

Rev. Zelwyn Heide

August 7, 2024

Philip's Daughters: Understanding Prophetesses in the New Testament

Introduction

In a recent interview with Russell Moore, Rick Warren describes what he calls a change of mind regarding women in the ministry. The interview came in the wake of his church, Saddleback, being expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention in 2023 for ordaining three women to the office of pastor.¹ Warren argues that several Scriptural passages moved him to reconsider his beliefs on this issue, and he includes Acts 2 and the events at Pentecost among them. “Women were preaching on the day of Pentecost,” he said. “How do we know that? Because Peter felt obligated to explain it.”² Warren then argues that Peter’s citation of Joel, specifically that men and women shall prophesy, proves that his position is correct. The New Testament says that women prophesied, and this is the reason why they can also preach.

Warren’s arguments reflect a wider debate within the Southern Baptist Convention regarding the role of women in the church. Many in the denomination wish to reaffirm their constitution’s stance regarding women and the ministry, leading to the recent Mike Law Amendment, which proposed changing their definition of a church in “friendly cooperation with the Convention” to be one which “affirms, appoints, or employs only men as any kind of pastor

¹ Michael Gryboski, “SBC expels Saddleback, 4 other churches that have female pastors,” *The Christian Post*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/sbc-decides-to-expel-saddleback-church-over-female-pastors.html>.

² Russell Moore and Rick Warren, “Rick Warren Reflects on his Legacy,” March 8, 2023 in *The Russell Moore Show*, published by Christianity Today, podcast, 53:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evxKe5E4TNA>, beginning at 13:44.

or elder as qualified by Scripture.”³ However, the amendment was narrowly defeated at their 2024 convention, showing that a sizable minority are pushing for the ordination of women within the SBC, using arguments similar to those of Warren.⁴

This drastic change in what is otherwise considered by many to be a conservative denomination should lead all to seek clarity on this issue. Warren and others like him claim to be following the lead of Scripture in ordaining women, citing among other things the existence of prophetesses in the Scriptures. It is undeniable that some women were called prophetesses in the time of the New Testament, including Anna in the temple and the four daughters of Philip. However, this paper will argue that there is a difference between prophets and pastors by examining the New Testament usage of the word “prophet” and its related terms as well as focusing on what Paul has to say about the nature of New Testament prophecy in 1 Corinthians.

The Word “Prophet”

In the Greek New Testament, the word for prophet and all of its related forms⁵ occurs in 197 passages. A close examination and comparison of these passages, however, shows that the word group is not used in the same way throughout the New Testament, but in fact describes several different things. By sorting through these uses and focusing on those which pertain specifically to prophets in the New Testament, the difference between prophets and pastors will become clearer.

The first step in this process, however, involves asking why the New Testament uses this particular word group, since it is not the only possible one in the ancient Greek language. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas meet a slave girl who is described as being possessed by an unclean spirit:

³ Mike Law, “What is the proposed amendment,” SBC Amendment, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://sbcamendment.org/home-2/frequently-asked-questions/>.

⁴ Scott Barkley, “Law Amendment falls short in Indy,” Baptist Press, June 12, 2024, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/law-amendment-falls-short-in-indy/>.

⁵ προφήτης, προφητεία, ψευδοπροφήτης, προφητικός, προφήτις

“And it happened as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave girl having a pythonic spirit met us, who brought much gain to her masters by oracles.”⁶ A pythonic spirit took possession of a host, typically a woman called a pythoness or a pythia, and used her as a means of speaking to those who asked questions of it. The most famous of these was the Pythia at Delphi, who was believed to be possessed by the god Apollo and would speak in sometimes cryptic ways to those who came. For the purposes of this study, however, the most important point is that this kind of divination was essentially mindless. As David Aune puts it, “One very popular ancient view of the origin of the oracular abilities of the Pythia was that a god or daimon took possession of her organs of speech to make oracular responses.”⁷ It was no longer the woman speaking, but the god within her.

Further, the word translated as “by oracles” in Acts 16⁸ is related to words like mania and mantis. Mania in Greek means madness or being out of one’s mind. It is also used to describe one who is possessed by a god and thus can no longer act in a rational way. Likewise, a mantis describes a pagan prophet who claimed to speak for a god, and mantises often wandered from place to place, offering their services for any who wanted to inquire about the future.

These concepts were clearly unsuitable for describing the nature of Biblical prophets, since prophecy in the Bible is never described as a mindless activity. As Peter says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but carried by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God.”⁹ They were carried by the Holy Spirit, not extinguished by Him. Further, Paul himself can

⁶ Acts 16:16, “Ἐγένετο δὲ πορευομένων ἡμῶν εἰς τὴν προσευχὴν παιδίσκην τινὰ ἔχουσαν πνεῦμα πύθωνα ὑπαντῆσαι ἡμῖν, ἥτις ἐργασίαν πολλὴν παρεῖχεν τοῖς κυρίοις αὐτῆς μαντευομένη.” Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷ David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 33.

⁸ μαντεύομαι.

⁹ 2 Peter 1:21, “οὐ γὰρ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου ἠνέχθη προφητεία ποτέ, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι.”

recognize a difference between his own thoughts and those of the Lord in passages like 1 Corinthians 7, even while still claiming to speak for God with authority. Most clearly, self-control, being in full possession of one's mind and passions, is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. For this reason, the mindless activity of a pythia or a mantis is clearly at odds with how we should understand Biblical prophecy.

The word group for prophet was also suitable for describing Biblical prophecy for other reasons. In ancient Greek, "prophet" had a much wider range of meaning than it does today. Its most basic usage was religious, meaning one who speaks for a god. However, it could also be used to describe those who explained the otherwise incomprehensible statements of a mantis. Plato in his work *Timaeus* says "wherefore also it is customary to set the tribe of prophets to pass judgment upon these inspired divinations; and they, indeed, themselves are named 'diviners' [*mantis*] by certain who are wholly ignorant of the truth that they are not diviners but interpreters of the mysterious voice and apparition, for whom the most fitting name would be 'prophets of things divined.'"¹⁰ In other words, Plato argues that prophets are not mantises. Mantises speak for a god, but prophets explain what they are saying to those who are listening.

"Prophet" also did not always have a religious meaning. Bacchylides, a Greek poet who lived from roughly 518 to 451 B.C., wrote a victory song for an athlete named Aglaus of Athens. In it, he says about the runner: "Twice did the spokesmen [prophets] of the wise umpires proclaim him victor at [the] Isthmus [games], and twice also have they proclaimed him beside the holy altar of Zeus Son of Cronus at [the games at] Nemea."¹¹ Prophets could therefore be little more than sports announcers, declaring the decision of the umpires to the crowd.

¹⁰ Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), 187-189.

¹¹ Bacchylides, *Lyra Graeca, Volume III* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 173.

The most basic meaning of prophet in Greek, therefore, is a spokesman, one who speaks on behalf of another, whether human or divine. Paul even uses prophet in this sense in Titus 1:12 when he says “one of them, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’”¹² Epimenides of Crete, whom Paul quotes, becomes a spokesman for Cretans in general, and Paul uses what he says to describe the false teachers among them who resisted the truth of the Gospel. As Wayne Grudem puts it, “Certainly Epimenides was not someone who spoke the very words of God! But Paul nonetheless calls him a ‘prophet.’”¹³

It is this wide range of meaning for the word prophet that made it a fitting choice to describe what is happening in the New Testament. A prophet speaks on behalf of someone else without losing his or her rationality in the process. He or she is thus a kind of messenger, bringing word from someone else for the benefit of those who hear.

Old Testament Prophets and Jesus

Sorting further through the uses of the prophet word group in the New Testament, the majority fall into a category which refers to the prophets of the Old Testament. Most of these are a part of citations of various Old Testament books. The first example of it in Matthew 1:22 sets a familiar pattern seen in the rest: “And all this happened so that the saying from the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled.”¹⁴ What the prophets before the time of Christ said would happen is now coming to its completion in Jesus Christ. God spoke through them in previous years, and God is now bringing it to pass.

The Old Testament prophets are also presented as those having authority from God, even if that authority is often resisted by those who refuse to listen. In the parable of the rich man and

¹² εἶπέν τις ἐξ αὐτῶν ἴδιος αὐτῶν προφήτης· Κρήτες αἰεὶ ψεῦσται, κακὰ θηρία, γαστέρες ἀργαί.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 39.

¹⁴ Τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ρηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος·

Lazarus, Jesus says: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither would they be persuaded if someone rose from the dead.”¹⁵ Refusing to listen to the prophets of old is the same as refusing to listen to God. Their words came from above, not from themselves. Likewise, Jesus rebukes the disciples on the road to Emmaus by saying “O foolish ones and slow in heart to believe all which the prophets have spoken!”¹⁶ Old Testament prophets having their authority from God meant that those who heard them had an obligation to accept them. A failure to believe or understand their words stemmed from unbelief and was a sin which required repentance.

Several passages also refer to Jesus Himself as a prophet. It is true that many of these examples come from a misunderstanding of who Jesus is and what He came to do. The apostles tell Jesus that the crowds say that the Son of Man is a prophet, among other things. It is only when Peter confesses Him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that Jesus praises him for speaking the full truth.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Jesus is indeed the Prophet, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophets as well as the One who exceeds them all. Jesus refers to Himself as a prophet in Luke 13 when He says, “Nevertheless, it is necessary that I go today and tomorrow and the following, because it is not possible that a prophet should perish outside Jerusalem.”¹⁸

Jesus as a prophet helps clarify further what the New Testament means by a prophet as opposed to secular Greek usage. Three passages in particular, taken together, are helpful here. The first of these is Matthew 26, along with its parallels in the other Gospels. After delivering the sentence of death upon Christ, those at the court of Caiaphas begin to strike Him and mock

¹⁵ Luke 16:31 “εἶπεν δὲ αὐτοῖς· Εἰ Μωϋσέως καὶ τῶν προφητῶν οὐκ ἀκούουσιν, οὐδ’ ἐάν τις ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆ πεισθήσονται.”

¹⁶ Luke 24:25 “καὶ αὐτὸς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· ὦ ἀνόητοι καὶ βραδεῖς τῆ καρδίας τοῦ πιστεύειν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς ἐλάλησαν οἱ προφῆται·”

¹⁷ Matthew 16:13-20.

¹⁸ Luke 13:33 “πλὴν δεῖ με σήμερον καὶ αὔριον καὶ τῇ ἐχομένῃ πορεύεσθαι, ὅτι οὐκ ἐνδέχεται προφήτην ἀπολέσθαι ἔξω Ἱερουσαλήμ.”

Him. Some of them even go so far as to say: “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is it that hit you?”¹⁹ Jesus may have been blindfolded, or they may have struck Him in such close succession that it would be normally impossible to tell who had delivered a specific blow. The assumption, however, is that a prophet would be able to tell and point out who had done it without being otherwise told.

The second passage is from Luke 7. Jesus is invited into the home of a Pharisee to eat with him. When a sinful woman comes into meet Jesus, she begins to pour ointment on His feet and to wet His feet with her tears. The Pharisee takes offense at this and says to himself: “If this one were a prophet, he would have also known what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.”²⁰ The implication again is that a prophet would be able to know the truth about this woman without having it revealed to him. Since Jesus has not done what the Pharisee would do in this situation, he assumes that Jesus cannot actually be a prophet.

The third and last passage here is from John 4. When Jesus tells the Samaritan woman to call her husband, she hesitates and says that she has no husband. Jesus reveals to her what she had been trying to hide. She spoke the truth, because she had five husbands and now lives with a sixth apart from marriage. Marveling that Jesus knew this about her, she says to Him: “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”²¹

All three of these passages show that a prophet in the Biblical sense not only speaks for God, but also reveals things which would not otherwise be known. God has given them something which they have not learned in any other way, often revealing even the secrets of the heart, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:25.

¹⁹ Matthew 27:68 “Προφήτευσον ἡμῖν, Χριστέ, τίς ἐστὶν ὁ παίσας σε;”

²⁰ Luke 7:39 “Οὗτος εἶ ἢν προφήτης, ἐγίνωσκεν ἂν τίς καὶ ποταπὴ ἢ γυνὴ ἣτις ἄπτεται αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἁμαρτωλὸς ἐστίν.”

²¹ John 4:19 “λέγει αὐτῷ ἡ γυνὴ· Κύριε, θεωρῶ ὅτι προφήτης εἶ σύ.”

Old Testament versus New

However, this paper argues that a distinction ought to be made between the prophets of the Old Testament and the prophets of the New Testament, even though the same word is used of both. It is true that there is overlap between them. Prophets in both testaments speak for God in a rational way, revealing things which would not be otherwise known. Nevertheless, New Testament prophets are different because they do not have the same absolute authority as those in the Old. There are two clear reasons for this.

First, Luke talks about a prophet named Agabus in two passages in Acts. In Acts 11:28, Agabus reveals through the Holy Spirit that a famine would come over the world, and this happened, Luke says, in the days of Claudius. Armed with this knowledge, the disciples make preparations to provide for those who would be the most in need.

More importantly, Luke talks about Agabus again in Acts 21. As Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, Agabus takes Paul's belt from him, wraps himself up in it, and says to Paul: "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'The man whose belt this is, thus the Jews will bind him in Jerusalem and hand him over into the hands of the Gentiles.'"²² Agabus clearly states that Paul will be bound and handed over, much in the same way that Jesus had been handed over to Pilate. The difficulty, however, is that while Paul was indeed taken into custody in Jerusalem, Luke tells us that it happened somewhat differently from what Agabus said would happen. When Paul is arrested later in the same chapter, the Romans take him away in order to *save* him from the Jews who were threatening to beat him to death. Thus, while Paul was arrested as Agabus said that he would be, he was not quite correct on the specifics of how it would happen.

²² Acts 21:11 "Τάδε λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον· Τὸν ἄνδρα οὗ ἔστιν ἡ ζώνη αὕτη, οὕτως δήσουσιν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ παραδώσουσιν εἰς χεῖρας ἔθνῶν."

Strictly speaking in Old Testament terms, this kind of discrepancy would label Agabus as a false prophet. Moses in his speech in Deuteronomy makes this point abundantly clear: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, and the matter does not happen and does not come, it is a word which the LORD has not spoken. In presumption the prophet has spoken it. You do not need to fear him.”²³ The sign of a true Old Testament prophet was the absolute accuracy of everything that he said. Anything less than that made him a false prophet who had not brought a word from the Lord.

Yet Agabus is never rebuked for what he said, nor does Luke ever present him as a false prophet. In fact, Paul in Acts 21 hears multiple times from various prophets that he should not go up to Jerusalem, yet he does not listen to what they say, putting himself instead into the hands of God. These prophets, including Agabus, speak for God, yet Paul chooses to not listen to what they are saying and proceeds to Jerusalem anyway. This detail by itself shows a stark difference between the Old Testament prophets and the New.

Second, Paul in his closing of 1 Thessalonians exhorts the Christians in Thessalonica: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything, hold fast to the good.”²⁴ Paul is hardly rebuking them for unbelief with this statement. While the Thessalonians struggled with issues regarding the return of Christ, Paul otherwise praises them for their steadfastness despite intense opposition. Therefore, his command here is to test prophecies against the written Word of God, and to accept what is true, but reject what is false.

The very act of subjecting prophecy to a test again sets it in contrast with the Old Testament. The frequent statement “Thus says the Lord” in the Old Testament is not an invitation to compare what is being said with other things and to sift through it, but a command

²³ Deuteronomy 18:22 אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר הַנְּבִיא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה הַדְּבָר וְלֹא יָבוֹא הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-דָבָר יִהְיֶה בְּזֶדוֹן דְּבָרֵי הַנְּבִיא לֹא תִגּוֹר מִמֶּנּוּ:

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 “προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε, πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε.”

to receive it as the authoritative word of God. Paul calling for them to subject New Testament prophecies to a test at least shows that they are held on a different level without compromising the fact that such revelations come from above.

If such a distinction is to be made, who then has the same kind of authority as the Old Testament prophets? This is seen clearly in the apostles themselves. Paul makes this abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 14 when he says: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him recognize that what I write to you is a command of the Lord.”²⁵ Likewise John says: “We are from God. The one who knows God hears us. The one who does not hear us is not from God.”²⁶ When the apostles speak in their God-given office, their words are to be received as the very words of God, just like the prophets of the Old Testament. To go against what they say is to go against the Lord Himself. Grudem again says: “Yet it is significant that Paul never appeals to a gift of prophecy to establish his authority—something that would have been very natural and very easy if New Testament prophets had been commonly thought to speak words with absolute divine authority. Rather, when Paul wants to establish his authority, he appeals to his status as an ‘apostle.’”²⁷

For all of these reasons, a distinction ought to be made between prophets in the Old Testament and prophets in the New. The former spoke the very words of God in a way which could not be questioned. The latter spoke for God in a way which needed to be tested and examined.

New Testament Prophets

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:37 “Εἴ τις δοκεῖ προφήτης εἶναι ἢ πνευματικός, ἐπιγινωσκέτω ἃ γράφω ὑμῖν ὅτι κυρίου ἐστὶν ἐντολή.”

²⁶ 1 John 4:6 “ἡμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐσμεν, ὁ γινώσκων τὸν θεὸν ἀκούει ἡμῶν, ὃς οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἀκούει ἡμῶν.”

²⁷ Grudem, 43.

New Testament prophecy may be further defined by the purposes which it serves. The first of these is that it is a sign of the possession of the Spirit. Even in the Old Testament, the presence of the Holy Spirit often manifested itself in prophecy. Prior to being crowned king in Israel, Saul leaves Samuel and finds a group of prophets: “And they came there to Gibeah, and behold, a band of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied in their midst.”²⁸ Prophecy was so closely connected to the Holy Spirit that it could also be taken away, as seen in the elders appointed by Moses: “And the LORD came down in a cloud, and He spoke with him, and He took from the Spirit which was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and it was when the Spirit rested on them they prophesied, but they did not continue.”²⁹ Without the Spirit of the Lord, no one could be a prophet, whether in the Old or New Testament.

This, then, is the reason why Peter cites the prophecy of Joel at Pentecost. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was given only to a few, but on that day, the Spirit was poured out upon all believers. As he says in Acts 2: “And it will be in those days, God says, I will pour out from my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.”³⁰ No longer would the old distinctions apply when it came to salvation. All are one in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, who lives within every believing heart.

As will be seen below when talking about 1 Corinthians, prophecy was only one sign of the presence of the Spirit. Even on the day of Pentecost itself, the primary sign was speaking in tongues. Nevertheless, prophecy would continue to be a proof of the possession of the Spirit and a sign that the long-promised New Testament had finally come. Since the Holy Spirit is poured

²⁸ 1 Samuel 10:10 וַיָּבֹאוּ שָׁם הַגִּבְעָתָה וְהִגָּה חֶבְלֵ-נְבִיאִים לְקִרְאָתָן וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּתְנַבֵּא בְּתוֹכָם:

²⁹ Numbers 11:25 וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעַנְן וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאצֵּל מִן-הַרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּתֵּן עַל-שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ הַזִּקְנִים וַיְהִי כִנּוּחַ עֲלֵיהֶם הַרוּחַ וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסְפוּ:

³⁰ Acts 2:17 “Καὶ ἔσται ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, λέγει ὁ θεός, ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου ἐπὶ πᾶσαν σάρκα, καὶ προφητεύσουσιν οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν καὶ αἱ θυγατέρες ὑμῶν.”

out on women no less than men in these last days, they too could be called to prophesy, just as the New Testament indicates.

The second purpose of New Testament prophecy was to present a message from God which then required a decision to be made. Agabus has already been mentioned above as one example. When he prophesied that a famine would come, the disciples were moved to make preparations to provide for those that would be most affected by it. It was not a command in the strict sense, but they acted as they thought best based on the information which they had received.

There are also several other examples of this throughout the New Testament, including passages which do not use the prophet word group directly. One occurs in Acts 13 with Barnabas and Paul being sent out on the first missionary journey: “And while they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart now for Me Barnabas and Saul to the work for which I have called them.’”³¹ While there is no direct mention of how this was revealed, the same passage mentions that there were prophets at Antioch. For this reason, it seems best to say, then, that these prophets received this from the Holy Spirit and presented it to the congregation. The church then laid hands upon them and sent them on their way.

As mentioned earlier, Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem before being taken to Rome meets disciples who attempt to dissuade him from going there. As Luke says in Acts 21: “And seeking out the disciples, we remained there seven days, [and they] were saying to Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem.”³² Nevertheless, Paul does not heed this particular message, nor does Luke suggest that the disciples were making false claims to speak for God. Rather, Paul

³¹ Acts 13:2 “λειτουργούντων δὲ αὐτῶν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ νηστευόντων εἶπεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον· Ἀφορίσατε δὴ μοι τὸν Βαρναβᾶν καὶ Σαῦλον εἰς τὸ ἔργον ὃ προσκέκλημαι αὐτούς.”

³² Acts 21:4 “ἀνευρόντες δὲ τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐπεμείναμεν αὐτοῦ ἡμέρας ἑπτὰ, οἵτινες τῷ Παύλῳ ἔλεγον διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος μὴ ἐπιβαίνειν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα.”

decides to go on to Jerusalem anyway, knowing full well that it would mean his imprisonment, even if he was not sure of the specific details. Paul is not chastised for going on to Jerusalem, nor are the prophets who spoke to him chastised for saying that he should stay. He is simply moved to act in a different way, leading those who were opposed to finally say: “Since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent and said: ‘The will of the Lord be done.’”³³

A third purpose of New Testament prophecy is encouragement and consolation. As Paul says clearly in 1 Corinthians 14: “For the one prophesying speaks to men edification and encouragement and consolation.”³⁴ Likewise, following the council at Jerusalem, Judas and Silas carry the letter of the council to the church in Antioch. As they are delivering the letter, Luke tells us that “both Judas and Silas, being also themselves prophets, through many words encouraged and strengthened the brothers.”³⁵ They use the opportunity to strengthen the brothers in faith and build them up, especially since the controversy regarding circumcision in Antioch had caused so much trouble.

Distinction from Teachers

It is this last point, however, that is the source of confusion regarding the difference between prophets and pastors. As seen in the examples above, the New Testament clearly states that prophecy involves, at least some of the time, edification and consolation. Yet the New Testament also clearly states that these same activities are exercised by the pastoral office. Paul in 2 Timothy, for example, calls on Timothy to “preach the word, be ready in season [and] out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort [or console], in all patience and teaching.”³⁶ While most of these

³³ Acts 21:14 “μὴ πειθομένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἡσυχάσαμεν εἰπόντες· Τοῦ κυρίου τὸ θέλημα γινέσθω.”

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:3 “ὁ δὲ προφητεύων ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ οἰκοδομὴν καὶ παράκλησιν καὶ παραμυθίαν.”

³⁵ Acts 15:32 “Ἰούδας τε καὶ Σιλᾶς καὶ αὐτοὶ προφήτῃται ὄντες διὰ λόγου πολλοῦ παρεκάλεσαν τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ ἐπεστήριξαν,”

³⁶ 2 Timothy 4:2 “κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, ἐπίστηθι εὐκαίρως ἀκαίρως, ἔλεγξον, ἐπιτίμησον, παρακάλεσον, ἐν πάσῃ μακροθυμίᾳ καὶ διδαχῇ.”

words do not appear directly in conjunction with prophets, there is clearly overlap in the common use of the word for exhort or console. Both pastors and prophets console the brothers while they carry out their calling from God.

It is this overlap that leads some to conclude that there is no appreciable difference between prophets and pastors at all. David Hill in his study of New Testament prophecy argues that “a functional approach is the most appropriate for the study of the phenomenon of Christian prophecy. A prophet is defined then in terms of his essential function, the function which constitutes him a prophet.”³⁷ This approach is understandable. It is easier to define something on the basis of what it is doing than by anything else, especially when there is no straightforward definition otherwise. Nevertheless, because there is overlap in the activities or functions of pastors and prophets, it leads Hill to conclude that they are more or less the same. He states later in his book that “the prophetic ministry has the characteristics of pastoral preaching.”³⁸ Hill is willing to maintain a distinction between the two, but the reason for doing so is purely because the New Testament uses the two words. Functionally, there is little to separate them in his mind.

Likewise, as mentioned in the introduction, Warren and others like him argue in a similar way regarding prophets and pastors. Women were prophesying at Pentecost, Warren argues. Since prophesy has at least some overlap with the pastoral office in terms of function, these women were effectively “preaching” the Gospel to the crowds. Therefore, since women are doing similar things as men in the New Testament, there is nothing to prohibit them from becoming pastors, despite the words of Paul in several places. It is similar in logic to saying that Mary Magdalene was the first “preacher” after the resurrection because she announced that Jesus is alive to the disciples, and therefore women can preach, an argument which Warren also makes.

³⁷ David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 4.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 104.

What all of this shows is that a purely functional definition is inadequate for defining the nature of New Testament prophecy. Basing it entirely on what we see prophets doing will lead us to the same confusion in the end. Aune, critiquing Hill's approach, says: "this definition will make it very difficult for Hill to distinguish among a prophet, an apostle, a preacher, and a teacher later on in his study."³⁹ Aune's own solution is inadequate, since he draws on a wide range of sources in his effort to define prophecy, including paganism. Nevertheless, his point is well made. If we want a clear picture of New Testament prophecy in contrast to the pastoral office, then we must also consider what separates the two while fully recognizing that they have some things in common in a functional sense.

It is clear that such a distinction should and must be made, since the New Testament always distinguishes between them, especially when they appear in the same context. The most common term for the pastoral office in the New Testament is "teacher." This may be seen even in connection with other terms such as "overseer," since Paul in his list of qualifications for an overseer in 1 Timothy 3 says that he must be "skillful in teaching."⁴⁰ Therefore, when we look at passages which use words from the prophet word group and the word for teacher, we can see that the two do not refer to the same thing. The best example of this is Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, when he says: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers."⁴¹ The use of the terms second and third would be very odd if Paul assumed that prophets and teachers were more or less the same thing. He clearly draws a line between them, arguing in the following verses that not all are prophets, nor are all teachers. These particular gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to each differently.

³⁹ Aune, 10.

⁴⁰ 1 Timothy 3:2 "διδασκτικόν"

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 12:28 "καὶ οὐς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας, τρίτον διδασκάλους."

This distinction can also be seen in the prohibition of Paul in 1 Timothy: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.”⁴² Paul’s command is clear: a woman may not teach. Yet Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 11: “But every woman praying or prophesying with an uncovered head dishonors her head.”⁴³ Paul’s assumption is that a woman may indeed prophesy, provided that her head has been covered. Had he wished to forbid a woman from prophesying, one would expect to find a similarly clear prohibition as the one on teaching, since Paul is not afraid to speak clearly on that issue.

Therefore, the New Testament clearly distinguishes between prophets and teachers. Even if they have some things in common in terms of function, they are not more or less the same thing. Similar functions do not mean that they were given for the same reasons. Each is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given for different ends, but both for the good of the Church.

Teachers

How then should teaching in the New Testament sense be understood? Perhaps the easiest way to show how a teacher differs from a prophet is to first make a few more brief observations about prophecy. In the examples listed above, the prophets brought a message from God which demanded some kind of response. Agabus prophesied of a coming famine, Barnabas and Paul were set apart for their missionary work, and Paul was warned of the danger which he would face in Jerusalem. Yet in all of these examples, the prophet pointed to something immediate and immanent. The famine would come in a few short years. Barnabas and Paul immediately set off on their journey. Paul knew that the danger would come once he reached the city. Beyond those points, however, these prophecies had no more relevance for the church. Even

⁴² 1 Timothy 2:12 “διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ ἀυθεντεῖν ἀνδρός, ἀλλ’ εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ.”

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 11:5 “πᾶσα δὲ γυνὴ προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτω τῇ κεφαλῇ καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς.”

Judas and Silas building up the church after the council in Jerusalem spoke to an immediate need. Once that need had passed, the need for the prophecy ceased.

The entire book of Revelation also points to this immediacy. John writes in the opening verses of the book: “Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep the things written in it, for the time is near.”⁴⁴ Of course, Revelation is an exception to this argument. God deemed the words of this prophecy to be so important for the future of the Church that He caused John to write it down. Revelation has a continuing relevance for Christians even today for that reason. Nevertheless, there is an urgency to the whole book that is true for New Testament prophecy in general. The end of all things is near, the present evil age will soon come to an end, and therefore we must be ready for it, remaining steadfast in the truth.

Teaching, on the other hand, hands down from generation to generation those things which apply to every age. Teachers in the New Testament instruct God’s people in the ways of righteousness and show them what it means to live as Christians in any particular situation. As Grudem puts it, “Teaching provided normative doctrinal and ethical guidance for the church. Those who publicly taught in churches spoke not with authority equal to Scripture itself but with authority that, in practical terms, provided the doctrinal and ethical summaries of scriptural teachings and the practical applications of Scripture by which the church was directed.”⁴⁵ If prophecy brought an immediate word to a particular situation, teaching hands down the Scriptures which speak to every situation.

For example, in 2 Timothy 4:2, cited above, Paul exhorts Timothy to “preach the Word.” Timothy as a pastor was commanded to teach the Scriptures to those entrusted to his care, leading them in the ways of truth. Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 “remained in Antioch, teaching

⁴⁴ Revelation 1:3 “μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας καὶ τηροῦντες τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα, ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.”

⁴⁵ Grudem, 121.

and proclaiming with many others the Word of the Lord.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Paul again tells Timothy: “And what you have heard from me among many witnesses, set these things before faithful men, who are competent and can teach others.”⁴⁷ Teachers are thus called to hand down the faith once delivered to the saints, remaining faithful to that Word which has been entrusted to them.

This is why James warns the church that “not many should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will be received with greater judgment.”⁴⁸ James does not say “not many should become prophets.” In fact, Paul even calls for the Christians at Corinth to eagerly desire to prophesy.⁴⁹ Teachers are held to a stricter standard because they are commanded to pass on the teaching of the Lord. It is one thing to speak a message which may even be disregarded, as Paul did with the prophets who tried to dissuade him. It is another thing entirely to teach falsely and lead others into destruction. A greater responsibility is laid upon the New Testament teacher, because he is pointing the way for all to follow based on the preaching of the Scriptures.

Not Exclusive

None of the foregoing should be taken to mean that prophets and pastors are by definition mutually exclusive, as if one could only be one or the other. The two gifts of the Spirit are distinct from one another, but that does not mean that they could not be both given to the same man. Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 12 that the various gifts are different from one another and that no one person has them all. Nevertheless, they depend on one another, so that together they build up the church. Similarly, Paul’s call for them to “strive for the greater gifts”⁵⁰ would make little sense if someone could only possess a single gift in exclusion to all others. God in His wisdom

⁴⁶ Acts 15:35 “Παῦλος δὲ καὶ Βαρναβᾶς διέτριβον ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενοι μετὰ καὶ ἑτέρων πολλῶν τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου.”

⁴⁷ 2 Timothy 2:2 “καὶ ἃ ἤκουσας παρ’ ἐμοῦ διὰ πολλῶν μαρτύρων, ταῦτα παράθου πιστοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οἵτινες ἱκανοὶ ἔσονται καὶ ἑτέρους διδάξαι.”

⁴⁸ James 3:1 “Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, εἰδότες ὅτι μείζον κρίμα ληψόμεθα.”

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:1

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:31 “ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα.”

may very well choose to give multiple gifts to one person, but He always does it for the benefit of the whole body and not for the glorification of the one who possesses them.

Revelation gives another example of this. John toward the end of the book gives a solemn warning: “I testify to all who hear the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book.”⁵¹ Revelation is a prophecy by its own description, but it is a prophecy which carries an absolute authority. Based on the argument laid out above, this appears to be a blending of prophecy itself with the apostolic authority of John. John is a prophet, but he is also an apostle. The two gifts are distinct from one another, but they work together here in the writing of this book.

Therefore, the picture that has emerged so far is that New Testament prophecy consists in revelations from the Lord which have an immediate relevance for those who hear it. Such prophecy is subject to testing and may even be disregarded in some circumstances. It is distinct from teaching, even if they have some things in common, because the latter involves the handing down of the Scriptures and instruction in what it means to be a Christian in every circumstance. Likewise, though the gifts are distinct, they may be given to the same person, so that one man may be both a prophet and a teacher. With all of this in mind, this paper will now examine the important passage of 1 Corinthians 12-14 and consider what it says about the nature of prophecy, especially in connection with prophetesses.

1 Corinthians 12-14

Among the many problems at Corinth was a debate about the significance of spiritual gifts. When Paul begins to give specific instructions on this issue in chapter 14, it becomes clearer that the debate centered around two gifts in particular: speaking in tongues and prophecy.

⁵¹ Revelation 22:18 “Μαρτυρῶ ἐγὼ παντὶ τῷ ἀκούοντι τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου· ἐάν τις ἐπιθῆ ἔπ’ αὐτά, ἐπιθήσει ὁ θεὸς ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὰς πληγὰς τὰς γεγραμμένας ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ,”

At least some of the Corinthians considered the first to be superior to the second, and likewise held those who could speak in tongues in higher esteem. As Dale Martin notes in his article: “In the first place, comparative analysis shows that in most cases speaking in tongues is taken *within* the practicing Christian groups as a high status indicator linked unproblematically with leadership roles.”⁵² The negative consequence of this attitude was a disdain toward those who did not have the gift, regarding them as inferior, and a self-promoting attitude which regarded itself as being above all others. Tongues showed that they were truly spiritual in a way that the others were not, so what use did they have for such people in the congregation?

Paul seeks to correct this attitude. All of the various gifts come from the Holy Spirit, he tells them. One gift is not evidence of a greater share in the Holy Spirit than another. Likewise, the gifts are not given for the glorification of the one who possesses it. Rather, all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit build up the church. As Paul puts it: “But to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common benefit.”⁵³ If a gift is causing division, that is evidence of an abuse of what God has given. All of His gifts should bring them closer together and bring them to greater spiritual maturity in all things.

Paul then uses a metaphor common in his own time to describe the nature of the church. All of them were members of one body, joined together through the Holy Spirit into Christ. This reality had two important implications. First, some of those who did not possess the gift of tongues regarded themselves as inferior, even not being a part of the body at all, doubtlessly based on some of the things which they had heard from others. In Paul’s metaphor, they thought that they were not a part of the body because they were not a particular member, whether a hand or an eye. Yet the reality of being one body meant that this conclusion was false. God has

⁵² Dale Martin, “Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1991): 552.

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 12:7 “ἐκάστῳ δὲ δίδεται ἡ φανέρωσις τοῦ πνεύματος πρὸς τὸ συμφέρον.”

arranged the body so that there is unity and variety. A lack of such variety would produce a monster, not a functioning body. As Paul says, “And if all were one member, where the body?”⁵⁴ There is no reason to consider oneself as being excluded from the body simply because one does not speak in tongues (or have any other particular gift).

Second, those who considered themselves superior likewise had no legitimate grounds for doing so. Anthony Thistelton in his commentary notes: “Not only does the rhetoric of the body reassure those with supposedly ‘inferior’ or ‘dispensable’ gifts that they do indeed belong fully to the body as essential limbs and organs, but this rhetoric now explicitly rebukes those who think that they and their ‘superior’ gifts are self-sufficient for the whole body, or that others are scarcely ‘authentic’ parts of the body, as they themselves are.”⁵⁵ One member cannot say to another that it can function without it. A hand may not be able to see, but an eye cannot lay hold of what it sees. It is only by working together and for the benefit of one another that both will be able to survive.

On the other hand, Paul does not argue for an absolute equality of the gifts. Some gifts are indeed greater than others. He hints at this reality when he encourages them to seek after the higher gifts. Nor does his critique of their attitude toward the particular gift of speaking in tongues mean that it had no value whatsoever. Paul will later be at pains to not only hold it up in its proper light, but even to show them that it was a gift he himself possessed. Rather, in their self-seeking attitude, they had failed to exercise these gifts in love. Even the greatest spiritual gift used in a loveless way is, in fact, nothing at all. Their lovelessness stemmed mostly from a basic misunderstanding of the purpose of these gifts. They regarded them as eternal, something which would have relevance even in eternity, when in fact they are all temporary, meant for this present

⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:19 “εἰ δὲ ἦν τὰ πάντα ἐν μέλος, ποῦ τὸ σῶμα;”

⁵⁵ Anthony Thistelton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids,, Eerdmans, 2000), 1005. Emphasis removed.

age prior to the fullness which will come only at the return of Christ. When set back into this proper perspective, the gifts will be seen for what they are: a benefit for one's neighbor rather than a reason for boasting.

All of this leads into 1 Corinthians 14 where Paul now speaks in concrete and practical terms. Focusing primarily on tongues and prophecy, Paul demonstrates that prophecy, despite its unimpressive appearance, is in fact the *greater* gift precisely because it is oriented toward the benefit of another. Tongues are certainly more attractive, but they really only benefit the one who is speaking. As Paul puts it, "for you on the one hand may give thanks well [when speaking in a tongue], but the other one is not built up."⁵⁶ It is better, then, to prophesy, because then someone hears a revelation from God in a way that can be understood. Through such understanding, they are either built up in faith or led to repentance. The whole church will profit rather than just one.

Further, tongues may in fact prove to be a stumbling block for those who are not Christians. Paul tells them that "tongues are a sign not for the ones who believe, but for unbelievers, but prophecy is not for unbelievers, but for believers."⁵⁷ Understanding this involves seeing that Paul uses the word "sign" in two different ways here. Signs given by God lead those who receive them either to repentance and faith or to judgment and condemnation. The sign of Jonah given in Matthew 12:39 hardened unbelieving Israel in their rejection of Jesus and became something which would be held against them on the Last Day. The sign of the infant Christ in Luke 2:12 would be the proof to the shepherds that the long-promised salvation of the Lord had come. Here in 1 Corinthians, Paul is thus arguing that tongues are a *negative* sign for unbelievers, but prophecy is a *positive* one which leads to faith. An outsider who hears Christians

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:17 "σὺ μὲν γὰρ καλῶς εὐχαριστεῖς ἀλλ' ὁ ἕτερος οὐκ οἰκοδομεῖται."

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:22 "ὥστε αἱ γλῶσσαι εἰς σημεῖόν εἰσιν οὐ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀπίστοις, ἡ δὲ προφητεία οὐ τοῖς ἀπίστοις ἀλλὰ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν."

speaking in tongues will assume that they are out of their minds, since the Greek word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:23 is related to mania, described earlier.⁵⁸ It will confirm them in their unbelief and drive them further away from the Lord, simply because they cannot understand what is being said. On the other hand, the outsider who hears all prophesying will be led to repentance, so that “the hidden things of his heart are revealed, and thus falling on his face he will worship God, declaring that, ‘Truly, God is among you.’”⁵⁹

Tying together this section with the conclusions drawn from the rest of the New Testament, Paul’s specific directions at the end of chapter 14 become clear. Order, not chaos, should define their common assembly. If tongues are to be exercised, they must be interpreted. Otherwise, Paul commands silence. Tongues without interpretation invite confusion and hardening, but tongues with interpretation build up the church. Likewise, “let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.”⁶⁰ Judging prophecies is certainly in line with the rest of the New Testament, since one must decide how to act upon what has been revealed for that moment. Further, if something is given to another while one is speaking, Paul commands silence for the first prophet. This implies, again in line with the remainder of the New Testament witness, that prophecy is rational. Interrupting the prophet, even with the possibility of never having another chance to speak again, shows that they are in full control of themselves at all times. Limiting their number also shows that their words are not to be regarded on the same authoritative level as the apostles or the Old Testament prophets.

The act of judging prophecies, however, means that they must be compared to a standard. One cannot make a judgment as to what is true or what is false without reference to something

⁵⁸ μαίνομαι

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:25 “τὰ κρυπτὰ τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ φανερά γίνεται, καὶ οὕτως πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον προσκυνήσει τῷ θεῷ ἀπαγγέλλων ὅτι Ὁντως ὁ θεὸς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐστίν.”

⁶⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:29 “προφηῆται δὲ δύο ἢ τρεῖς λαλείτωσαν καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι διακρινέτωσαν.”

already judged to be true. In terms of prophecies, such a standard can only be provided by the Word of God. Weighing what is said against the Scriptures will enable Christians to test the spirits to see whether they are of God.

However, as seen earlier, the work of explaining the Scriptures is the act of teaching. Warning against what is false in a specific prophecy would necessarily involve setting out specific doctrines and ethical directions, both of which God has given to the pastoral ministry in His church. Therefore, Paul's inclusion of a specific command for women to be silent here makes perfect sense. The act of judging prophecies and explaining them involves teaching, something which the Scripture limits to men. While women could be prophetesses and even speak their prophecies in the worship service in Corinth, prophets are not the same thing as teachers, and therefore boundaries must be established. God is, after all, a god of peace and not of confusion.

Prophetesses

Therefore, before making some final observations, this paper will take a brief look at the three specific examples of women named prophetesses in the New Testament. The first of these women is Anna in Luke 2. Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple as part of the purification required for women who have given birth under the Old Testament. While there, they meet Simeon who prophesies about the child and gives thanks to God for sending His salvation into the world. Anna, being a prophetess and filled with the Spirit, also speaks of Jesus to the crowds. As Luke says, "And standing near in that hour, she began to praise God and to speak of Him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."⁶¹ Anna's specific words are not

⁶¹ Luke 2:38 "καὶ αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐπιστᾶσα ἀνωμολογεῖτο τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλάλει περὶ αὐτοῦ πᾶσιν τοῖς προσδεχομένοις λύτρωσιν Ἱερουσαλήμ."

recorded. Her message bore an immediate relevance, since she was praising God and speaking of Jesus to that particular crowd.

Second, Philip, who is one of the Seven appointed in Acts 6, eventually takes up residence in Caesarea. When Paul and those with him arrive there on his way to Jerusalem for the last time, they stay at his house. Luke states that “to him were four virgin daughters who prophesied.”⁶² There is no indication of anything that these four women said. It may be implied, however, that they were among those who tried to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem, like the other prophets in the chapter. Regardless, Philip’s daughters all possess this spiritual gift, which they doubtlessly exercised for the benefit of the church.

Finally, John in his letter to the church in Thyatira describes a woman named Jezebel and rebukes the church in that city for their tolerance of her. “But I have this against you,” he says, “that you permit the woman Jezebel, who says that she is a prophetess and teaches and leads my servants astray to commit adultery and to eat idol-foods.”⁶³ Unlike Anna and the four daughters of Philip, Jezebel is clearly a false prophetess, one who claims to speak for God even while leading Christians into compromise and sin. Note that John holds her teaching against her. She usurped this activity for herself, and her violation of God’s prohibition led her into further error. It is not true prophecy if it leads into sin, whether in the Old Testament or the New.

Reflections

Two final questions need to be addressed. First, does the gift of prophecy continue today? Could there be prophets or prophetesses among us in the New Testament sense? The answer to this depends largely on one’s assumptions. Those who deny that prophecy continues often do so either by arguing that there is no essential difference between the Old Testament and the New

⁶² Acts 21:9 “τούτω δὲ ἦσαν θυγατέρες τέσσαρες παρθένοι προφητεύουσαι.”

⁶³ Revelation 2:20 “ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι ἀφεῖς τὴν γυναῖκα Ἰεζάβελ, ἡ λέγουσα ἑαυτὴν προφητὴν καὶ διδάσκει καὶ πλανᾷ τοὺς ἔμοῦς δούλους πορνεῦσαι καὶ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα.”

Testament prophets, or by arguing that prophecy existed only as a means of legitimizing the Gospel. Benjamin Warfield in his influential work *Counterfeit Miracles* argues that miracles like prophecy were given as a means to prove the God-given authority of the apostles. As he says, “These gifts were not the possession of the primitive Christian as such; nor for that matter of the Apostolic Church or the Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctively the authentication of the Apostles. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it.”⁶⁴ Miracles were needed to show that the Gospel was indeed from God, but once it was firmly established, there was no further need for them. Prophecy therefore ceased with the death of the last apostle. Warfield spends most of his book debunking claims to miracle through the age of the Church, especially those close to his own time.

Douglas Judisch, following a similar argument as Warfield, goes a step further and argues that prophecy throughout the Scriptures is essentially the same in every case. For example, he states that “the classic description of prophecy provided by the apostle Peter makes it clear that the New Testament concept of propheteia [prophecy] is the same as the Old Testament concept of nebu'ah [prophecy].”⁶⁵ For this reason, there cannot be true prophets today. Since they served a similar purpose as the Old Testament prophets, there is no longer any need for them. Judisch does recognize that there is a difference between teaching and prophecy, and he likewise argues, as this paper has done, that women may be prophets.⁶⁶ However, since

⁶⁴ Benjamin Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 5–6.

⁶⁵ Douglas Judisch, *An Evaluation of Claims to the Charismatic Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 53–54.

prophecy showed that the apostles were truly from God, there is no need for any further prophecy. The gift has entirely ceased.

Behind this kind of argument is a legitimate concern about those who claim an authority for themselves which God has not given to them. Self-proclaimed prophets have existed in every age, but they seem to have only increased in number in the previous century. John MacArthur, who firmly denies the possibility of continuing prophecy, cites a charismatic author and then reacts by saying: “That is tantamount to saying that current instances of charismatic prophecy are divine revelation equal to Scripture. Such a claim is disturbing because the possibilities of fraud and error by present-day ‘prophets’ are obvious.”⁶⁷ One could easily multiply examples of abuse and fraud perpetrated by those claiming to have a direct revelation from God.

A genuine gift of the Holy Spirit will not be vague or hard to define. So much of what many claim to be spiritual gifts like prophecy or tongues today seems to barely resemble what appears in the New Testament. MacArthur is quite right to criticize claims of working miracles which are “partial, gradual, or temporary.”⁶⁸ The examples of charismatic gifts in the New Testament are never ambiguous or so intentionally vague that they are impossible to prove. Peter could not fake raising Dorcas from the dead in Acts 9. Nor would a genuine gift of prophecy today be a matter of calling any kind of impression or thought a word from the Lord. As D.A. Carson, though otherwise open to the possibility of a continuation of the gifts, puts it: “Calling an inanity a prophecy does not stop it from being an inanity.”⁶⁹

Nevertheless, if the argument laid out above holds true, there is nothing to prevent the gift from being given today. God is free to give or not to give a gift like prophecy as He pleases.

⁶⁷ John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

⁶⁹ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Examination of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 172.

This is not to say that prophets and prophetesses do exist today, only that it is possible. The witness of history seems to clearly indicate that genuine prophecy in the New Testament sense has been taken away. Already by the year 392, Chrysostom could confess in his sermons on 1 Corinthians 12-14 that “this whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.”⁷⁰ Therefore, it would be presumptuous to claim such a gift without a legitimate reason to do so, yet the possibility remains open until the coming of the Last Day.

What is needed above all is clarity, which leads into the last point to consider. A lack of clarity in these issues leads both to a blurring of New Testament distinctions between prophecy and teaching as well as unjustified claims to such a gift in the modern setting. In confessional Lutheran circles, there is a tendency to identify the pastoral office in terms of its function or activities. Pastors preach, for example, or teach the Bible. In order to safeguard the office, these functions are then often narrowly defined. So long as duly ordained men are carrying out these activities in that narrow sense, it is argued that we are following the Lord’s mandate. The trouble with such a narrow and functional approach to the ministry is that it cannot effectively deal with ambiguities present in the New Testament itself. Prophets and pastors do have some things in common, such as exhortation or consolation. A failure to account for this, whether intentionally or unintentionally, will only continue to perpetuate the problem. The undeniable existence of prophetesses in the New Testament when considered only in a functional way will add fodder to those who want to bypass Scripture’s clear commands on who can be pastors.

The solution is therefore to seek clarity, as this paper has attempted to do. The New Testament clearly and consistently distinguishes between pastors and prophets. This distinction

⁷⁰ Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 168.

includes more than just their various functions, though those are certainly included. While a single man may indeed be both a pastor and a prophet in the New Testament sense, there is no threat to the pastoral office in recognizing that one may be a prophet without also being a pastor. Both are distinct gifts of the Holy Spirit given for the common good. If the gift of prophecy were given again today, it would be a benefit for the Church and not a means of transgressing God's clear order.

Bibliography

- Aune, David. *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.
- Bacchylides. *Lyra Graeca, Volume III*. Edited and translated by J.M. Edmonds. Loeb Classical Library 461. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922.
- Barkley, Scott. “Law Amendment falls short in Indy.” Baptist Press. June 12, 2024. <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/law-amendment-falls-short-in-indy/>.
- Carson, D. A. *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987.
- Grudem, Wayne. *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000.
- Gryboski, Michael. “SBC expels Saddleback, 4 other churches that have female pastors.” The Christian Post. February 22, 2023. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/sbc-decides-to-expel-saddleback-church-over-female-pastors.html>.
- Hill, David. *New Testament Prophecy*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979.
- Judisch, Douglas. *An Evaluation of Claims to the Charismatic Gifts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978.
- Law, Mike. “What is the proposed amendment?” SBC Amendment. Accessed July 29, 2024. <https://sbcamendment.org/home-2/frequently-asked-questions/>.
- MacArthur, John. *Charismatic Chaos*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.
- Martin, Dale B. “Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1991): 547–589.
- Moore, Russell and Rick Warren. “Rick Warren Reflects on his Legacy.” Christianity Today. *The Russell Moore Show*. March 8, 2023. Podcast, 53:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evxKe5E4TNA>.
- Plato. *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles*. Translated by R. G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library 234. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Schaff, Philip, ed. *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. Vol. 12. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.

Warfield, Benjamin B. *Counterfeit Miracles*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918.