THE NEW TESTAMENT PROPHET

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Bible students are agreed that the New Testament prophet was an office in the church that was a gift from Christ to the church (Eph 4:11), and that those who held this office were gifted by the Holy Spirit for this work. What is not of universal understanding are the questions of whether (1) the office of the prophet continued past apostolic times into our age, and (2) whether Christians who were not acknowledged as holding the office could be gifted to prophesy apart from that office.

This article will maintain that the office of the NT prophet did not continue beyond the apostolic period, and that the early church did not recognize self-proclaimed prophets, at least not those whose prophecies were fallible.

Uniqueness of the Apostolic Era

A major misunderstanding on the part of some Christians has been a failure to recognize that the period of the apostles was determinatively different from subsequent generations of the church. Reading the New Testament, and especially the book of Acts, Christians can rightfully long for the vibrancy of the NT church and even may wish to see manifestations of God’s power with his people. However, when post-apostolic Christians try to reduplicate the same supernatural gifts and extraordinary offices, they err in not recognizing the uniqueness of the apostolic era.

First of all, the church offices of apostle and prophet were extraordinary and temporary. This is because these offices were foundational for the establishment of the NT church. Ephesians 2:19-20 is quite explicit about the foundational purpose of these two offices: “. . . the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.” While mortal sinners held these offices in the early church, it is important to remember that they only could become the foundation for the church because, when they spoke officially for the Lord, they spoke without error.

Expositors differ whether the foundational prophets in view here are OT prophets or NT prophets, or even from both testaments. The preferred interpretation is to take these prophets as NT prophets, especially due to Paul’s repetition of the same phrase, “apostles and prophets,” a few verses later in Eph 3:5 where the context identifies them as contemporary with the apostles. This connection indicates that the prophets of Eph 2:20 are NT prophets.

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1 This article is a revision of a similar one first published in the Journal of Modern Ministry, 4:2 (Spring 2007): 147-153.
2 Eph 3:5: “. . . the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same
The next Pauline reference to NT prophets is in the catalog of NT officers in Eph 4:11: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.” There appears to be a hierarchy of order in these offices, lending support to the orthodox belief that the primary offices of apostle and prophet were extraordinary for establishing the church before these temporary offices disappeared. On the other hand, the office of “pastor-teacher,” and perhaps that of “evangelist,” is not extraordinary and continued into the post-apostolic church.

At the same time, note that NT prophets are distinguished from the apostles in identity. The roles of these two offices overlapped in the function of communicating revelation from God, but Christ’s giving of prophets spread this gift of divine revelation beyond the locale of the limited number of apostles. Still, the apostles were primary in the church, as indicated by the Antiochian church’s appeal to the apostolic-led church in Jerusalem, despite having their own prophets in Antioch (Acts 15:2, cf. 13:1). The church at Antioch would have liked an authoritative answer from its own leaders, but its own prophets recognized that they could only speak authoritatively to the church when God spoke infallibly to them.

While some of the office titles in Eph 4:11 are unique to the NT (apostles and evangelists), two, at least, are found in the OT: prophets and pastors. “Pastor/shepherd” in the OT is a broader descriptive term that encompasses both political and ecclesiastical leaders in Israel. With regard to the biblical prophet, the critical question is whether the function of NT prophets was the same as that of OT prophets. If the role and function is the same, then we may gain an understanding of the NT prophet from the rich prophetic background of the OT. Ecclesiastical continuity from the primitive OT church into the New Testament will also be seen in this bridge.

**Roots of the NT Prophet in the OT**

Prophets are found in both the Old and New Testaments. The gift of prophecy in the NT is confirmed at Pentecost when Peter cites an OT prophet who had predicted that a day was coming when

God… will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

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body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.” Daniel Wallace offers further reasons why these are NT prophets in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 285-286.

3 There is no need to prove the office of the prophet in the OT. “Pastor” in the OT is a term often used to represent Israel’s political leaders (Ezek 34) and occasionally its spiritual/eclesiastical leaders as in Jer 23. Disobedient prophets and priests in this chapter are represented as false shepherds. Significantly, the role of the shepherds/pastors in Jer 3:15 is to feed the flock with knowledge, suggesting a parallel to the NT pastor who serves as a teacher (Eph 4:11).
Is it possible that the prophet Joel believed that these future prophets of the New Covenant would be serving God in ways strikingly dissimilar to the long tradition of OT prophets from Abraham to John the Baptist? That is not likely. Rather, Joel implies that prophecy will be more universal at the outpouring of the Spirit. And what will God’s NT servants do? “They shall prophesy.”

Without redefining prophecy for his time, Peter corroborates Joel’s expectations that began to unfold on the day of Pentecost. NT prophets prophesied in the classic tradition of speaking for God only when He spoke to them. Contrary to the notion that NT prophecy can be less than OT prophecy, Peter, and for that matter, Luke, understood the role of the NT prophet to be the same as that of the OT prophet.

The NT prophet was not merely a Christian with heightened sensitivities to the Holy Spirit who might speak his sometimes fallible or sometimes accurate predictions based on intuitions prompted by the Spirit in his heart. No, a prophet was a recognized spokesman for the Lord who spoke God’s revelation when the Lord directed him to speak. This precludes the possibility of a “secondary type of prophecy with diminished authority,” bringing a fallible message for the church.

It is historically incongruous and theologically inconsistent to suggest a notion of fallible NT prophecies while affirming the reliability of revelations through the OT prophets. Few would dare teach that God-given prophecies in the OT could be subject to error. That approach would undermine the authority and reliability of all the OT prophecies, and it would have made their fallible messengers liable to stoning for not accurately speaking the truth of God!

On the other hand, since there is continuity between the Old and New Testament prophets, one would not expect a cheapening of the role of prophecy whereby the NT prophet may speak divine revelations sometimes, but on other occasions also may utter divine impulses or vague intuitions that he himself can misinterpret in his prophesying. No, the fullness of Pentecost in the apostolic church meant a more universal distribution of spiritual gifts to establish the certainty of the gospel. This wider dispersion of the Spirit’s gifts did not mean

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4 God calls Abraham a prophet in Gen 20:7.
5 The OT is replete with condemnations of self-styled prophets who speak fallibly when God has not sent them to speak for Him. A prophet is God’s called spokesman (Deut 18:18-22; cf. Exod 7:1-2).
6 In the book of Acts Luke uses the title of “prophet” for both OT prophets and for NT prophets without qualifying his usage. See George W. Knight’s Prophecy in the NT (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publishers, 1988), note on p. 4.
7 When a controversy arose at Antioch, the prophets there did not offer fallible impressions but remained silent because the Spirit was silent (cf. Acts 15:2).
8 These are the words of Wayne Grudem in The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999), p. 262.
9 Deut 18:20-22 says that some will speak “presumptuously” in God’s name. A key prophetic test guarding against human presumption in prophecy is fulfillment of short-term predictions. If the prophet’s words do not come to pass, he is not speaking for God, but for other gods or for himself, and therefore must be put to death. This same passage affirms that Jesus, the Messenger of the covenant (Mal 3:1), was a prophet in the model of the Mosaic tradition, implying that other new covenant prophets after Pentecost were similar to their OT counterparts.
10 Biblical sign miracles are the means for establishing God’s message and messengers: John 20:30-31 and 2 Cor 12:12.
poorer quality control in prophecy nor the degeneration of the gifts, for any “uncertain sound of the trumpet” would have defeated the purpose of the gifts.

The Passing of the Prophets

Even before the end of the apostolic era, the exercise of apostolic gifts (2 Cor 12:12) was waning. The foundation had been laid by the apostles and NT prophets, and Christ the Cornerstone was building his church beyond its groundwork. The work is still carried on by missionary church planters and by pastor-teachers who, with other ordinary church officers, have taken over the leadership of the church. This is the same spiritual leadership that the apostles emphasized for themselves when they declared that they needed to be free to give themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

After the NT prophets passed with the apostles from the early church, there were occasional attempts to resurrect the earlier Pentecostal gifts and power. The Montanists of the late second century had prophets, but the movement was roundly rejected by the orthodox church because the Montanists charged that the message of the apostolic era was incomplete.

Modern claims of alleged continuing revelation in the church take a subtler approach. Charismatics practice a broadly-defined “word of knowledge,” a spiritual gift that is distinguished from the gift of prophecy in 1 Cor 12:8-10. Others in the so-called “Third Wave” of the church encourage prophetic utterances that may be fully or partially fallible due to the mixture of human and divine impressions in the utterance, even though these are allegedly at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The test is in the congregation’s response to know how much is from God. This approach well fits the spirit of the post-modern age by blending a subjective neo-orthodox-like interpretation with a disregard for the objective truth of Scripture.

Conclusion

God sent special messengers and gave his revelations at key periods in sacred history. After the time of Malachi there were no prophets or revelations for 400 years until the coming of John the Baptist. So also, after the NT prophets served their purpose, the prophetic voice fell silent. John’s apocalypse, as the last canonical prophecy (Rev 1:3), looks forward to the resumption of prophecy at the end of the age when two prophets (Rev. 11:3) with charismatic

11 When Paul was jailed in Rome he apparently did not heal Epaphroditus even though this servant was a great comfort to him (Phil 2:25-27).
12 The flagship of the Third Wave is the Vineyard Church, and it finds support in the early scholarship of Dr. Grudem. F. David Farnell notes that Dr. Grudem recently has tempered his position compared to his earlier claims of two kinds of NT prophecy allowing error in secondary, non-authoritative prophecies, The Masters Seminary Journal (Fall 2003): 241.
13 1 Macc 4:44-46 records that after the temple abomination of Antiochus Epiphanes, the religious leaders in the days of the Maccabees determined to wait for the coming of a prophet to tell them what to do with the desecrated stones of the altar. This admission confirms there were no inter-testamental prophets and incidentally reveals that “writing prophets” were not involved in the production of the apocryphal books of that era.
authority finally appear. At that juncture in history God once again will reveal his purposes through his servants the prophets.