

# Prophets and Prophecy

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**'...especially that you may prophesy...' (1Cor.14:1)**

Ben Pugh

## The Hebrew Prophets

The prophets of ancient Israel would critique – often very harshly – the status quo under the monarchy.

‘The truth is that the Jerusalem establishment had reduced YHWH to a guarantor of chosenness and did not expect or accept that YHWH would or could do otherwise than guarantee.’<sup>1</sup>

Brueggemann highlights two things the prophets did to ‘re-imagine’ the reality of God in a nation that had shut him out: they told the *truth* and they brought *hope*.<sup>2</sup>

### ***They were Truth-Tellers***

Truth was needed when, during the long slow decline of the monarchy, denial had set in. By the time of Jeremiah the coming demise of Jerusalem is all too obvious to the prophet – sadly, not to the people. They were more willing to hear the false prophet Hananiah confidently announcing a ‘return to normalcy.’<sup>3</sup>

‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house...I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah...and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon (Jer.28:2-4).’

Jeremiah’s ministry is frustrated: ‘They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.’ (Jer.6:14). Brueggemann describes the ideological position of the status quo as being ‘like a narcotic.’<sup>4</sup> A symptom of such corporate denial is that we start to falsely label, just as Isaiah warns: ‘Woe to you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!’ (Isa.5:20). ‘When things are mislabelled, then one need not see them as they are.’<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to deal with the illusions of the Jerusalem establishment, the prophets needed to maintain a position that was outside of it.<sup>6</sup> This meant, not disconnecting themselves from the people, but bringing God’s revealed perspective on things, using what is termed the ‘messenger formula’<sup>7</sup>: ‘Thus says the Lord...’ The prophets could all boast of a direct special calling from God that often found them reluctant (Isa.6, Jer.1, Ezek.2) or in humble circumstances (Amos 7:15): ‘They have not simply made a carefully considered career choice.’<sup>8</sup> Another characteristic literary device is the use of ‘therefore.’ This word introduces the people to the consequences of their evil ways (e.g. Jer.3:3; 5:14-15, 8:10; 8:12).<sup>9</sup>

### ***They were Bringers of Hope***

Hope was brought once Israel had been humbled following the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE. In this new situation, the situation expressed in the language of Lamentations and Psalm 137, despair rather than denial was the danger. Into this situation the language is ‘Do not fear...’

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination’, *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10/1 (Spring 2011), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, pp. 6-23.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Birch, ‘Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership’, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Birch, ‘Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership’, p. 14. Birch speaks for many in urging a return, in the context of church ministries today, to ‘the voicing and hearing of God’s call.’

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Prophetic Leadership’, p. 12.

(Isa.43:1,10,13,14) and the promise is of restoration of relationship, rebuilding, prosperity and forgiveness (Isa.40:9; 52:7; 54:7-8; Jer.31:4-5; 15; 31:34; 32:44; 33:7-8).

Brueggemann summarises: 'It is as urgent to *tell hope* in the face of despair as it is to *tell truth* in the face of denial.'<sup>10</sup> In churches, both positions: despair and denial can be equally intransigent: 'Congregations, not unlike pastors, have an artistic, tenacious capacity to protect our denial, to guard our despair so that we need relinquish neither.'<sup>11</sup> Into this intransigence the prophet brings a message that has been born in the 'reality of God.'<sup>12</sup> Still more profoundly, Brueggemann insists that the world itself, in which all the hearers of prophetic messages must live, '...is an arena of sustained meaning and purpose in which all creatures are answerable for their creatureliness.'<sup>13</sup> It is the voice of God that awakens that awareness of creaturely accountability to the Creator, and just maybe some will shake themselves free of their self-assured denial and their navel-gazing despair. Conversely, 'Without God, endless denial is possible; without God bottomless despair is possible.'<sup>14</sup>

Thus: 'The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us...'<sup>15</sup>

Prophetic leaders bring two further things, also encapsulated in a single word each:

### ***They Stimulate Shared Memory***

This is not unrelated to the way prophets recall people back to *Truth*, and the fact that they bring *Vision* is, of course, not unrelated to the bringing of *Hope*. Birch points out that, in being able to make an appeal to the shared memory of the people, they needed to be people that were not so anti-establishment and counter-cultural as to be unable to do so:

'People think of a prophet as a somewhat counter-cultural, anti-establishment figure who might play an important role as advocate of justice but is not a model for what we seek in church leadership in general.'<sup>16</sup>

Prophets were not 'isolated individuals, standing alone against injustice...'<sup>17</sup> They 'operate out of a sense of corporate solidarity.'<sup>18</sup> Prophets performed their ministry with '...an acute sense of *what God had done* in the life of Israel.'<sup>19</sup> Their messages were tailored to the contexts they operated in. The prophets to the Northern kingdom (Elijah, Elisha, Amos & Hosea) tried to recall the people using memories of Sinai and Moses. The Northern tribes had broken away profoundly from the traditions that were the most deep-rooted and basic. While the prophets of Judah spoke a lot about David. There was no need to remind them of Sinai but there was a need to recall them to the ideals of the Davidic tradition: 'The prophets call the people to remember and respond in celebration, praise, recital, and proclamation...'<sup>20</sup>

### ***They are Vision-Casters***

The prophets, however, were not nostalgic or sentimental. The other aspect of their ministry was to remind the people of, '...*what God yet can do*.'<sup>21</sup> They were the dreamers of the land who dared to believe in new possibilities.<sup>22</sup> Vivid pictures are used such as dry bones coming to life (Ezek.37) and a

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, 'Prophetic Leadership', p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 'Prophetic Leadership', p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, 'Prophetic Leadership', p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, 'Prophetic Leadership', p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, 'Prophetic Leadership', p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 17.

New Covenant written, not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts (Jer.31). Deutero-Isaiah is devoted entirely to this vision of a brighter future (Isa.40-55): 'Part of what enables this prophet of exile [i.e. 'Deutero-Isaiah'] to sing hopefully in the midst of a broken community is his use of the creative tension between memory and hope.'<sup>23</sup> This tension is expressed in the use of memory and hope together in Isaiah 52:1-2, a kind of 'carry on where you left off' message:

'Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you, for I called him alone and blessed him and increased him.'

## **New Testament Prophets: Are they the same as Old Testament Prophets?**

### ***Continuity and Discontinuity***

The New Testament function of 'prophet' is defined in Luke-Acts using Christ, the 'Prophet like Moses,' (Acts 3:22-23; 7:37) as its reference point. In continuity with Old Testament prophets, Jesus was now the one who modelled what it meant to be a Spirit-anointed champion of the marginalised, and visionary of a brighter future (Luke 4:18-19). What is not completely clear in Luke is the exact role that New Testament prophets actually had. In terms of giving 'critical decisions' their function appears quite different to the Old Testament prophets,<sup>24</sup> though significant continuity with the Old Testament concept of prophet can safely be assumed.<sup>25</sup> Gonzalo Haya-Pratts asserts that, "Luke feels tied to the Old Testament concept."<sup>26</sup>

### ***Christ: The New Model***

The role of prophet was also likely to have been modelled on Christ, just as the role of apostle had been. Jesus' ministry can itself be described as prophetic: "...in its proclamation, in its reaction against the formalism of contemporary Judaism, and in its ministry to 'the poor.'"<sup>27</sup>

### ***Church Planting: The New Role***

In Paul, the apostles and prophets functioned side-by-side in laying the foundations of church, one as an ambassador for Christ gathering people for him, the other as a revealer of the 'mystery' of Christ<sup>28</sup> to those gathered people (Eph. 2:20, 3:5). The aim of these ministries was that the people themselves would grow into the likeness of that very Christ that was the defining focal point and giver of each of the five-fold ministries (Eph. 4:11-16).

### **Reflection**

Why were prophets needed as well as apostles for establishing new congregations?

## **What Happened in the Postapostolic Church?**

Historically, it appears that the original mobile charismatic ministries gradually evolved into sedentary, monarchical ministries. It is believed that Apostles and Prophets were gradually replaced by Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons. Apostles and prophets were the mobile, church-planting wing of church ministry, who set in 'elders' or 'deacons' as the permanent, sedentary oversight of a local church.<sup>29</sup> Deacons, it is thought, gradually took over from the charismatic office of Teacher. By the early 2nd

<sup>23</sup> Birch, 'Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership', p. 17..

<sup>24</sup> Haya-Pratts, Empowered Believers, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> See Haya-Pratts, Empowered Believers, pp. 198-200; Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, pp. 82-84; Turner, 'Does Luke Believe,' pp. 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Empowered Believers: the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts (Tr. S. Ellington. Eugene: Cascade, 2011), p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> James D.G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit (London: SCM, 1975), p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Fee, God's Empowering Presence, pp. 691-2. As such, both ministries seem to have been mobile: Didache XI, XIII.

<sup>29</sup> e.g. Henry Chadwick, The Early Church Rev Ed., (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 45-53.

Century, apostles and prophets were themselves being replaced by stationary, elected, and increasingly powerful, bishops and presbyters.<sup>30</sup>

### Reflection

There seems to be something inherently mobile about the ministry of a New Testament prophet. Does circuit ministry preserve something of this peripatetic dynamic? Is circuit ministry good or bad for the local church?

## Are Prophets Today the Same as New Testament Prophets?

The tendency of Luke to draw deliberate parallels with Old Testament figures is widely recognized in Lukan scholarship though few draw out these parallels more than Roger Stronstad in his *The Prophethood of All Believers*.<sup>31</sup> According to Stronstad, the structural parrallelisms that Luke employs demonstrate that "...because Jesus has transferred the Spirit of prophecy from himself to his disciples they will have, both as a community and as individuals, the same kind of prophetic ministry as he himself had."<sup>32</sup> He went rather too far with this idea, however, and was rigorously critiqued by Max Turner<sup>33</sup> who preferred to picture Luke as picking out a few "heroic examples" rather than "all believers."<sup>34</sup>

The trajectory of this transfer of anointing from Christ to his people, if Acts 2:29 is anything to go by, points to prophetic ministries being reproduced from Christ's prophetic anointing now as well as then. And given the thread of continuity, not only between today and the New Testament but between the New Testament and the Old, we should expect prophets today to not simply be prophesyers but 'seers' in the wider sense ready speak truth to denial and hope to despair, and to speak up for the downtrodden. It is possible that some of the most critical voices in our churches are suppressed prophets. They are frustrated because they see the truth behind every veneer but also because they see reason to hope when everyone else has made a virtue out of despair.

### Reflection

I remember once seeing an article in a charismatic magazine which was titled: 'Prophets: Asset or Liability? To what extent are present day prophets a potential asset or liability?'

## Pentecostals, Prophets and Prophecy

Classical Pentecostals very early on had some disagreements with the Apostolic Faith Church, or the 'Apostolics' as they were known. The AFC were (and still are) a denomination within Classical Pentecostalism that...

a) Were led by the notorious William Oliver Hutchinson who ended up believing that he was the "Manchild" of Revelation 12:13, and

b) Believed, like today's Apostolic Networks do, in the present day existence of apostles and prophets. Their denomination was led by the pronouncements of their "prophets."

The non-Apostolics, already beset with relentless bad press and opposition, were desperate to dissociate themselves from the Apostolics and so took up a stance on the gift of *prophecy* and the office or function of *prophet* that was as follows:

1. Someone using the gift of prophecy may be termed a "prophet" in a relative sense, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 14. However, a prophet is an office-holder. Someone with the office of prophet may prophesy, but no one who prophesies is necessarily a prophet or set to become one. This seems fair enough.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Didache XV.1-2.

<sup>31</sup> (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Stronstad, *Prophethood of All Believers*, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Max Turner, "Does Luke Believe Reception of the 'Spirit of Prophecy' makes all 'Prophets'?" *Inviting Dialogue with Roger Stronstad*, *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 20, (2000), pp. 3-24.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, "Does Luke Believe," p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> So Gee, *Concerning Spiritual Gifts*, p. 58.

2. Neither prophets nor prophesiers are to give guidance. They may predict but they must never guide or lead. Acts 11:28, 13:1-3 and 21:10 were exegeted in support. Gee was even more emphatic than Horton on this score: "It can be affirmed that there is not one single instance of the gift of prophecy being deliberately resorted to for guidance in the New Testament."<sup>36</sup>
3. A sharp distinction was made between Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets and prophesiers. The distinction was likened to priests: in the Old Testament only a select few were priests; now, everyone is. On the basis of Peter's Day of Pentecost sermon, the same is said of prophets:<sup>37</sup>

It is now the privilege of all believers to be personally led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14). It cannot be stated too emphatically that we need neither prophet nor priest to come between ourselves and the Lord in this present dispensation, and to submit for one moment to such a system is a definite step backwards into bondage.<sup>38</sup>

It is the case that we no longer need the seers of Old Testament times who gave guidance to those who wanted to "enquire of the Lord,"<sup>39</sup> yet little effort is made to explain why, if this is the case, we have New Testament prophets at all, or even the gift of prophecy.

The net result of these three stringencies is, as you can see, to effectively exclude the possibility of anyone today holding the office of prophet. If anyone does decide they are a prophet (and a further prohibition is placed on desiring to hold office: we may eagerly desire to prophesy but not to be a prophet<sup>40</sup>), they will find that all they can legitimately do with it is prophesy in the same way as someone simply using the gift of prophecy. They may speak edification, exhortation and comfort: three words that are held to be definitive and comprehensive.<sup>41</sup>

### **Reflection**

Given that we all now have the gift of the Spirit and may hear God for ourselves, do we need prophets or even people to prophecy?

When someone gives a word of prophecy to someone, are they revealing something of the will of God to that person or are they confirming the will of God already revealed to them?

## **Prophecy Recap**

### ***The Drainpipe Theory of Prophecy***

Horton gave us one pole on the extreme end of interpretations by which we can measure all the other positions:

Prophecy in its simplest form is divinely inspired and anointed utterance. It is entirely supernatural. As speaking with tongues is supernatural utterance in an unknown tongue, so Prophecy is supernatural utterance in a known tongue. It is a manifestation of the Spirit of God, and not of the human mind.<sup>42</sup>

Horton excludes any human ingredient in the strongest of terms, saying that all who prophesy, whoever they are, are "but 'mouths' for the expression of divine words."<sup>43</sup> This what we might term the "drainpipe" approach. It is a dictation view of prophecy.

<sup>36</sup> Gee, Concerning Spiritual Gifts, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> All these points are elucidated at length by Horton, The Gifts of the Spirit, p. 162-7.

<sup>38</sup> Gee, Concerning Spiritual Gifts, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> Gee, Concerning Spiritual Gifts, p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> Horton, The Gifts of the Spirit, p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> Horton, The Gifts of the Spirit, p. 162, 164, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Horton, The Gifts of the Spirit, p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> Horton, The Gifts of the Spirit, p. 160.

### ***The Inspired-Sermon Theory of Prophecy***

At the other end of the scale are those who are so uncomfortable with the unbridled unleashing of random pictures and intuitions and the use of these for guiding churches and individuals that they prefer to stay more or less with the traditional interpretation of prophecy as "...*applied to preaching*, especially as *biblical*, or *gospel*, applied preaching."<sup>44</sup> Many would allow that God *could* communicate in a totally unpremeditated prophetic way, yet the reservations are so great as to narrow the actual possibilities to almost nothing.

### ***The Hebrew Prophet Theory of Prophecy***

It is clear, both in pagan and in biblical usage, that prophesying does not only, or even mainly, involve prediction of future events. The main purpose of the gift, according to Paul, is "edification, exhortation and comfort" to God's people. It may also serve to awaken the consciences of unbelieving visitors. Fee defines it as: "spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, intelligible messages, orally delivered in the gathered assembly, intended for the edification or encouragement of the people."<sup>45</sup> This is probably neither prepared sermons,<sup>46</sup> on the other hand, nor "ecstasy" or "frenzy" on the other. Rather the background was the more Jewish concept of a prophet who is fully in possession of his faculties and announcing an inspired and perfectly intelligible message.<sup>47</sup>

## **Summary**

While prophesying is a gift of the Spirit that involves speaking edification, exhortation and comfort to people, the wider gift of Seer probably also still exists and is the role described in Ephesians 4:11. This wider role involves more than just prophesying regularly but is about speaking the truth and casting vision. It is a role that should not necessarily be confined to a formal leadership position (prophets need to come at us from left field and not be upholders of the party line), but is a role that Paul deemed essential in the starting up of new congregations.

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<sup>44</sup> Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 489.

<sup>45</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 170.

<sup>46</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 170, n. 329.

<sup>47</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 169-70.