

Destiny College Notes

The Ministry Of The Prophet In The New Testament And Today

Ian Rawley

What image does the word 'prophet' conjure up for you? A bald old man in a desert? An eccentric radical? A devoted family man who likes hill-walking and gardening? Hopefully the last description will be more apposite than the first two, because the prophet should be a familiar figure in today's church, whether locally based or itinerant,¹ helping to equip (or prepare) God's people for their God-given ministries.² The new testament makes it clear that Jesus Christ was apostle,³ prophet,⁴ evangelist,⁵ pastor⁶ and teacher,⁷ and that this multiple ministry is continued after his ascension by individuals who carry a certain aspect of his nature.⁸ Although these individuals have clear ministry priorities, each one of them needs to work together to bring the fullness of their corporate anointing to the church.

Of these equipping ministries, prophets are particularly sensitive to the heart of God. They will especially want to spend quality time listening to the Holy Spirit and discerning what he is saying to the church generally, or to specific congregations. What concerns God, concerns them. What pleases God, pleases them. What angers God, angers them. They can therefore manifest a wide range of deep emotions under the leading of the Holy Spirit when they are explaining to others what they sense in their spirits. But although emotionally sensitive, they should not be emotionally unstable, for the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.⁹ Indeed, they should normally be able to articulate clearly why they are feeling what they are feeling, because the essence of their ministry is to be God's

spokesperson. It is what their name literally means.¹⁰ Let us look at some specific ways in which they function in the church.

ETHICAL

We have already touched on this aspect of the prophets' ministry. Prophets care deeply about principles like justice, righteousness and integrity. They tend to ask pointed questions about individual and corporate behaviour. They will want to be sure that any action taken was right, fair and without hypocrisy. In this way they often act as God's plumbline.¹¹ For them, the end never justifies the means. Processes matter as much as results. The Holy Spirit must not be grieved.¹²

PREDICTIVE

Since the essence of their gifting is revelation,¹³ prophets are often used by God to warn his people about things that are going to happen in the future. Two examples of this are recorded in the Book of Acts. In chapter 11: 27-30, some prophets, including one named Agabus, came down to Antioch from Jerusalem and warned the Christians there about a major famine that would take place in the near future. This actually occurred a few years later in the reign of Claudius. As a result of this revelation, the church in Antioch decided to provide help for the believers in Judea.

In chapter 21:10-14 Agabus the prophet is at work again. This time he comes down from Judea to Caesarea where he foretells Paul's arrest and imprisonment at Jerusalem. The dramatic way in which Agabus brings the prophecy to Paul is actually reminiscent of some of the prophets in the Old Testament.¹⁴ Unlike the Tyrian Christians who 'spoke through the Spirit' (verse 4), or those of Paul's companions who were within earshot (verse 12), he fails to conclude that Paul ought not to continue his journey. He is mature enough in his gifting to bring the word of the Lord and no

more. Others must weigh¹⁵ what is delivered and decide what to do.

FOUNDATIONAL

Ephesians 2:20 clearly describes both apostles and prophets as foundations to the church. From the word order and, more importantly, because of Ephesians 3:5, it seems clear that Paul is describing prophets of the new covenant, not prophets of the old covenant. While those apostles and prophets of the first century clearly laid the original foundation of the church of Jesus Christ, that foundation needs to be re-laid, in a similar way, in every generation until Jesus returns. It is interesting to note that after his split with Barnabus,¹⁶ who was probably a prophet¹⁷ before being recognised as an apostle,¹⁸ Paul travelled with Silas the prophet¹⁹ who may also have been recognised as an apostle.²⁰

ENCOURAGING/STRENGTHENING/COMFORTING

This trio of descriptive words obviously comes from 1 Corinthians 14:3, concerning the purpose of prophecy. It should be no surprise therefore that prophets are often used in this way in their ministry. After the great debate at the Council of Jerusalem two prophets, Judas and Silas were chosen to go with two apostles, Paul and Barnabus, to communicate the outcome of the doctrinal debate to the church at Antioch. Luke specifically records that it was the two prophets who 'encouraged and strengthened the brothers'.²¹

But however prophets function, they are there to bless and serve the church. They are part of a team of equipping ministries that are vitally necessary if the Bride is to make herself ready to meet the Bridegroom.²² If you are hungry for all that God has in store for you, you will need all those whom God has said are necessary for that to happen. As with all the equipping ministries, it is not sufficient to simply attend meetings where prophets are

speaking or ministering in their spiritual giftings. It is necessary to have an ongoing relationship with them to fully benefit from the gift of the ascended Christ in them for you. Don't settle for second best, get biblical and get blessed!

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¹ Cf. The prophets residing in Antioch (Acts 13:1) with those travelling with Agabus (11:27)

² Ephesians 4:12

³ Hebrews 3:1

⁴ John 6:14

⁵ Luke 4:16-21

⁶ John 10:11

⁷ John 13:13

⁸ Ephesians 4:7,11

⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:32

¹⁰ From the two Greek words, pro and phemi; to speak for or on behalf of.

¹¹ See Amos 7:7

¹² Ephesians 4:30

¹³ 1 Corinthians 14:25,30

¹⁴ egs. Ahijah the Sihonite (1 Kings 11:29-39); Isaiah (Isaiah 20:2-4); Ezekiel (Ezekiel 4:1-3)

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:29

¹⁶ Acts 15:39

¹⁷ From Acts 13:1, he must have been either a prophet or a teacher. In support of the former is the fact that the apostles gave him the new name of 'Barnabus', which means 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36). For the significance of that, see the next section of the article.

¹⁸ Acts 14:14

¹⁹ Acts 15:32,40

²⁰ Cf. Thessalonians 1:1 with 2:6

²¹ See Acts 15:22-35

²² See Revelation 19:7