

Nine

Prophets



Introduction

As with the ministry of the apostle, there is much confusion about the ministry of prophets. Much of this confusion surrounds the question of the role of the prophet as a foreteller of future events and about the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament prophets. Although the New Testament does not provide a lot of information as to the function and ministry of the prophet, sufficient insight is provided to arrive at a fair understanding of this ministry. Only four are specifically mentioned as being New Testament prophets – Jesus, Agabus, Judas and Silas. There were others besides these four a number of other prophets who were not named.⁴⁷²

472 Acts 11:27, 13:1.

Examples of New Testament Prophets

Jesus

The first of all New Testament prophets is obviously the Lord Jesus Christ. Both Peter and Stephen preached that He was that prophet which Moses had prophesied would be raised up.⁴⁷³ However, because Jesus was endowed with all the gifts, it is very difficult to isolate one specific aspect of His ministry in order to define how that ministry operates.

Agabus

Agabus appears on the scene twice. First he predicts: “There was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.”⁴⁷⁴ Second, he prophesied that Paul would be bound at Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles.⁴⁷⁵ It is important to note that Agabus was accurate on the first of these two, but that the prophecy concerning Paul was flawed in the detail. First, he predicted that the “*Jews* at Jerusalem” would bind Paul. This did not happen. Luke is specific on two occasions, Acts 21:23 and Acts 22:29, that it was the *Romans* who bound Paul. Second, he foretells that the Jews would “deliver” Paul into the hands of the Gentiles. Again this was not fulfilled, as the Jews tried to kill Paul and the Romans had to rescue Paul by force.⁴⁷⁶

It is noteworthy that Paul did not regard the prophecies concerning his capture and the need to avoid captivity as prescriptive. He continued to do what God had indicated to him personally to do.⁴⁷⁷

473 Acts 3:21-25, 7:22,27.

474 Acts 11:27.

475 Acts 21:10.

476 Acts 21:32-33.

477 Acts 21:13,14.

It is significant that these are the only two occasions when prophecies of a New Testament prophet are recorded. They clearly indicate that:

- New Testament prophets are not accurate verbatim as Old Testament prophets were.
- Their pronouncements were not the authoritative word of God as in the Old Testament.
- This aspect of the ministry of a New Testament prophet was indeed a minor aspect of the work of a prophet.

Judas and Silas

We are not given much detail about these two men. They are specifically called prophets and are sent from the Council at Jerusalem with the responsibility to disseminate the conclusions of the meeting.⁴⁷⁸ They were “leading men amongst the brethren,”⁴⁷⁹ indicating that they were mature and respected as leaders in the church.

The mission of carrying the message to Antioch does give some insight into this ministry. These two had the confidence of the Council to not only carry the letter written by James, but also to verbally explain the decision to the believers. This they did, it seems, not as “prophets” but as respected leaders. When they arrived at Antioch, they fulfilled their commission and then “exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.”⁴⁸⁰ This second “phase” of their ministry in Antioch had to do with their ministry as prophets. Thus we can deduce that exhortation (building up) and strengthening are essential elements of this ministry.

Having completed their work, the church at Antioch released them to return to Jerusalem. This fact indicates their submis-

478 Acts 15:22.

479 Ibid.

480 Acts 15:31.

sion to the local church where they were serving at the time as opposed to functioning as representatives of Jerusalem. Silas, however, felt differently and decided to stay on while Judas returned. After a while in Antioch, Paul asks Silas to accompany him on his next missionary journey. Later, Paul continued his journey, leaving Silas behind.⁴⁸¹ After some time Paul sends for Silas and Timothy, who both obey this call, indicating that they were working under Paul's direction at that point in time.⁴⁸² The manner in which Silas' movements are arranged give an important insight into the absence of a hierarchical structure and the degree of fluidity that existed in the relationships between these workers. Men moved about as they personally felt the Holy Spirit direct them, and as the dynamics of relationships among these workers required.

Differences Between Old Testament and New Testament Prophets⁴⁸³

Ecstatic vs. Non-ecstatic Utterance

Old Testament prophets spoke ecstatically. According to Grudem, an affirmative answer to any one of four questions would define the prophet as speaking ecstatically.

- Was the prophet forced to speak against his will?
- Did the prophet lose his self-control and begin to rave violently or in a disorderly, disruptive way?

481 Acts 17:14.

482 Acts 17:15.

483 Wayne Grudem has done an excellent and detailed study on the differences between these two "varieties" of prophets in Appendix One of his book *The Gift of Prophecy*. Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2000.

- Did the prophet speak things that made no sense to him?
- Was the prophet for a time unaware of his surroundings?⁴⁸⁴

Thus a careful examination of most of the Old Testament prophets would reveal that they spoke “under the control of the Holy Spirit,” often did not understand what they were saying, and at times had no control over what they uttered.

The New Testament prophet is different. In dealing with the disorder in the Corinthian church, Paul is emphatic that “...the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets,”⁴⁸⁵ and that prophets could choose whether they wanted to speak or not.⁴⁸⁶ The modern trend for people to say, “I could not help doing this or that – the Spirit made me do it,” belies this principle. Friedrich confirms the absence of the ecstatic in the operation of the New Testament prophet:

Its chief mark is the proclamation of God’s word in which the speaker’s personhood remains intact (1Corinthians 14). It stays on the sober ground of faith (cf Romans 12:6). God gives, and believers make responsible use of the gift.⁴⁸⁷

Foretelling

It is also incorrectly assumed that the prime function of Old Testament prophets was to predict future events.⁴⁸⁸ This erroneous preconception is then amplified into a double error when the chief function of New Testament prophets is viewed as speaking predictively. The primary function of the Old Testament prophet was to *forth*tell the word of God, rather than *fore*tell the future. “A prophet is not primarily *fore*teller (a future-teller) but a *forth*-

484 Ibid p103.

485 1Corinthians 14:32.

486 1Corinthians 14:29,30.

487 Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. p963.

488 Koch, Kurt. *Charismatic Gifts*. The Association for Christian Evangelism. Montreal. 1975. p109.

teller, one who speaks forth for God about the social evils of the time.”⁴⁸⁹ “Prophets did more than reveal the future, for their messages had present application to the life of the nation. They were *forthtellers* more than *foretellers*, exposing the sins of the people and calling them back to their covenant responsibilities before God.”⁴⁹⁰ The main function of Old Testament prophets was to be *messengers from God*, sent to speak to men and women with words from God.”⁴⁹¹ “The biblical prophet is... essentially a proclaimer of the word, not a magician or soothsayer.”⁴⁹² Thus in both the Old and New Testaments prediction of future events was a secondary aspect of the function of a prophet. And, in the Old Testament, such predictions were often declared as consequences of not heeding the word of God or of not returning to the terms of the Covenant.

Authority of the Prophetic Word

The Old Testament prophet spoke the very words of God. “(I) will put My words in His mouth”⁴⁹³ are words that frequently appear in the Scriptures.⁴⁹⁴ The very words that the prophet would speak would be the actual words God was speaking to such an extent that the prophets often spoke in the first person. One example out of many is when Isaiah says: “Thus says the Lord to His anointed.... I am the Lord, and there is no other.”⁴⁹⁵ Thus “to disbelieve or disobey anything the prophet says in God’s name is no minor matter – it is to disbelieve or disobey God.”⁴⁹⁶ “What

489 Larson, B., Anderson, P., & Self, D. 1990. *Mastering Pastoral Care*. [*Mastering Ministry*]. Multnomah Press; *Christianity Today*: Portland, Or.; [Carol Stream, IL]. p132. (Electronic)

490 Wiersbe, W.W. *Be Decisive. An Old Testament Study*. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill. 1996, 1995. On Jeremiah 1:4 (Electronic).

491 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy*. p21.

492 Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. p960.

493 Deuteronomy 18:18.

494 Exodus 4:12, 24:3, Numbers 22:38, 23:5,16, Jeremiah 1:9, Ezekiel 2:7 etc.

495 Isaiah 45:1, 5.

496 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy*. p24.

the Lord spoke through the prophet had absolute divine authority, extending even to the very word the prophet used.⁴⁹⁷ As a result, much of the Old Testament Scriptures are these same words of the prophets in written form.

When we turn to the New Testament, however, we find that this kind of authority is vested in the apostles who wrote the New Testament.⁴⁹⁸ No prophet in the New Testament has the same authority as an Old Testament prophet, nor did they speak the very words of God as in the Old. If this were not so, the words of these prophets would likewise be above question. But the contrary is true. The words of the prophets are to be judged.⁴⁹⁹ As noted previously, Paul had no hesitation to reject the words of the prophets as not binding, even though different prophets confirmed the same prophecies.⁵⁰⁰

The Old Testament prophet had to be tested as a *prophet*.⁵⁰¹ If he passed that test his words were above question. The New Testament prophet is not tested as a *prophet*, but every time he speaks his *words* are to be judged. While Old Testament prophets spoke words that were not only equal with Scripture, but also *were* Scripture, those of the New Testament do not have the same authority as Scripture and indeed have to conform to, and be subservient to, the Scriptures.⁵⁰²

497 Ibid p25.

498 1Corinthians 11:23 15:23

It is for this reason also that we have not listed John, as author of the book of Revelation, as a New Testament prophet. He functions as an Old Testament prophet and an Apostle and not as a New Testament prophet.

499 1Corinthians 14:29, 1Thessalonians 5:20,21.

500 Acts 21:4, 11.

501 Deuteronomy 13:1-5, 18:20-22.

502 1Corinthians 14:37.

Prophets in Practice

Revelation Rather Than Plenary Inspiration

Old Testament prophets received the very words they were to speak and often had no control over what they would say at all. Since we have established that those of the New Covenant do not enter into the same kind of ecstasy, it becomes important to define how they receive their message. “Prophecy rests on revelation. Revelation is imparted to the prophet and becomes prophetic proclamation.”⁵⁰³ We can see this in 1Corinthians 14:30: “But if anything is *revealed* to another who sits by....” The Spirit would give some kind of revealed knowledge to the prophet, which would have to be from God and in conformity with His Word to be valid. Because this is a revelation of a (small) part of the mind of the Lord, and because this revelation comes to a human mind which is tainted by its own agenda, background and spirituality – or lack thereof – the message which is conveyed to the congregation could be incomplete, lacking in detail or incorrect. “For we know in part and we prophesy in part...for now we see in a mirror, dimly.”⁵⁰⁴ Hence the need to evaluate that which is spoken, as is also clearly evident in the case of Agabus and Paul.

Grudem lists five qualities of this revelation:⁵⁰⁵

- The revelation comes spontaneously.
- The revelation comes to an individual.
- The revelation is from God.
- The revelation gives insights from God’s perspective.
- The revelation is recognizable to the prophet.

503 Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. p963.

504 1Corinthians 13:8,12.

505 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy*. pp96-100.

Evaluating the Words of the Prophet

1Corinthians 14:29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge” (*NKJV*); “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (*NIV*). The question is, who are the others that must judge? Three possibilities are proposed: first, those with the gift of discernment of spirits; second, the other prophets; and, third, the whole congregation.

It could not refer to the gift of discerning spirits, as the only link between 1Corinthians 14:29 (let the others *judge*) and 1Corinthians 12:10 (*discerning* of spirits) is the similarity between the two Greek words for judge (*diakrino*) and discerning (*diakrasis*) and of their proximity in the text. This link is tenuous at best.

If Paul had meant to restrict his instructions in 1Corinthians 14:29 to those with this gift, he would not have used such a general term as “the others” and left it without further specification. He would have had to say something like, “those with the gift of distinguishing between spirits” if he had wanted to convey this meaning to his readers.⁵⁰⁶

Could Paul be meaning the other prophets when referring to “the others”? This is possible, but we must raise the same objection as above. Surely he would have specified the other prophets if that were what he meant. The second objection is the practical application of this rule. If it meant the other prophets, one could imagine a prophet speaking, after which the other prophets would meet in a huddle while the congregation waits for the decision. Once these prophets had conferred they would relay their decision to the congregation, by which time the force of what had been said had been forgotten.⁵⁰⁷ Surely not.

In other Scriptures that refer to the judging of what had been said, the whole congregation is involved. In 1Corinthians 12:3, Paul gives a test for the evaluation of speech. He gives it to the

506 Ibid p55.

507 Ibid p56.

whole congregation, not to an elect group. In the same way he tells the Thessalonians “Do not despise prophecies. Test all things.”⁵⁰⁸ Again it is evident that he is addressing the whole church and not just a particular part of that church. The Bereans are commended because they “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”⁵⁰⁹ In each of these instances the whole assembly is involved, and it would seem correct to assume that 1Corinthians 14:29 is no exception to this pattern.

Grudem proposes the following scenario, which seems highly probable:

As a prophet was speaking, each member of the congregation would listen carefully, evaluating the prophecy in the light of the Scripture and the authoritative teaching that he or she already knew to be true. Soon there would be an opportunity to speak in response, with the wise and mature no doubt making the most contribution. But no member of the body would have needed to feel useless (cf. 1Corinthians 12:22), for every member at least silently would weigh and evaluate what was said.⁵¹⁰

Against what is the prophecy tested or measured? There can only be one median – the Word of God. There can be no other standard as all else would be subjective and therefore not normative to every situation and in every church.

...[T]here is the over-all test of the apostolic deposit. The test of the true prophet, or any man who lays claim to spirituality, is that he takes ‘knowledge of the things that I write to you, that they are the commandment of the Lord’, for apart from this there is nothing but ignorance ([1Corinthians 14:] 37,38 RV). This teaches us that the prophets were not sources of new truth to the Church, but expounders of truth otherwise revealed.⁵¹¹

508 1Thessalonians 5:20,21.

509 Acts 17:11.

510 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy*. p57.

511 Motyer, JA. *The New Bible Dictionary*. JD Douglas (Ed) Inter-Varsity Press, London. 1970. p1045.

The Purpose of Prophecy

The purpose of prophecy is clearly stated in 1Corinthians 14:3: “But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.” Other than this verse, we have no other statement as to the purpose of prophecy. It is interesting that the predictive aspect is not included in what seems a fairly complete definition. In one of the few Scriptures that shows prophets in operation, Judas and Silas “exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.”⁵¹² This confirms 1Corinthians 14:3.

The Greek word for edification (*oikodome*) is made up of two words – *oikos* meaning a house and *dome* meaning to build. So it literally means “to build up the house” or “the act of one who promotes another’s growth in Christian wisdom, piety, happiness, holiness.”⁵¹³ Building up the church and its members in the faith would be the first priority of prophecy. Paul contrasts edification with breaking down when, in a few verses earlier, he says “[A]ccording to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction.”⁵¹⁴ This may indeed be a good test as to the validity of a prophet’s ministry and prophetic utterance: Does it build up or break down? This question should not only be asked in the short term but in the long term. Many apparent prophecies seem encouraging to the hearer at the time, but in the long run can be very destructive. Take for example the common “prophecy,” “God told me to tell you to resign your job, he has a great work for you.” When this does not come to pass and the poor victim has lost all, it can rightly be assumed that this was destructive and not up-building.

The Greek word for exhortation is *paraklésis*. Of the verb form of this word Vine says: “[T]o call on, entreat... to admonish, exhort, to urge one to pursue some course of conduct (always prospective, looking to the future, in contrast to the meaning to comfort, which is retrospective, having to do with trial ex-

512 Acts 15:32.

513 Thayer. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

514 2Corinthians 13:10.

perienced).⁵¹⁵ Thus exhortation includes the whole gamut from encouragement to admonition, but all with an eye to urging the believer on to greater devotion and service.

Of the Greek word for “comfort,” Vine says that it is “primarily a speaking closely to anyone (*para* - near, *muthos* - speech), hence denotes consolation, comfort, with a greater degree of tenderness than *parakl sis* (exhortation).⁵¹⁶

If we have to draw from the function of prophets in the Old Testament, we can deduce that prophets primarily called men back to a right relationship with God and to the Scriptures. “Should not a people seek their God?... To the law and to the testimony”⁵¹⁷ seems to capture the essence of the Old Testament prophet’s message. Edification, exhortation and comfort are a continuum of the same function. Friedrich says: “The prophets admonish, console, encourage, and censure.”⁵¹⁸

Are All Who Prophecy “Prophets”?

Some argue that there was not a clearly defined group of prophets and that all believers were required to prophesy.⁵¹⁹ This stems from an incorrect assumption that all who prophesy are, of necessity, prophets. Every believer is required to preach the Gospel,⁵²⁰ and yet there is a separate ministry or function of the evangelist.⁵²¹ Every believer is required to care for others,⁵²² and yet there is an office of elder or shepherd.⁵²³ Older women are encouraged to

515 Vine. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Bible Words*.

516 Ibid.

517 Isaiah 8:20, 21.

518 Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. p963.

519 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy* p161ff.

520 Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15.

521 Acts 21:8.

522 1Corinthians 12:25.

523 Titus 1:12.

teach younger women,⁵²⁴ yet this does not make them teachers to the whole church since they are forbidden to teach.⁵²⁵ In the same way everyone is encouraged to prophesy,⁵²⁶ but this does not mean that everyone is a prophet.

In Ephesians 4:11 the word “some” is used four times, clearly emphasizing that there were specific ones gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists etc. These are contrasted with and distinct from the “saints” (verse 12), “we all,” (verse 13) and the function of “every joint” (verse 16). In 1Corinthians 12:29 Paul asks a rhetorical question: “...are all prophets?” To which the answer clearly is no. Yet he says, “For you can all prophesy one by one”⁵²⁷ and “...[I]f all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all.”⁵²⁸ It becomes evident that although many, if not all, in the church may prophesy, there are specific ones who are gifted as prophets in the church. As we have seen, some of these are even named such as Agabus, Judas and Silas. Acts 11:27 says: “And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.” Clearly this was not a group of believers, but a specific group of men who were recognized as prophets. We find a similar group in Antioch.⁵²⁹ However, Philip had four daughters and it is specific that they prophesied,⁵³⁰ and Scripture does not name them prophets or prophetesses.

In 1Corinthians 12:10 we find prophecy listed as one of the “gifts of the Spirit.” None of the other nine gifts listed resulted in the one used in that gift being called a “healer,” “tongues speaker” or “dispenser of knowledge.” These are simply gifts that support ministries or functions in the church. Thus we see miracles and healing associated with the apostolic ministry, and a word of wisdom and a word of knowledge with the pastoral ministry. That

524 1Timothy 2:12.

525 Titus 2:3.

526 1Corinthians 14:24, 31.

527 1Corinthians 12:31.

528 1Corinthians 12:24.

529 Acts 13:1.

530 Acts 14:9.

does not mean that someone who gives a word of wisdom automatically becomes a pastor. In the same way we can safely assume that the prophet would prophesy. But the converse is not necessarily true – everyone who prophesies is not *ipso facto* a prophet.

To speak of the “office of the prophet”⁵³¹ would also be wrong. We see that elders and deacons are ordained or appointed.⁵³² There is, however, no similar instruction concerning prophets or evangelists or teachers. While these are clearly recognized by the church as “ministries” or “functions,” they do not occupy an “office.”

Prophecy, Preaching and Teaching

Lang goes to great length to show how prophecy was replaced by preaching: “In the course of the second century this original spontaneity of utterance died almost entirely away.”⁵³³ This resulted in the common perception today that preaching is prophecy. As shown above, prophecy must contain the element of revelation. Lang quotes a number of respected sources, such as F.F. Bruce, who stress not only revelation, but the *immediacy* of that revelation.⁵³⁴ Thus prophecy would be a speaker declaring that which the Holy Spirit would reveal to him for that moment and for that audience. Some preaching and even some parts of a regular message or sermon could contain prophetic elements. But to say that all preaching is prophecy is to strip the gift of its supernatural component.

It is also possible to confuse prophecy and teaching. 1 Corinthians 14:31 says that prophecy results in learning or instruction. However, the kind of instruction the writer has in mind would be very different from the kind of doctrinal instruction that comes

531 Sumrall. *The Gifts and Ministries of the Holy Spirit*. p214.

532 Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5.

533 Lang. *The Churches of God*. pp138ff.

534 Ibid.

from teaching. While it is evident that both prophecy and teaching would be involved in the declaration of the Word of God, there also has to be a distinction between them. On five occasions the New Testament mentions “prophets” and “teachers” in the same breath and, yet, distinguishes between them as separate groups.⁵³⁵ Clearly they have different functions and operate very differently.

Teaching has its source in a systematic study of the Scriptures in a logical and often empirical way, while prophecy has its source in revelation which comes spontaneously. Teaching has the purpose of imparting doctrinal truth through the reasoning faculties, while “the emphasis of prophecy would have been on immediate practical application to the hearers’ lives.”⁵³⁶ Prophecy would appeal to the conscience often through the emotions.⁵³⁷ Thus the two are so different that they could never be confused in practice.

Conclusion

Paul lays much emphasis on the need for prophecy in the church: “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy... he who prophesies edifies the church.”⁵³⁸ “Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy.”⁵³⁹ Today the church seems to be split into two camps. Those who overemphasize this gift, and often run to the very excesses that 1Corinthians 14 warns against, and those who are so afraid of such excesses that they do not allow for the operation of this ministry at all. Surely the truth does not lie in the excess, nor in the over-correction of it, but in a biblical application of that which the Lord intended for

535 Acts 13:1, 1Corinthians 12:28, 29, Ephesians 4:11, 2Peter 2:1.

536 Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy*. p129.

537 Gee. *The Ministry-Gifts of Christ*. p40.

538 1Corinthians 14:1,4.

539 1Corinthians 14:39.

His church. Would to God that men would again speak by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that which is doctrinally correct for the edification, exhortation and comfort of His church.