

THE OFFICE OF THE PROPHET IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

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The subject of this study has its primary reference to a specific aspect, namely, the office of prophet in the New Testament church. However, for the sake of thoroughness, and in order to see this particular office in its proper light, we need first to look generally at the whole teaching of the New Testament regarding prophecy. Accordingly, I shall divide this study into two parts: first, generally, the office and function of prophecy in the New Testament; and second, specifically, the office and function of prophecy in the New Testament church.

I have attempted to study and to include every reference to prophets or prophecy or to prophesying in the entire New Testament, with the exception of those many passages where the reference is obviously to the prophets of the Old Testament. Not all of these references will be cited, but it has been my purpose not to omit from consideration a single scripture pertaining to the subject.

I. Prophets and Prophecy in the New Testament.

A. Meaning of terms.

To begin with, prophecy in the New Testament is the same as prophecy in the Old Testament; it is a continuation of the same office and function. Evidence of this is to be seen in that the expressions are used as well-known terms without any need to explain them or any effort to alter them. The New Testament opens with John the Baptist preaching to multitudes who have gone out to hear one who they thought was a prophet. By far the majority of the references in the New Testament to the words prophet, prophecy, or to prophesy, are direct references to the Old Testament prophets or to their words or writings. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel, Enoch, Samuel, Elijah, and Zachariah are referred to as prophets, and one of the commonest expressions in the Gospels calls attention to the ways in which Christ fulfills the words or writings of the Old Testament prophets.

Thus, the paper which has preceded this one is actually the foundation on which this or any study of New Testament prophecy must be built. (Note: See article by S. H. Bess.)

B. Prophetic function not lost in Gospel period.

When the New Testament period opens, the prophetic function was not entirely lost or forgotten. The years between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New are often referred to as the silent years, when the voice of the prophet was no longer heard in Israel. And there is a sense in which this is true, for from Malachi until John no one is to be found who ranks with those who bore the title in the Old Testament. But there were those who were called prophets, and the ideal of prophecy was still a part of the expectations and even the language of the people of Jesus' day.

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When John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness a delegation of officials challenged him with the question, "Who are you? . . . Are you Elijah? . . . Are you That Prophet?" (John 1:21,25). Again and again we are told that the people held John to be a prophet. And Jesus too was greeted with the same expectation.

Perhaps even more clearly this consciousness of prophecy on the part of the people in Gospel times can be seen in some of the expressions and vocabulary used. Jesus seems to be quoting a proverb when he says, "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country" (Matt. 13:57). Pharisees push aside the claims of Christ with the observation, "Out of Gallilee ariseth no Prophet" (John 7:52). The Lord speaks of professing followers who will in the day of judgment say, "Have we not prophesied in thy name?" (Matt. 7:22), and He promises, "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward" (Matt. 10:41). Such expressions show at least that the idea of prophets and prophecy was not completely lost in Israel in New Testament times.

Also, there were those who are specifically called prophets or were said to prophesy. John's father, Zacharias, "was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied" (Luke 1:67). Anna, a prophetess, is mentioned in connection with the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:36). And John the Gospel writer tells us that Caiaphas, the wicked high-priest who participated in the trial of Jesus, had unconsciously prophesied when he said it was expedient for one man to die rather than the whole nation (John 11:51).

C. Title especially used of two persons.

In the Gospels the prophetic office is particularly ascribed to two individuals, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Reference has already been made to the often-repeated fact that the people believed John to be a prophet. But more than that, at the time of his birth his father, speaking by prophecy, said, "Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest" (Luke 1:76). Jesus asks concerning John, "What went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet" (Matt. 11:9) and goes on, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28). And the ministry of John was in every respect a true example of the Old Testament prophetic office.

Jesus also was considered a prophet by many of the people of his day. When He asked his disciples what men were saying about Him they answered, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others Jeremias, or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:14). Similar estimates of his person were made by Herod the tetrarch when he heard about Jesus and his works (Luke 9:8), by the Samaritan woman (John 4:19), and by the man born blind (John 9:17). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem in his triumphal entry the multitude said, "This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee" (Matt. 21:11), and the rulers feared to lay hands upon Him because the multitude took him for a prophet (Matt. 21:46).

But more important than his reputation among men is the actual claim of Christ himself. On at least two occasions Jesus referred to himself as a prophet. In the synagogue at Nazareth, when they rejected his claim, He said, "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country and in his own house" (Matt. 13:57). And when He was warned that Herod would kill Him He replied, "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). Thus the early Christians rightly took the prophecy of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15,18 and applied it to Christ:

"A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me" (Acts 3:22). Christ too exercised all the functions of the prophetic office.

D. Passages relating to the future.

Leaving the period of the Gospels, the New Testament speaks of a future exercise of the prophetic function. In Acts 2:17-18 the prophecy of Joel (2:28) that in the golden age to come God would pour out of his Spirit upon all flesh, "and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" is given a limited application to the experience of Pentecost, but still the primary reference to the future kingdom of the Messiah is not impaired. In the book of Revelation the two witnesses who stand up for God in Jerusalem against the beast are said to "prophesy a thousand two hundred and three-score days" (Rev. 11:3,6). It is clear that these references to future prophetic activity are in full harmony with the prophetic function in the Old Testament and the Gospels.

E. Summary: The nature of the prophetic function.

In summarizing the nature of the prophetic function as it is seen in the Gospels, at least four elements make up the work of the prophet.

The first of these, and probably the one we most commonly associate with the word, is the predictive element. Prophecy foretells the future. This certainly was an element of Old Testament prophecy and appears also in the New. John the Baptist came with the prediction: "There comes one after me . . ." and prophesies the coming of the Messiah and the day of judgment. Jesus was exercising the prophetic office when he foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the age, and his own second coming.

The second, and perhaps more important, is the hortatory element in prophecy. The prophet not only foretells, but forthtells. He speaks for God. He voices the judgments and message of God for the people of his day. This even in the Old Testament was the primary function of the prophet, and the same is true in the New. John preached repentance for the sins of his day as well as announcing the advent of the Messiah, and it was this preaching which earned him the reputation of a prophet with the people. The two Emmaus disciples called Jesus a prophet because of his mighty deeds and words (Luke 24:19) rather than because of his predictions, for at the time they seem actually to have disbelieved his predictions.

While the above two aspects are the ones usually mentioned, I believe that there are two others which in the New Testament are clearly associated with the prophetic function, at least in the thinking of the people.

A third element seems to be the possession of supernatural knowledge. The Samaritan woman said, "I perceive that thou art a prophet" (John 4:19) when Jesus surprised her with his knowledge about her five past husbands and her present affair with a man who was not her husband. It was this supernatural knowledge which made her think that Jesus was a prophet. So also the Pharisee in whose house Jesus was dining concluded, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). And when the soldiers were mocking Him they spit in his face, and buffeted Him and smote Him with the palms of their hands, saying, "Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, who is he that smote thee?" (Matt. 26:68). The possession of such knowledge would have been the mark of a prophet, and the telling of such hidden information would have been prophesying.

A fourth element is the power to perform miracles and wonders. Certainly this had been true of many of the Old Testament prophets, such as Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah. It seems that this, more than anything else, led the people of Jesus' day to call Him a prophet. When He raised to life the son of the widow of Nain the people "glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us" (Luke 7:16). When Herod heard of all the miracles Jesus was doing, he thought that John the Baptist was risen from the dead, or that Elijah or one of the prophets was risen again (Luke 9:7,8). The man born blind was asked to explain who he thought the man was who had opened his eyes and he said, "He is a prophet" (John 9:17). Thus again, in the thinking of the people at least, the power to work miracles seems to have been associated with the prophetic office.

II. The Office of Prophet in the New Testament church.

I shall first survey the Scripture passages involved, then attempt a summary of the New Testament teaching on the subject, and finally seek to relate it to our present-day and present-church life.

A. Survey of passages involved.

The first Scripture referring specifically to prophecy in the New Testament church comes from the very first day of the existence of the church (Acts 2:17-18). Peter, in explaining the strange phenomena of that Pentecostal experience, quotes the prophecy of Joel (2:28) concerning the last days when God would "pour out of his Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy." While the prophecy in its context and primary application unquestionably looks to the Messianic future age, the Millenium, Peter sees in it some relationship to the event then transpiring, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the believers at Pentecost and the accompanying phenomena of tongues of fire and the witnessing in tongues understood by the different nationalities represented. These men were not drunk; they were prophesying by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on them. And there is nothing strange that this prophecy of the still-future Kingdom of the Messiah should be experienced by the believers in this age of the church, for even now we are translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13), and many aspects of that future kingdom are already applicable to us. Thus, prophesying is one of the results of the outpouring of the Spirit, whether in the Messianic kingdom of the future or in those who in this church age enter into that Kingdom.

More directly, there are many persons who are called prophets or who are said to prophesy in the New Testament church. In Acts 11:27, 28 we read that prophets went down from Jerusalem to Antioch, one of whom was named Agabus, who foretold that a great famine was coming. This same Agabus later (Acts 21:10) foretold Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Jerusalem. In Acts 13:1 we read of certain prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch, among whom were listed Barnabas and Saul. Again in Acts 15:32 the two men sent forth by the Jerusalem council to carry its decision to the Gentile congregations, Judas and Silas, are also called prophets. In Acts 19:6 the twelve Ephesians who believed Paul's message were baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon them, "and they spake with tongues and prophesied." In Acts 21:9 we are told of four virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist who prophesied. Thus in the early church there was a group of persons who were called prophets or were said to prophesy.

Still other New Testament references speak in a general way about this prophetic function in the church. James 5:10 calls attention to "the prophets who have spoken in the name of

the Lord" as examples of suffering and patience. Timothy received his gift "by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (I Tim. 4:14; cf. 1:18). The Thessalonians were exhorted not to despise prophesyings (I Thess. 5:20). Paul mentions in connection with his treatment of women's head-coverings that "every man praying or prophesying having his head covered dishonoreth his head, but every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head" (I Cor. 11:4,5). Again, these references witness to the existence in the New Testament church of those called prophets and of the exercise of the prophetic function.

More important for our consideration are a few specific references to the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church. In Romans 12:6 Paul exhorts us to diligence in the use of the spiritual gifts which the Holy Spirit has bestowed, saying, "having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith." In Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 he speaks of "apostles and prophets" in the church, and in 4:11 he says that the ascended Christ has given gifts to the church, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." But by far the most detailed description of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church is to be found in I Corinthians 12-14. In this section the apostle is answering a direct question put to him by letter from the church at Corinth, concerning spiritual gifts in general and the gift of tongues in particular. His answer tells us practically all that can be known about these strange gifts in the early church, and perhaps the rest of this paper should be an attempt to give an exposition of these chapters. But that would take us far beyond our immediate purpose, so I have chosen instead to summarize the New Testament teaching regarding these gifts.

B. Summary of New Testament teaching.

First, prophecy was one of many supernatural spiritual gifts distributed and exercised in the New Testament church by the sovereign choice and power of the Holy Spirit. When we study the Scriptures which speak of these gifts several facts appear which we should note.

These gifts were not a fixed and unchanging catalog or just so many specific functions in the church. In at least six different places we have lists of these gifts given to us in the New Testament, and no two of them agree either in the gifts included or in the order given. Sometimes they are referred to as offices in the church, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Sometimes they are referred to as abilities or functions, such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues (I Cor. 12:8). Usually they are mixed, as in I Cor. 12:28: "first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; after that, miracles, healings, governments, discerning of tongues," or in verses 29-30 where the same list is repeated with two omitted and another added. In Romans 12:6 what starts out as a list of gifts - prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting -, soon changes to a general list of miscellaneous Christian duties, - giving, ruling, showing mercy, love, etc. The same person sometimes exercised several of these gifts; for example, Paul, who was an apostle, is also called a prophet (Acts 13:1) and exercised the gift of prophecy (by implication in I Cor. 14), yet he tells us that he spoke in tongues more than all the others (I Cor. 14:18), and we know that on many occasions he worked miracles. Also it seems that every member of the body had some one of these gifts, whether prominent or insignificant, and each was to respect the importance of his own and every other's gift (I Cor. 12:11-27). Thus it appears that these gifts of the Spirit were special endowments or enablings according to the needs of the church and varied greatly as the needs varied. This is precisely what we are led to expect from the initial statements made about them, that the Holy Spirit divides "to every man severally as he will."

Prophecy was one of these special miraculous enduements. Several things serve to indicate the important place which it occupied among these spiritual gifts in the church. It is the only one which is included in every list of these gifts. The prophets are often coupled prominently with the apostles, and when they are they always are second only to them (Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; I Cor. 12:28; 29-30). They often are coupled with teachers, and always are listed ahead of them (Acts 12:1; Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:28, 29-30, Rom. 12:6). In Acts 19:6, as many times elsewhere, prophecy is associated with the gift of tongues, and the way Paul uses it to contrast with tongues in I Corinthians 14 shows clearly its greater importance and usefulness.

Second, these spiritual gifts served a special confirmatory purpose in the New Testament church during the formation of the New Testament, and ceased when that purpose was accomplished. Here we reach the crux of the whole matter and must part company with the Pentecostals who profess the continuance of these gifts in the church of our day.

In dealing with this point let us turn first to the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 1:1-2 the writer speaks of the two revelations that God has made of himself. At different times and in differing manners God spoke to the fathers by the prophets--that is the Old Testament. Now in these last days He has spoken to us by his Son. That refers to the New Testament, as he makes plain in chapter two, when he contrasts the surety and inviolability of the Old Testament which was spoken by angels with the greater surety and inviolability of the "so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him" (v. 3). Then verse four tells the function of these supernatural gifts of the Spirit: "God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will." The signs and miracles and spiritual gifts were God's means of confirming the word of the early Christian preachers during the period between the living word of Christ himself and the completion of God's Word in the New Testament Scriptures.

The nature of the gift of prophecy itself points to the same conclusion. Prophecy in the New Testament church was not mere preaching, it was miraculous preaching, inspired preaching. Like prophecy in the Old Testament it was saying, "Thus saith the Lord." It was a supernatural gift whereby the prophet was able to reveal to his listeners new truth from God. This might mean foretelling the future, or anything else which could not be known by natural means. His words were God-breathed, inspired. It was "by revelation" that the mystery of the church was made known to the apostles and prophets, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:3-5. The writing of the New Testament is called a prophecy (Rev. 1:3), perhaps not entirely because of the nature of its contents. Thus, the gift of prophecy especially was related to revelation and to inspiration, and the exercise of the gift in the early church served to place the stamp of divine authority on the Christian message during the period when that message was being crystallized into the inspired New Testament.

Going on, there are hints in the New Testament that these spiritual gifts were intended to be temporary. Probably the clearest passage is I Corinthians 13:8: "Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." Here we need to turn directly to the original Greek, for the King James Version in its beautiful phraseology certainly conceals something of the directness and simplicity of the original. There are three of these supernatural spiritual gifts mentioned here which Paul says are only temporary: prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. To express this lack of permanence he uses two words in the original, one with prophecy and knowledge, and a different one with

tongues. To translate it as simply as I know how, it reads thus: "Whether prophecies, they shall be put out of commission; whether tongues, they shall stop; whether knowledge, it shall be put out of commission." He certainly is not saying that prophecies shall fail of fulfillment. He says rather that the time will come when prophecy shall no longer be operative; it will be put out of use. The special gifts of prophecy and supernatural knowledge will no longer be needed some day when the full revelation of the New Testament is completed and they will be de-commissioned. Of tongues he is more abrupt; they shall stop, cease.

The question arises, as we read on into verses 9-12, if knowledge and prophecy here are to be put out of commission by the completion of the New Testament, whether then the expression "that which is perfect" in verse 10 is to be understood as referring to the completed New Testament. This is a problem of interpretation which I cannot go into now, but there is no reason I can see why it cannot be so taken. The problem really arises in connection with verse 12, where Paul contrasts "now", when we see through a glass darkly, and "then", when we shall know even as we are known. Here the contrast seems to be between this present life and the future state. Perhaps the answer may be seen in the fact that between these two sets of contrasts Paul uses an illustration of still another contrast, that of a child and a man. The interpretation would then be something like this: Prophecy, tongues and supernatural knowledge are gifts given temporarily until that which is perfect, the written New Testament, is completed. An illustration of such a change from the temporary to the permanent may be seen in growth from childhood to maturity, maturity making the things of childhood only temporary. A further illustration is the contrast between our knowledge of things now in this life with what it will be in the life to come, when our knowledge will be direct and perfect.

Perhaps a further hint of the temporary nature of these gifts in the early church is the record of the abuse of the gift of tongues in the Corinthian church, and the disrepute into which it had come. Paul, in dealing with the situation, reminded them forcibly that the purpose of the gift was the edification of the church and therefore they had to be understood. So those with tongues must not speak in the church unless an interpreter was present, then only one or two or at most three, and always in turn. This last rule he applied also to prophecy, and he rather sternly reminded them that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (I Cor. 14:32). These gifts seem to be becoming, in the thinking of this one church at least, things to be coveted for their own sakes, rather than for their divinely intended purpose. Now it is instructive to note that the function of edification of the church is precisely the function later assigned to the written Scriptures (II Tim. 3:16) and in this very passage Paul demands that any one who might consider himself to be a prophet should acknowledge that the things which he (Paul) was then writing were the commandments of the Lord (v. 37). In other words, Paul's words, since they were Scripture, took precedence over the words of the prophets.

This understanding of the spiritual gifts in the New Testament church is supported by the history of the church in the years following. In the *Didache*, "The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles," written about the middle of the second century, we still read of men called prophets, wandering around from church to church. Apparently there are quite a number of them, but they no longer held the position of honor and respect which the New Testament affords them. The writer of this little tract on practical Christianity deals with a problem which obviously was a very real one in his day: how to distinguish the true prophet from the false. He offers in brief this criterion: If the man stays one day, or at most two, receive him. But if he stays three he obviously

is just after your free support. He is a false prophet. If he is satisfied with food for each day he is a true prophet. If he asks for money to take with him he is a false prophet. Thus early in the history of the church prophecy came into disrepute. What better explanation is there than that suggested by the Scriptures? Prophecy, having served its purpose of confirming the message until the inspired Scriptures were completed, then was de-commissioned. Those who continued to bear the title had no real function to perform, and thus arose the abuses here reflected.

One of the heresies of the early church was associated with the gift of prophecy. Montanism was a sect which believed in the continuation of the miraculous spiritual gifts and particularly of prophecy. So the Montanists were adding to the Scriptures the supposed special revelations which they claimed to receive from the Lord. Nor is this heresy dead, for in more recent times a Joseph Smith received some tablets from heaven, and a Mr. Tomlinson of Cleveland, Tennessee, exercises the prophetic gift as he foresees himself elected as the next president of the United States.

As a matter of fact, the gift of prophecy is dead; it has been rendered inoperative. Today, men are shut up to the inspired written Word of God as their only source of revelation. It is God's complete and final message. No prophet today would have anything to say.

C. Relation to present church functions.

There may be a sense in which these spiritual gifts, or rather the practical functions of these gifts, have continued in the normal operation of the work of the church.

Take the office of apostle for example. There are no apostles today. They were the authoritative general leaders of the church in the New Testament. That office has ceased to exist. Its function is carried on in the congregational government of the churches. But the pronouncements of churches are not authoritative decrees to be put up alongside the Scriptures.

Or look at the gift of healing. Workers of miracles have long since vanished away, in the sense that the New Testament speaks of those who were supernaturally endowed with power to heal the sick and do other mighty works. But no one of us would say that God has ceased to heal the sick. He still is the Great Physician, and God has left to the church a divinely appointed means whereby the sick may call for the elders of the church, who anoint the sick with oil, and the prayer of faith still saves the sick and the Lord still raises them up. But the elders of the church are not divine healers.

So also, the gift of prophecy has been put out of operation. There are no revealers of new divine truths today. God has said all He has to say in this book. This book is all the prophet and all the prophecy there is today. There are those who edify the church by expounding the prophecies of this book, but they are not prophets, any more than elders are healers or church votes are infallible.

Perhaps we may use in closing this paper a verdict of the people of Jesus' day, when they said of Him, that He spake as one having authority and not as the scribes (Matt. 7:29). This is an interesting contrast. Let us always remember, we are scribes, bringing forth out of the treasures of God's Book things new and old, interpreting His authoritative Word for the edification of his people. We are not prophets authoritatively revealing new truths from God.