God's character and purposes, calling for repentance and justice, and trusting God, not predicting dates.

32.6 Resurrection, Judgement and the New Creation

The Christian hope is not the escape of souls from a doomed world but the resurrection of the body and the renewal of creation. Paul's great chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, argues that Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits of the resurrection of all who belong to him, and that the perishable will put on the imperishable. In Romans 8, creation itself waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God, to be set free from its bondage to corruption. Peter looks for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13). Revelation concludes with the vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, where God dwells with his people, death is no more and the river of life flows for the healing of the nations.

Judgement is part of this hope. Scripture teaches that we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), and that God will judge the world in righteousness. The prophets' longing for justice, the cry of the martyrs, 'how long, O Lord?' (Revelation 6:10), and the sufferings of the innocent are answered by the promise that God will set all things right. This truth comforts the oppressed and warns the powerful. It also humbles the church, for judgement begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). The church's hope is grounded in grace, not in its own merits.

32.7 The Church as the Bride

The Bible concludes with the marriage of the Lamb. The church is portrayed as a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 19:7-8; 21:2). Paul describes Christ's purpose to present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be

holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27). The church is therefore a community in preparation. This lends urgency to the pursuit of holiness, unity and faithfulness. It also gives dignity to the church despite its present weakness: she is the object of Christ's love and his promise.

32.8 The End of Prophecy

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 that prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease and knowledge will pass away, for we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. Whatever one's view of the time referred to, whether the end of the age or an earlier stage, the passage makes clear that prophecy is provisional. It serves the church until the day when faith becomes sight and the Lord is seen face to face. In the new creation, there will be no need for a temple, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21:22), and the servants of God will see his face (Revelation 22:4). The prophetic voice will be fulfilled in the direct presence of God.

32.9 Living Prophetically in Light of the End

1. Live in hope. The future belongs to Christ, and believers can face present trials with confidence.
2. Live in holiness. The prospect of meeting the Lord motivates purity (1 John 3:2-3).
3. Live in watchfulness. Stay alert, faithful and busy with the Lord's work.
4. Live in mission. The gospel must be proclaimed to all nations before the end comes (Matthew 24:14), and the church participates in that task.
5. Live in justice and mercy. The final judgement will take account of how the vulnerable were treated (Matthew 25:31-46).
6. Live in unity and love. The church is one body and will be one bride.
7. Live in humility regarding what remains unknown. We see in a mirror dimly, but we trust the One who knows.

32.10 Eschatology in the Old Testament Prophets

The prophetic expectation of the future provides the background for the New Testament hope. Three major themes may be noted.

32.10.1 The Day of the Lord

Amos warned those who longed for the day of the Lord that it would be darkness and not light (Amos 5:18-20), because Israel was unprepared. Zephaniah described it as a day of wrath, distress and anguish (Zephaniah 1:14-18). Joel connected it with the invasion of locusts and the call to repentance (Joel 2). Isaiah described the Lord's judgement on the proud and the oppressor (Isaiah 2:12; 13). The day of the Lord is a day of divine intervention, when God acts decisively to judge evil and vindicate the righteous. It could refer to particular historical judgements, such as the fall of Jerusalem, and also pointed to a final day. The New Testament speaks of the day of the Lord Jesus Christ or the day of Christ, relating it to his return (1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:2).

32.10.2 *The renewal of creation*

The prophets envisioned not merely the end of evil but the renewal of the world. Isaiah 65:17-25 promises new heavens and a new earth, in which Jerusalem will be a joy, infants will not die young, people will build houses and inhabit them and the wolf and lamb will feed together. Isaiah 11 depicts a peaceable kingdom in which the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. These hopes are material and communal, not a flight from the world. They shape the New Testament's picture of the new creation.

32.10.3 *The resurrection of the dead*

The hope of resurrection emerges in some of the later prophetic texts. Isaiah 26:19 declares, your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, though a picture of national restoration, uses the language of resurrection (Ezekiel 37). Daniel 12:2 states plainly that many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. This hope is developed in the New Testament and grounded in Christ's resurrection.

The prophets also looked for a Messiah, a king from the line of David, a servant, a son of man. They looked for the gathering of the nations and the pouring out of the Spirit. As we have seen, these expectations find their fulfilment in Christ and the church, though some elements await consummation. The method of reading the prophets in light of the New Testament, applied in Chapter 2, suggests that the fulfilment unfolds in stages: the first coming, the present age of the Spirit and the final return.

32.11 Eschatology in the New Testament Letters

The New Testament letters regularly connect the doctrine of the last things with ethics and pastoral care. A survey of key passages may illustrate.

- 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. Written to a young church troubled by the death of some members, this letter comforts with the assurance that those who have died in Christ will rise first and that believers will be caught up together to meet the Lord. It urges watchfulness and sobriety, since the day of the Lord will come like a thief.
- 2 Thessalonians 2. Paul corrects the idea that the day of the Lord has already come, speaking of a rebellion and a man of lawlessness, who will be destroyed by the Lord Jesus at his coming. The passage is notoriously difficult, and interpreters differ on many details, including the identity of the restraining power. The pastoral aim is clear: do not be shaken, stand firm.
- 1 Corinthians 15. This chapter presents the resurrection of Christ as the foundation of Christian hope and describes the resurrection body, concluding with the call, therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.
- Philippians 3:20-21. Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.
- Colossians 3:1-4. Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, for when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.
- Titus 2:11-14. The grace of God trains us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives while we wait for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

- 2 Peter 3. In the face of scoffers who ask where the promise of his coming is, Peter insists that the Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise but is patient, not wishing that any should perish, and he exhorts believers to live in holiness and godliness.
- 1 John 3:2-3. We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.
- Hebrews 10:25. Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
- James 5:7-9. Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it.

The common thread is that the hope of Christ's return is not a puzzle for speculation but a motive for holiness, patience, perseverance, mutual encouragement and mission.

32.12 The Millennium: Four Views Compared

Disagreement about Revelation 20, which speaks of a thousand years in which Satan is bound and the saints reign with Christ, has produced four main schools of thought. It is helpful to describe each fairly.

- Historic premillennialism. Christ will return before a literal or symbolic millennial reign on earth, following a period of tribulation. The view is found among some early Christian writers, such as Irenaeus, and in modern times is associated with scholars like George Eldon Ladd. Its strength is its natural reading of the sequence in Revelation 19 and 20. Its challenge is explaining how the resurrection and judgement are related to the earthly reign.
- Dispensational premillennialism. A variation of premillennialism, popularised by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century and the Scofield Reference Bible in the early twentieth, distinguishes Israel and the church in God's plan and teaches that the church will be taken up in a rapture, usually before a period of tribulation, after which Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years. It has been very influential in popular evangelicalism, especially in the United States and, through missions, in Africa. Critics argue that it divides the people of God and that the pretribulation rapture lacks clear biblical support.
- Amillennialism. The millennium is a symbolic reference to the present age, in which Christ reigns through the church and the souls of the departed saints reign with him in heaven. Christ's return will bring the resurrection, judgement and new creation. Augustine articulated this view, and it has been common in Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed traditions. Anthony Hoekema defended it in recent times. Its strength is its integration of Revelation with the rest of the New Testament; its challenge is that its reading of the thousand years as the present age may seem to some to overlook the language of the text.
- Postmillennialism. The gospel will increasingly prevail, resulting in a long period of peace and righteousness, after which Christ will return. Jonathan Edwards and, later, theologians such as Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield held versions of this view. It enjoyed popularity in times of optimism. Its challenge is the difficulty of reconciling it with the persistence of evil and the New Testament's expectation of suffering.

Darrell Bock's edited volume *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* and Millard Erickson's *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* offer helpful comparisons. This book does not argue

for any one view. It urges that Christians affirm what they hold in common, hold their particular views with humility, and refrain from treating them as tests of orthodoxy or fellowship.

32.13 Hope, Ethics and Social Engagement

A mistaken idea of eschatology has sometimes led Christians to disengage from the world. If the earth is going to be destroyed, why bother caring for it? If Christ is returning soon, why invest in long-term projects such as education, institutions or the environment? Such reasoning contradicts the New Testament. Paul concludes his great chapter on the resurrection with the instruction to be steadfast and abounding in the work of the Lord, because their labour is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). The hope of the resurrection and the new creation gives meaning to present work. Nothing done in the Lord is wasted. Revelation says of the dead who die in the Lord that their deeds follow them (Revelation 14:13).

The prophet Jeremiah, on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem, bought a field, an act of confidence in God's promise of restoration (Jeremiah 32). It is a model of hope that invests in the future. N. T. Wright, in *Surprised by Hope*, argues that the Christian hope is not an escape from the world but the renewal of the world, and that the church's present work in justice, beauty and evangelism anticipates the new creation. Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* similarly insists that the promise of God's future opens the present to transformation. Whether or not one agrees with every detail of their arguments, the main point is biblical: hope energises responsibility.

For African Christians, the hope of the coming kingdom is both a comfort in suffering and a stimulus to action. It affirms that the cries of the poor will be heard, that oppression will not have the last word, that the dead in Christ will rise and that creation will be healed. It supports efforts to improve education, health, justice and the environment, as signs of the kingdom. It also encourages patient endurance when the results of such efforts seem slight.

32.14 Death, Resurrection and the Intermediate State

Death is a reality that every person faces. For believers, Paul describes death as gain: for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain, and desires to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better (Philippians 1:21-23). To be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Jesus told the repentant criminal, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43). These texts suggest that believers who die are in the presence of Christ in a conscious state, awaiting the resurrection of the body.

Christians differ on the details of the intermediate state, the period between death and resurrection. Some traditions teach purgatory, a process of purification after death, though Protestants reject it. Others speak of soul sleep, a state of unconscious waiting, which has been held by a minority. Most Christians have held that the souls of the faithful are with the Lord in conscious rest. The Bible speaks sparingly of this period, and humility is appropriate. What is clear is that the final hope is not disembodied existence but the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). The new body will be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual.

Pastorally, this hope shapes funerals, grief and the care of the dying. It allows believers to grieve with hope. It dignifies the body and the physical world. It undergirds the church's care for the sick and the dying. In African contexts, where the relation between the living and the dead is of deep significance, the Christian hope of resurrection and reunion in Christ offers a

powerful answer, grounded not in the continuing power of the dead but in the victory of the risen Christ.

32.15 Judgement and Final Hope

The New Testament speaks of a final judgement. Jesus described the separation of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Paul writes that we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), and Revelation depicts the great white throne (Revelation 20:11-15). Judgement is real, and it concerns how people have lived and their response to Christ. Yet the nature of final punishment has been debated among Christians.

- The traditional view holds that the lost will suffer eternal conscious punishment. It appeals to texts such as Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:11 and has been the majority view in church history.
- A second view, called conditional immortality or annihilationism, holds that the lost will ultimately cease to exist, after a period of judgement, while the saved receive eternal life. Its proponents, including some evangelical scholars, appeal to texts speaking of destruction, death and perishing. John Stott, in a dialogue published in the late 1980s, said that he held this view tentatively and hoped others would examine the matter.
- A third view, held by a minority across history, holds that in the end God will reconcile all to himself. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa have been associated with it. Most Christians have rejected it, noting the New Testament's warnings, though some hold a hope that it may be so.

These are serious matters on which Christians should speak carefully. Several pastoral principles apply. We should take seriously the New Testament's warnings of judgement, which are meant to be sobering and to inspire urgency in mission. We should avoid relishing the fate of others or using the doctrine as a weapon. We should trust that the Judge of all the earth will do what is just (Genesis 18:25), and that his mercy and justice are perfect. And we should remember that the church's task is to proclaim the good news so that all may repent.

The Bible ends with a vision of the Lamb, the water of life and the invitation, let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price (Revelation 22:17). The church's prophetic task is to extend that invitation until the day when faith becomes sight.

32.16 Chapter Summary

- The church lives between the first and second comings of Christ, tasting the future and longing for its fullness.
- The return of Christ is certain, but the time is unknown, and the proper response is watchfulness and faithful service.
- Christians hold different views of the millennium and should not make secondary matters tests of fellowship.
- Sensational end-time speculation has repeatedly failed and should be avoided.
- The Christian hope includes resurrection, judgement and the new creation, with the church as Christ's bride.
- Prophecy is provisional and will be fulfilled in the vision of God, and in the meantime the church lives in hope, holiness, mission and love.

- The prophets' hopes, the eschatology of the letters, four views of the millennium, the link between hope and ethics, the intermediate state and resurrection, and the debate about final judgement round out the chapter.

32.17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does the already-and-not-yet shape your understanding of the church's confidence and humility?
2. What are the dangers of date-setting and end-time speculation, and how can a church guard against them?
3. How does the hope of the resurrection and the new creation affect the way Christians engage with the present world?
4. What does it mean to live as the bride of Christ in a church that is still imperfect?
5. How can your church practise watchfulness in a way that leads to mission and mercy?

32.18 Suggested Further Reading

- N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*.
- George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*.
- Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*.
- Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*.
- Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*.
- G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*.
- Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*.
- Darrell L. Bock (ed.), *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*.

Conclusion

The Church That Hears and Speaks

This book began with a simple claim: that the church, by its very nature, is a prophetic community. We have traced that claim through the whole of Scripture and the history of the church. In Israel, the people of God were called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a community shaped by the word of the Lord and witnessing to the nations. The prophets summoned that community to covenant faithfulness, criticised its worship, its kings and its economics when these departed from justice, and held out the hope of a new covenant and a renewed people. In Jesus Christ, the prophetic promise found its fulfilment: the Word became flesh, anointed with the Spirit, and gathered a community around the kingdom of God. At Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on all flesh, and the gift that Moses had longed to see given to all the Lord's people became the inheritance of the church.

The apostolic church lived this reality in worship, mission, mutual care and bold witness, and its leaders gave instructions for the exercise and testing of prophecy that remain indispensable. The history of the church since has been a story of the Spirit's renewing work and of human failure, of prophetic voices at the margins and the centre, of abuse and its correction. In Africa and especially in Nigeria, the prophetic dynamic has been conspicuous, with extraordinary vitality and, at times, extraordinary danger.

Several convictions run through the chapters of this book.

1. The word of God is the measure of all prophecy. No claim, however impressive, may stand above Scripture.
2. The Spirit is the source of prophetic life. Without the Spirit, the church has nothing to say and no power to say it.
3. The whole community is called to be prophetic. The gifts are many, and the offices serve the body.
4. Prophecy must be tested. Love of the gift requires love of discernment.
5. Prophecy is moral. It concerns justice, mercy, integrity and the care of the vulnerable, as well as the exercise of spiritual gifts.
6. Authority is service. Leaders who claim the prophetic must be accountable, humble and free of the love of money.
7. The prophetic church is a suffering church. Fidelity may cost, and the church follows a crucified Lord.
8. The church lives by hope. The last word belongs to the Lamb who was slain and to the new creation.

The challenges are real. False prophecy, spiritual abuse, commercialisation and compromise with power undermine the church's witness. But the remedy is not the abandonment of the prophetic. It is the recovery of its biblical shape: rooted in Scripture, centred on Christ, empowered by the Spirit, accountable to the community, aimed at the edification of all and expressed in love and justice.

It is the hope of the author that this book will serve pastors, students and believers in the task of building prophetic churches: congregations that listen to God, speak truthfully, serve

generously, suffer patiently and wait expectantly. The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. May the church be found faithful when the Lord appears.

Lessons from Each Part

Looking back over the eight parts of this book, a short summary of the main lesson of each may help readers to carry the argument with them.

- Part I, Foundations. The prophetic is not an optional extra to the church's identity but part of what it means to be the people of God. It is the church's calling to hear, embody, proclaim and, when necessary, suffer for the word of the Lord. Method matters: Scripture is the final norm, and every claim must be tested.
- Part II, The Old Testament Roots. Israel was called to be a prophetic community, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, shaped by covenant and sent as a witness. The prophets called that community back to its covenant, and in exile and promise they pointed ahead to a new covenant and a Spirit-filled people.
- Part III, Christ, the Spirit and the Church. Jesus is the prophet like Moses and more than a prophet. In him the kingdom came, a community was gathered, and at Pentecost the promise of Moses and Joel was fulfilled: the Spirit was given to all God's people for witness.
- Part IV, The Apostolic and Early Church. The New Testament shows a church that prophesied, tested, ordered and suffered. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians, the gifts of Ephesians 4, the letters of Revelation and the earliest post-apostolic texts together give a pattern of gifts governed by love, order and Scripture.
- Part V, Offices, Order and Discernment. Prophetic ministry flourishes within accountable structures. The gift and office of the prophet, the order of elders, the tests of discernment and the ethics of authority belong together, and their neglect has produced much of the harm described in this book.
- Part VI, The Prophetic Church in Practice. Worship, preaching, prayer, pastoral care and leadership are the places where the prophetic nature of the church becomes visible week by week.
- Part VII, Church and Society. The prophetic church bears witness in public life, seeking justice and peace, reading its African and Nigerian context with honesty and love, and taking part in the mission of God across the world.
- Part VIII, Challenges and the Future. The church must name and address false prophecy, abuse and commercialisation, pursue renewal through repentance, and live in hope of the coming kingdom.

A Charge to Pastors and Church Leaders

To those who lead churches: guard the word, guard the flock and guard yourselves. Open the Scriptures with diligence and humility. Make room for the gifts of the Spirit and teach your people to test them. Build teams, not empires. Submit to accountability that is real, not decorative. Handle money with transparency and modesty. Protect the vulnerable without exception. Speak truth to power with courage and without hatred, and speak it first to your own household. Care for your own soul, your marriage and your rest. Prepare others to take your place. Remember that you are an under-shepherd, answerable to the Chief Shepherd, who will appear.

A Charge to Church Members

To those who sit in the pews and serve in the background: you are the people of God, a royal priesthood and a holy nation. The Spirit has gifted you, and the church needs your gift. Read the Bible for yourselves. Test what you hear, kindly and carefully. Do not give your conscience to any human being. Pray for your leaders and hold them to account with love. Practise honesty in your work, generosity with your possessions and reconciliation in your relationships. Stand with the poor and the persecuted. Be patient with the imperfect church, as Christ is patient with you.

A Charge to Teachers and Students of Theology

To those who study and teach in seminaries, Bible colleges and universities: let your scholarship serve the church. Listen to African voices and the voices of the global church. Do your historical work with care and your exegesis with honesty. Address the real questions that pastors and congregations face, including the questions about prophecy, authority, money and power. Build bridges between the academy and the congregation. And let your theology issue in worship and obedience.

A Final Blessing

May the God who speaks open our ears to hear. May the Lord Jesus, the faithful witness, make us faithful. May the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets, fill us afresh and make us a prophetic people, to the glory of the Father. Amen.

Seun Emmanuel Afolabi

Appendix A: Key Biblical Texts

The following passages are among the most important for the study of prophetic ecclesiology, grouped by theme. The list is a guide to further study, not an exhaustive catalogue.

A.1 The People of God as a Prophetic Community

- Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Isaiah 43:10-12; 1 Peter 2:9-10

A.2 The Nature and Call of the Prophet

- Deuteronomy 18:15-22; 1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 2 and 3; Amos 7:14-15; Numbers 11:24-29

A.3 Covenant and Critique

- Deuteronomy 28; Isaiah 1:10-17; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 7; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8

A.4 Exile, Remnant and New Covenant

- 1 Kings 19:18; Isaiah 10:20-22; Jeremiah 29:4-14; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Joel 2:28-29

A.5 Christ the Prophet and the Kingdom

- Deuteronomy 18:15; Luke 4:16-21; Luke 7:16; Luke 24:19; John 1:1-18; Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 5 to 7; Hebrews 1:1-3

A.6 Pentecost and the Early Church

- Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-47; Acts 4:23-31; Acts 6:1-7; Acts 11:27-30; Acts 13:1-3; Acts 15:1-35; Acts 21:8-14

A.7 Gifts, Offices and Order

- Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12 to 14; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4

A.8 Testing and Discernment

- Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Jeremiah 23:16-32; Matthew 7:15-23; Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-6; Revelation 2:18-29

A.9 Authority, Abuse and Accountability

- Ezekiel 34; Mark 10:42-45; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 13:10; 1 Timothy 5:19-21; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 3 John 9-10

A.10 Worship, Prayer and Preaching

- 1 Chronicles 25:1-8; Psalm 51:16-17; Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 18:1-8; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; James 5:13-18

A.11 Justice, Society and Mission

- Leviticus 19; Proverbs 31:8-9; Micah 4:1-5; Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 12:17-13:7; Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Revelation 7:9-10; Revelation 18

A.12 Wealth and Money

- Proverbs 30:7-9; Matthew 6:19-24; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 12:13-21; Acts 8:9-24; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; James 5:1-6

A.13 Renewal and the Last Things

- 2 Kings 22 and 23; Nehemiah 8 and 9; Joel 2:12-17; Matthew 24 and 25; 1 Corinthians 13:8-12; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; Revelation 21 and 22

Appendix B: Church Discernment Guidelines

This appendix offers a practical model that a local church may adapt for the exercise and testing of prophecy. It should be reviewed and approved by the church's leadership and, where appropriate, by the congregation.

B.1 Statement of Principles

1. We believe that God speaks and that the Holy Spirit gives the gift of prophecy for the building up of the church.
2. We believe that Scripture is the final authority and that no prophecy may contradict or add to it.
3. We believe that all prophecy is to be weighed, and that testing is an act of obedience and love.
4. We believe that prophetic ministry is to be exercised in humility, accountability and love.

B.2 Who May Prophesy

- Any member who is a committed believer, living in good standing with the church, and who has been taught the principles of this policy, may contribute prophetic words in appointed settings.
- Those who seek to exercise regular prophetic ministry shall be known by the leadership, shall meet the standards of character set out in Scripture and shall be recognised by the eldership.

B.3 Procedure in Public Meetings

1. Anyone wishing to share a prophetic word should first submit it to the designated leader or team member, who will consider whether it is appropriate to share.
2. The word is shared briefly, clearly and with humility, using wording such as I sense that the Lord may be saying, rather than demanding obedience.
3. The leader invites the congregation or a designated group to weigh the word. If it is judged edifying and consistent with Scripture, it is received with thanks. If it is judged unclear or unhelpful, it is set aside graciously.
4. Words that include correction, warning or directive guidance for individuals are not given in public, but referred to the leadership.
5. A record is kept of significant words and how they were weighed.

B.4 Procedure for Personal Prophecy

1. Personal prophetic words should be given in the presence of at least two mature believers, or recorded with the knowledge of the recipient.
2. The speaker must not predict death, illness, divorce, misfortune or failure, and must not name individuals as witches or demonic agents.

3. The speaker must not instruct the recipient to marry, divorce, move, resign, borrow, give money or take any other major decision on the basis of the word.
4. The recipient is encouraged to write the word down, pray over it, consult leaders and wait.
5. No payment or gift may be requested or implied in connection with any prophetic word.

B.5 The Weighing Questions

The weighing group should ask the six questions of Chapter 19: Is it consistent with Scripture and the gospel? Does it exalt Christ? What is the character and motive of the speaker? Does it build up? Is it confirmed by the community? What are its fruit and outcome over time?

B.6 Handling Concerns and Complaints

1. Any member may raise a concern about a prophetic word or the conduct of a person exercising prophetic ministry, with a leader or a designated complaints officer.
2. Concerns are recorded, taken seriously and investigated fairly, with the principle that serious accusations require evidence.
3. Where there is any suspicion of abuse, exploitation or crime, the matter is referred immediately to the appropriate authorities.
4. Complainants are protected from retaliation.

B.7 Correction and Restoration

- Mistaken or unhelpful words are corrected gently and educationally.
- Persistent or serious misuse leads to a period of restriction or removal from prophetic ministry, followed where appropriate by restoration in accordance with Galatians 6:1.

B.8 Financial Integrity

- No fee, gift or offering may be solicited by a person in return for a prophetic word, healing, deliverance or blessing.
- The sale of anointing oil, water, cloths or similar items with promises of spiritual benefit is prohibited.
- All offerings are handled according to the church's financial policy, with transparent record-keeping.

B.9 Safeguarding

- Prayer ministry with children, young people and vulnerable adults is conducted only with appropriate consent, in open view and with at least two screened adults present.
- The church maintains a safeguarding policy, and all ministry leaders receive training.

B.10 Review

This policy shall be reviewed annually by the leadership and amended as needed. New members and ministry leaders shall be given a copy and offered an explanation.

Note: this model is offered as a starting point. Churches should adapt it to their own doctrinal commitments and legal context and seek competent legal advice where necessary.

Appendix C: Group Study Guide

The book may be used in a small group, Bible school or leadership training programme. The following sixteen-session plan covers the whole book in two sessions per part. Each session may include prayer, a short overview, discussion of the questions at the end of each chapter, Scripture reading and a practical application.

C.1 Suggested Plan

1. Part I, Session 1: Chapters 1 and 2. What is prophetic ecclesiology? How do we know what we claim to know?
2. Part I, Session 2: Chapters 3 and 4. The nature and forms of prophecy; the prophetic strand in church history.
3. Part II, Session 1: Chapters 5 and 6. Israel as a prophetic community; the prophets and the covenant.
4. Part II, Session 2: Chapters 7 and 8. Critique of worship, temple and power; remnant, exile and new covenant.
5. Part III, Session 1: Chapters 9 and 10. Christ the Prophet; the kingdom and the community of Jesus.
6. Part III, Session 2: Chapters 11 and 12. Pentecost and the Spirit-empowered church; the prophetic community in Acts.
7. Part IV, Session 1: Chapters 13 and 14. Paul and prophecy in Corinth; Ephesians 4 and the five-fold ministry.
8. Part IV, Session 2: Chapters 15 and 16. Revelation and the seven churches; the Didache, the fathers and Montanism.
9. Part V, Session 1: Chapters 17 and 18. The gift and office of the prophet; apostles, elders and order.
10. Part V, Session 2: Chapters 19 and 20. Testing prophecy; accountability, ethics and authority.
11. Part VI, Session 1: Chapters 21 and 22. Worship and preaching; intercession and prayer.
12. Part VI, Session 2: Chapters 23 and 24. Pastoral care and discipleship; leadership and governance.
13. Part VII, Session 1: Chapters 25 and 26. Justice, peace and public witness; the African context.
14. Part VII, Session 2: Chapters 27 and 28. Church, state and society in Nigeria; mission and the global church.
15. Part VIII, Session 1: Chapters 29 and 30. False prophecy and abuse; commercialisation and the prosperity culture.
16. Part VIII, Session 2: Chapters 31 and 32. Renewal and reformation; the eschatological church.

C.2 Cross-Cutting Discussion Questions

1. What is the most important thing you have learned about the church's prophetic calling?
2. Where has your church been most faithful to this calling, and where has it fallen short?
3. What changes in your own life does this study invite?
4. What changes in your church's practice might be proposed to leadership?
5. How will you test what you have learned against Scripture?

C.3 Suggested Assignments for Students

- A short essay (1,500 words) on the criteria for testing prophecy, applying them to a case study.
- An exegetical paper on 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 or Ephesians 4:11-16.
- A historical report on a prophetic movement in African church history.
- A draft of a church policy on prophetic ministry, modelled on Appendix B.
- A reflection paper on the church's public witness in the student's own context.

C.4 Session Outlines

Each session below suggests an opening prayer theme, a key passage, a focus for discussion and a practical action. Facilitators should adapt them to their groups.

1. Session 1 (Chapters 1 and 2). Opening: prayer for ears to hear. Key passage: Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Focus: what does it mean to call the church prophetic, and how do we test claims? Action: each member writes down one claim about God's guidance they have heard and tests it using the six questions.
2. Session 2 (Chapters 3 and 4). Opening: thanksgiving for the prophets of the past. Key passage: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5. Focus: the purposes and forms of prophecy; the story of the prophetic in church history. Action: research one prophetic movement from your own region and share it.
3. Session 3 (Chapters 5 and 6). Opening: confession of idolatry in its modern forms. Key passage: Exodus 19:3-6 and Micah 6:6-8. Focus: Israel as a witnessing community; the covenant charges. Action: identify one modern idol and one concrete step to resist it.
4. Session 4 (Chapters 7 and 8). Opening: lament for injustice. Key passage: Amos 5:21-24 and Jeremiah 29:4-7. Focus: worship that is joined to justice; faithful presence in exile. Action: plan one act of service that addresses a local need.
5. Session 5 (Chapters 9 and 10). Opening: adoration of Christ. Key passage: Luke 4:16-21 and Matthew 5:1-12. Focus: Jesus as prophet and the community of the kingdom. Action: invite someone on the margins to a meal.
6. Session 6 (Chapters 11 and 12). Opening: invocation of the Spirit. Key passage: Acts 2:1-47. Focus: Pentecost and the early church. Action: pray in your mother tongue and discuss what difference language makes.
7. Session 7 (Chapters 13 and 14). Opening: prayer for love. Key passage: 1 Corinthians 13 and Ephesians 4:11-16. Focus: prophecy, love and the equipping of the saints.

- Action: each person names a gift they believe they have and how they can use it for others.
8. Session 8 (Chapters 15 and 16). Opening: prayer for the churches. Key passage: Revelation 2 and 3. Focus: Christ's evaluation of his churches; lessons from the early church. Action: write a short letter to your own church in the style of one of the seven letters, with honest commendation and challenge.
 9. Session 9 (Chapters 17 and 18). Opening: prayer for leaders. Key passage: 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. Focus: the prophetic ministry and church order. Action: review your church's leadership structure and ask where accountability could be strengthened.
 10. Session 10 (Chapters 19 and 20). Opening: prayer for wisdom. Key passage: 1 John 4:1-6 and Ezekiel 34. Focus: testing prophecy; accountability and ethics. Action: work through one case study from Chapter 19 and draft a short policy on prophetic words.
 11. Session 11 (Chapters 21 and 22). Opening: silence and adoration. Key passage: Colossians 3:16 and Matthew 6:9-13. Focus: worship, preaching and prayer. Action: plan a service with a time for lament and intercession for the nation.
 12. Session 12 (Chapters 23 and 24). Opening: prayer for the sick and the grieving. Key passage: Psalm 23 and Nehemiah 2. Focus: pastoral care and leadership. Action: identify one person in need of care and plan a visit.
 13. Session 13 (Chapters 25 and 26). Opening: prayer for justice. Key passage: Isaiah 58 and Proverbs 31:8-9. Focus: public witness and the African context. Action: choose one public issue, study it and decide on a response.
 14. Session 14 (Chapters 27 and 28). Opening: prayer for the nation and the world. Key passage: Jeremiah 29:7 and Acts 13:1-3. Focus: the Nigerian context and global mission. Action: commit to pray regularly for one missionary and one neighbour of another faith.
 15. Session 15 (Chapters 29 and 30). Opening: confession. Key passage: 1 Timothy 6:6-19 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Focus: false prophecy, abuse and money. Action: examine your own giving and the church's finances in light of the principles of the book.
 16. Session 16 (Chapters 31 and 32). Opening: praise and hope. Key passage: Joel 2:12-17 and Revelation 21 and 22. Focus: renewal and the hope of the kingdom. Action: write a personal commitment to prophetic faithfulness and share it with the group.

Appendix D: Forms and Checklists

The following forms and checklists are offered for local adaptation. They are not legal documents, and churches should seek appropriate advice about their legal obligations.

D.1 Record of a Prophetic Word

- Date and place of the meeting:
- Name of the person who gave the word (with contact details if appropriate):
- Name of the person or group to whom the word was addressed:
- The words as spoken, recorded as accurately as possible:
- Scriptures referred to, if any:
- Witnesses present:
- Weighed by (names of leaders or members) and the date of weighing:
- Outcome of the weighing: received with thanks / received with questions / set aside / referred for further prayer:
- Any action agreed, by whom and by when:
- Follow-up review date and outcome:

D.2 Weighing Sheet

1. Is the content consistent with Scripture and the gospel?
2. Does it exalt Jesus Christ?
3. What do we know of the character and motive of the speaker?
4. Does it build up, encourage or console?
5. Does it have the confirmation of mature believers?
6. Does it require action? If so, are the usual means of guidance (Scripture, prayer, counsel, circumstances) in agreement?
7. What are the risks if we act on it? What are the risks if we do not?
8. What do we propose to do, and when shall we review?

D.3 Visiting Minister Checklist

- Name, church and denomination of the visitor, with contact details.
- Reference obtained from the home church or accountability body, with date and name of the referee.
- Statement of faith received and found consistent with ours.
- Purpose and content of ministry agreed in writing.
- Arrangements for hospitality and honorarium agreed in advance and disclosed to the leadership.
- Agreement that no goods or services will be sold and no appeals made for personal gifts.
- Named leader who will be present throughout.

- Plan for debriefing after the visit.

D.4 Safeguarding Checklist

- A written policy approved by the leadership and shared with members.
- A named safeguarding officer and deputy, with contact details displayed.
- Screening and training for all who work with children and vulnerable adults.
- Rules for ministry settings, including the presence of two adults and appropriate use of touch.
- A reporting procedure that is known and used.
- A record of concerns and responses, kept securely.
- A relationship with local child protection and police services.
- Annual review of the policy and training.

D.5 Financial Health Checklist

- An approved annual budget, with regular reports to the leadership.
- Two people count and record all offerings.
- Bank accounts in the name of the church or its trustees, with dual signatories.
- Written policies on expenses, loans, gifts and conflicts of interest.
- Annual independent examination of the accounts, with a summary available to members.
- Remuneration of pastors and staff set by a body that does not include the persons concerned.
- Separate accounting for restricted funds, with reports on their use.
- Fundraising appeals that are honest, voluntary and free of promises of material return.
- Title deeds and legal documents held securely, in the name of the church or trustees.
- Compliance with applicable laws on registration, reporting and tax.

D.6 Complaint Intake Form

- Date received and by whom:
- Name and contact details of the person raising the concern (or note if anonymous):
- Person or ministry the concern is about:
- Summary of the concern, in the complainant's words as far as possible:
- Any immediate risk to a person? Yes / No. If yes, action taken:
- Any possible crime? Yes / No. If yes, reported to authorities on (date):
- Persons informed and date:
- Next steps agreed and responsible persons:
- Date for review:

Appendix E: A Timeline of the Prophetic Church

The dates below are approximate where marked, and some are debated among scholars. They are offered as a reference for readers working through the historical chapters.

E.1 Old Testament Period

- Exodus and Sinai: dating debated, in the fifteenth or thirteenth century before Christ.
- The period of the judges and the prophet Samuel: roughly the twelfth and eleventh centuries before Christ.
- David and Solomon: about 1000 to 930 before Christ.
- Elijah and Elisha: ninth century before Christ.
- Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah: eighth century before Christ.
- Fall of Samaria: 722 or 721 before Christ.
- Josiah's reform: about 622 before Christ.
- Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Ezekiel: late seventh and early sixth centuries before Christ.
- Fall of Jerusalem and exile: 586 before Christ.
- Cyrus's decree allowing return: about 538 before Christ.
- Haggai and Zechariah; completion of the second temple: 520 to 516 before Christ.
- Ezra and Nehemiah: fifth century before Christ.
- Maccabean revolt: from 167 before Christ.

E.2 New Testament Period

- Ministry of Jesus: about AD 27 to 30 or 33 (dates debated).
- Pentecost: about AD 30 or 33.
- Conversion of Paul: about AD 33 to 36.
- Church at Antioch sends Barnabas and Saul: about AD 46 to 48.
- Jerusalem council: about AD 49.
- Paul in Corinth: about AD 50 to 52.
- First letter to the Corinthians: about AD 54 to 55.
- Revelation: commonly dated to about AD 95.

E.3 The Early and Medieval Church

- The Didache: late first or early second century (dating debated).
- Ignatius of Antioch martyred: early second century.
- The New Prophecy (Montanism) in Phrygia: from the later second century.
- Perpetua and Felicity martyred at Carthage: 203.
- Decian persecution: 250 to 251.
- Edict of Milan: 313.
- Council of Nicaea: 325.

- Athanasius's festal letter listing the New Testament books: 367.
- Council of Constantinople: 381.
- Ambrose and Theodosius: 390.
- Councils of Hippo and Carthage: 393 and 397.
- Council of Chalcedon: 451.
- Hildegard of Bingen: twelfth century.
- Catherine of Siena: fourteenth century.

E.4 Reformation and Modern Period

- Luther's ninety-five theses: 1517.
- Zwingli's Prophezei in Zurich: 1525.
- Schleithem Confession: 1527.
- Münster: 1534 to 1535.
- Spener's Pia Desideria: 1675.
- Herrnhut: 1720s.
- Wesley at Aldersgate Street: 1738.
- Abolition of the British slave trade: 1807; slavery: 1833.
- African Methodist Episcopal Church organised: 1816.
- Samuel Ajayi Crowther consecrated bishop: 1864.
- Complete Yoruba Bible: 1884.

E.5 Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

- Topeka, Kansas: 1901. Welsh Revival: 1904 to 1905. Azusa Street: from 1906.
- Edinburgh World Missionary Conference: 1910.
- William Wadé Harris's ministry in West Africa: about 1913 to 1915.
- Garrick Braide's ministry in the Niger Delta: about 1915 to 1918.
- Simon Kimbangu's ministry and arrest: 1921.
- Cherubim and Seraphim begins in Lagos: 1925.
- Ilesa revival under Joseph Ayo Babalola: 1930.
- World Council of Churches founded: 1948.
- Christian Association of Nigeria founded: 1976.
- Lausanne Congress and Covenant: 1974.
- Murder of Archbishop Janani Luwum: 1977.
- Kairos Document: 1985.
- Genocide in Rwanda: 1994.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: 1996 to 1998.
- Cape Town Lausanne Congress and Commitment: 2010.
- Global pandemic and its impact on church life: from 2020.

Appendix F: Prayers and Liturgical Resources

These prayers were written for this book and may be used freely in worship and private devotion, with or without adaptation.

F.1 A Prayer for Ears to Hear

Lord God, you have spoken by the prophets and finally by your Son. Open our ears to hear your word. Quiet our noise, still our pride and make us attentive. Give us hearts to obey what we hear and courage to speak what you give, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

F.2 A Prayer for Discernment

Holy Spirit, spirit of truth, guide us into all the truth. Keep us from credulity and from cynicism. Give us humility to weigh what is said, honesty to examine our own hearts and love to speak truth in love. Let us hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil, for the sake of Christ and his church. Amen.

F.3 A Prayer for Church Leaders

Chief Shepherd, bless those who lead your flock. Make them faithful in the word, gentle in authority, honest in money and pure in life. Give them friends who tell the truth, rest for their bodies and joy in their calling. Protect them from pride and from despair, and surround them with a community that prays for them, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

F.4 A Litany of Lament and Hope

Leader: For those who have suffered violence and loss in our land,

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: For children who are hungry, and parents who cannot provide,

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: For those who have been deceived and harmed in the name of religion,

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: For leaders in government and in the church, that they may act with justice and mercy,

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: For the persecuted, the imprisoned and the displaced,

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: For our own failures to love, to speak and to act,

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the hope that you will wipe away every tear and make all things new,

All: We give you thanks, O Lord. Amen.

F.5 A Prayer for the Nation

God of all nations, we pray for our country. Give wisdom to those who govern and integrity to those who serve. Heal the wounds of division. Protect the vulnerable. Make us a people who seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with you. Bring peace to every community, and let your church be a sign of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

F.6 A Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Lord Jesus, you were despised and rejected, and you know our sufferings. Be near to your people who suffer for your name. Give them courage in fear, comfort in loss and love for those who wrong them. Preserve their lives where it is your will, and deliver them from the hand of the oppressor. Awaken your church everywhere to stand with them, and hasten the day when every tear will be wiped away. Amen.

F.7 A Prayer of Commitment to Prophetic Faithfulness

Lord, I give myself afresh to you. Let your word be my lamp and your Spirit my guide. Make me honest in speech, generous in giving, humble in service and courageous in witness. Keep me from the fear of people and the love of money. Make me a true member of your prophetic people, and when I fall, lift me up. To you be the glory for ever. Amen.

F.8 Benedictions

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13, author's rendering)

Appendix G: Frequently Asked Questions

G.1 Is the gift of prophecy still given today?

Christians differ. Cessationists hold that prophecy ceased with the apostolic age; continuationists hold that it continues. This book has argued that the New Testament instructs the church to desire prophecy and not to despise it, that the canon is closed and that all contemporary prophecy must be tested by Scripture.

G.2 How can I know whether a word is from God?

Apply the six questions of Chapter 19: Is it consistent with Scripture? Does it exalt Christ? What is the character of the speaker? Does it build up? Is it confirmed by the community? What are its fruit and outcome over time? Consult mature believers and do not rush.

G.3 Should I act on a personal prophecy?

Treat it as something to be weighed, not as a command. Do not make major decisions such as marriage, resignation, borrowing or giving large sums on the strength of a prophetic word alone. Use the ordinary means of guidance: Scripture, prayer, counsel, circumstances and wisdom.

G.4 Can women prophesy?

Yes. The Bible records women prophets in both Testaments, and Joel's promise, quoted at Pentecost, includes daughters. Churches differ on women's ordination and leadership, but all can affirm the prophetic gifts of women.

G.5 Is it wrong to use the title Prophet or Apostle?

Titles are not wrong in themselves, since the New Testament speaks of apostles and prophets. They become problematic when they are used to claim unquestionable authority, to seek status or to raise funds. Function, character and accountability matter more than the title.

G.6 What if a prophecy does not come true?

Some prophecies are conditional, and some are mistaken. The speaker should acknowledge error humbly and the church should respond with grace to honest mistakes while holding persistent deception to account.

G.7 What should a church do if a leader is accused of abuse?

Take the allegation seriously, ensure the safety of anyone at risk, report suspected crimes to the authorities, follow a fair and independent process, support all parties and communicate appropriately. See Chapter 20.

G.8 Is tithing required of Christians?

Christians differ. Many see the tithe as a helpful standard; others stress voluntary, proportionate and cheerful giving. All should agree that no one should be coerced or promised material rewards in exchange for giving. See Chapter 30.

G.9 What is the difference between a prophet and a pastor?

A pastor shepherds, teaches and cares for a flock, usually as part of a local eldership. A prophet speaks the Spirit's timely word. The two roles complement each other and may overlap in one person.

G.10 May Christians consult traditional healers or diviners?

The Bible forbids divination and consulting mediums. Christians should seek help through prayer, the church and qualified medical care, while respecting the cultural context and the fears of families. Pastors should offer a satisfying alternative in pastoral care and teaching.

G.11 How should churches engage in politics?

The church should pray for rulers, teach about justice, promote civic responsibility, speak against corruption and injustice, and serve the poor, without becoming an instrument of any party. See Chapters 25 and 27.

G.12 Are dreams from God?

Some may be, but not all dreams are revelations. Dreams should be tested like any other claim, and interpretations should be offered tentatively. Dreams must never be used to accuse people of witchcraft.

G.13 What if my church is unhealthy? Should I leave?

Pray, seek counsel, and where possible raise concerns respectfully with the leaders. If the church is abusive, if safety is at risk or if leaders refuse all accountability, leaving may be wise. Seek the support of a trusted pastor or counsellor, and find another community of faith.

G.14 What about the saying, touch not the Lord's anointed?

In context, the phrase refers to God's protection of the patriarchs among foreign kings. It does not place church leaders beyond question. Nathan rebuked David, and Paul opposed Peter. See Chapter 2.

G.15 Can ordinary members test a prophet?

Yes, and they are commanded to do so. The Bereans were praised for examining the Scriptures, and 1 Thessalonians 5:21 tells all believers to test everything. The responsibility belongs to the whole community.

G.16 How should Christians relate to people of other faiths?

With love, honesty and respect. Share the good news without coercion, defend religious freedom for all, cooperate for the common good and resist violence and stereotyping. See Chapters 27 and 28.

Appendix H: A Thematic Reading Guide

The works listed here are drawn from the bibliography and grouped by theme for readers who wish to pursue a topic.

H.1 The Prophets of Israel

- Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*: a classic study of the prophetic personality and message.
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*: criticism and hope in the prophetic tradition.
- Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*: a scholarly survey.
- Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*: social and ethical teaching of the Old Testament.

H.2 Prophecy in the New Testament

- Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*: the Spirit in the letters of Paul.
- Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*: a case for fallible congregational prophecy.
- D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*: a careful exposition of 1 Corinthians 12 to 14.
- Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*: an overview of the biblical evidence.

H.3 Church History and Revival

- Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*: the history of ecstatic and prophetic movements.
- Christine Trevett, *Montanism*: a study of the New Prophecy.
- Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*: classic criteria for testing revival.
- Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*: a global survey.

H.4 African Christianity

- Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*: a historical and theological introduction.
- Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity and Christianity in Africa*: African identity and the gospel.
- John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*: the religious worldview of African societies.
- Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*: the translation principle in mission.
- J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura*: a study of a Yoruba movement.

H.5 Church, Society and Public Witness

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*: a Christian vision of justice.
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*: reflections on reconciliation.
- Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church*: the church in Rwanda.

- Matthew Hassan Kukah, Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria: a Nigerian analysis.

H.6 Leadership, Ethics and Abuse

- Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership: shared leadership in the local church.
- Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse: recovery for those harmed.
- Diane Langberg, Redeeming Power: authority and abuse in the church.
- Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: servant leadership.

H.7 Worship, Prayer and Preaching

- John Stott, Between Two Worlds: the challenge of preaching.
- Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching: a method of sermon preparation.
- D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation: the prayers of Paul.
- Richard Foster, Prayer: forms of prayer in the Christian tradition.

H.8 Mission and the Last Things

- Christopher Wright, The Mission of God: the Bible's missionary narrative.
- David Bosch, Transforming Mission: paradigm shifts in the theology of mission.
- N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: resurrection and new creation.
- Anthony Hoekema, The Bible and the Future: an amillennial survey.

Glossary

Aladura: A Yoruba term associated with prayer, used for a family of African-initiated churches in Nigeria and beyond which emphasise prayer, visions, healing and prophecy.

Anointing: In Scripture, the act of setting apart for God's service by oil, and the work of the Holy Spirit empowering a person for that service; the title Christ means the Anointed One.

Apocalyptic: A literary and theological mode, found in books such as Daniel and Revelation, which unveils heavenly realities and the ultimate victory of God through symbolic imagery.

Apostle: One sent with a commission. In the New Testament, the term applies to the Twelve and Paul as foundational witnesses and, more widely, to other commissioned messengers.

Apostolic succession: The doctrine that bishops stand in a line of continuity with the apostles; understood differently as a succession of persons, of doctrine or of charismatic ministry in various traditions.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A New Testament expression for the Spirit's work in believers; understood by some as conversion-initiation and by others as a distinct empowering experience.

Canon: The collection of books recognised by the church as Scripture and as the authoritative rule of faith and practice.

Catechism: A summary of Christian teaching, often in question-and-answer form, used to instruct new believers.

Cessationism: The view that certain miraculous gifts, often including prophecy, ceased with the apostolic age.

Charismata: The Greek word for gifts of grace, applied to the Spirit's gifts to the church.

Charismatic: Relating to the gifts (charismata) of the Spirit; also a renewal movement emphasising such gifts within older denominations.

Church discipline: The process by which a church seeks to correct and restore members and leaders who persist in sin, as in Matthew 18.

Conditional prophecy: A prophetic announcement whose fulfilment depends on the response of those addressed, as in Jeremiah 18:7-10 and the book of Jonah.

Contextualisation: The process of expressing the gospel in forms intelligible to a particular culture without altering its essential content.

Continuationism: The view that all the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, continue in the church today.

Covenant: A binding relationship initiated by God, with promises and obligations, especially the covenants with Abraham, Moses, David and the new covenant in Christ.

Covenant lawsuit: A prophetic form in which God brings a case against his people for breach of covenant, as in Micah 6.

Day of the Lord: The prophetic expectation of God's decisive intervention in judgement and salvation.

Diakrisis: The Greek word for distinguishing or discerning, used for the gift of discerning spirits and for the weighing of prophecy.

Discernment: The Spirit-enabled and communal process of testing claims, spirits and utterances.

Ecclesiology: The doctrine of the church: its origin, nature, ministry, mission and destiny.

Ecumenism: The movement for unity among Christian churches.

Ekklesia: The Greek word for church, meaning an assembly called out.

Elder: A leader in a local church, also called overseer or presbyter, charged with teaching, shepherding and guiding the congregation.

Eschatology: The doctrine of the last things, including the return of Christ, resurrection, judgement and the new creation.

Exegesis: The careful interpretation of a biblical text in its context.

Five-fold ministry: The ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd and teacher listed in Ephesians 4:11.

Forthtelling: Proclaiming God's word and will for the present, as distinct from foretelling the future.

Genre: A type of literature, such as narrative, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic or letter, which affects how a text is read.

Glossolalia: Speaking in tongues.

Hermeneutics: The theory and practice of interpretation.

Hesed: A Hebrew word for steadfast love or covenant loyalty.

Incarnation: The doctrine that the eternal Son of God became human in Jesus Christ.

Inculturation: The process by which the gospel takes root in a culture and shapes its expression.

Intercession: Prayer on behalf of others.

Intermediate state: The condition of believers between death and the resurrection of the body.

Kerygma: The apostolic proclamation of the gospel.

Kingdom of God: The reign of God, inaugurated in Jesus and to be fully revealed at his return.

Koinonia: The Greek word for fellowship, sharing or participation, describing the common life of believers.

Laity: The members of the church who are not ordained; from the Greek laos, the people of God.

Lament: A form of prayer that expresses grief, protest and trust before God.

Millennium: The thousand-year reign mentioned in Revelation 20, interpreted in different ways by Christians.

Missio Dei: The mission of God, the conviction that mission originates in God's own sending and the church participates in it.

Montanism: A second-century prophetic movement from Phrygia, also called the New Prophecy, associated with Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla.

Navi: The most common Hebrew word for prophet.

New covenant: The covenant promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel and established through the death and resurrection of Christ, involving forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

Oracle: A divine message delivered through a prophet, often introduced by the formula, Thus says the Lord.

Paraclete: A title for the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel, variously translated Helper, Advocate or Comforter.

- Parousia:** The Greek word for the coming or presence of Christ at the end of the age.
- Pentecostalism:** A movement originating in the early twentieth century which emphasises baptism in the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, healing and mission.
- Pneumatology:** The doctrine of the Holy Spirit.
- Presbyter:** An elder; the origin of the English word priest in some traditions.
- Prophecy:** A Spirit-inspired utterance communicating God's word for edification, encouragement, comfort, instruction or warning.
- Prophetic perfect:** A Hebrew grammatical usage in which a future event is described in the past tense to express its certainty.
- Prosperity gospel:** A set of teachings that promise material wealth and health as the result of faith, positive confession and giving.
- Rapture:** The doctrine, held by some Christians, that believers will be caught up to meet the Lord at his coming; understood in various ways.
- Remnant:** The faithful portion of God's people preserved through judgement.
- Sacrament:** A rite, such as baptism or the Lord's Supper, understood as a visible sign of God's grace.
- Safeguarding:** Policies and practices to protect children and vulnerable adults from harm.
- Septuagint:** The early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Shalom:** The Hebrew word for peace, signifying wholeness, flourishing and right relationships.
- Shema:** The Jewish confession in Deuteronomy 6:4, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
- Simony:** The buying or selling of spiritual offices or gifts, named after Simon the magician in Acts 8.
- Sola scriptura:** The Reformation principle that Scripture alone is the final authority for faith and practice.
- Spiritual abuse:** The misuse of spiritual authority or claims to coerce, control or exploit another person.
- Spiritual gifts:** Abilities given by the Holy Spirit to believers for the common good.
- Syncretism:** The blending of Christian faith with elements of other belief systems in a way that compromises the gospel.
- Theology:** The study of God and of all things in relation to God.
- Tithe:** A tenth of one's income or produce given to God, practised in Israel and debated among Christians today.
- Torah:** The Hebrew word for instruction, applied to the first five books of the Bible.
- Trinity:** The doctrine that the one God exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Typology:** The reading of persons, events or institutions in the Old Testament as patterns that find their fulfilment in Christ.
- Ubuntu:** A southern African concept expressing the interdependence of persons, often rendered a person is a person through other persons.
- Word of Faith:** A movement, originating in the twentieth-century United States, that emphasises faith confession and often teaches that health and wealth are the believer's right.

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