

Ephesians 4:11 Prophets Part 1

EPH 4:11 "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,..."

As we continue in our study of these gifts given to the church by the Lord we come to the second gift, after apostle, which is prophet. Again, this gift is given to the church to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

The gifts of God are always meant for works of service whether it is the gift of prophecy or the gift of mercy or the gift of evangelism or whatever. Gifts from God are not meant to be sat on or buried in the ground as was the case with one of the three servants whose master gave each one a portion of his wealth to be invested and cared for.

Our Master has entrusted each one of us with gifts to be used in the Body of Christ in a way that encourages each other and brings glory to God. But the question has been raised with this particular gift of prophet, as to what this gift is and how it works in the church.

Is this a gift similar to that of the prophets of the O.T.? Is this a gift on an equal par with the apostles as might be intimated in EPH 2:19-20 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

We see a similar intimation in EPH 3:4-5 "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."

Could these prophets, spoken of in these two passages, be different from the prophets we find in our text in Eph.4:11? Or could they even be different from the prophets we find in Rom.12 and 1Cor.12?

It's important we understand these things because a proper biblical grasp of this gift will determine the authority that N.T. prophets

had back in the first century and what authority they now possess today as they minister to the body of Christ.

When I was teaching through the two sections I mentioned a moment ago, found in Ephesians 2:19-20 and Ephesians 3:4-5, I did not pursue the gift of prophet or prophecy because I knew I was coming up on this text in Eph.4:11, and I decided then that I would deal with the whole ball of wax here.

A question which should immediately come to mind in the previous two passages is, does the N.T. prophet share the same privilege and authority as the N.T. apostle?

Eph.2:19-20 specifically says that the household of God is built on the foundation of the *apostles* and *prophets*, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

It would appear that prophets were instrumental together with the apostles in establishing this foundation. A similar thought is found in Eph.3:4-5 where Paul is saying that the mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church was revealed through God's holy apostles and prophets.

What I'd like to do this morning is to determine who these prophets are in Ephesians chapter 2 and 3, and then see if they're the same prophets as spoken of in Ephesians 4:11.

The problem we immediately run into with the two passages in chapters 2 and 3 is that the Greek construction is not the same as we find in Eph.4:11. In our text the Greek language makes a clear distinction that the prophet is a different office from the apostle, who is different from the evangelist, who is different from the Pastor and teacher.

In fact, Dr. Grudem notes that the Greek phraseology in Eph.4:11 is much stronger than we have in the English. Our English translations read, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,..." (EPH 4:11)

And so it seems quite obvious that each group is distinct from the other until we get to pastors and teachers and we'll deal with that when we dig into it in a couple of weeks.

But the Greek would allow an even stronger distinction as it could say, "And he gave on the one hand the apostles, on the other hand

the prophets, on the other hand the evangelists, on the other hand the pastors and teachers." (Grudem)

But when you come to Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 the Greek construction is not the same. In fact, the Greek language could actually be talking about one group with two distinctions. And the reason this is important is because it begins to narrow our search for who these prophets actually are in Eph.4:11 and what authority they possess.

And so our time this morning is going to be spent on the Ephesians 2 and 3, before we can move on to 4:11.

Let's examine these passages.

EPH 2:19-20 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets***, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

Some have suggested that Paul is referring to N.T. apostles and O.T. prophets at this point. And though we certainly recognize that O.T. prophets are foundational to our faith as it was revealed in the prophets, our text in Eph.2:20 will not allow the interpretation that Paul is speaking of O.T. prophets here. The whole context is talking about how the Gentiles are now a part of the N.T. church.

And this is made clear with passages like EPH 2:14-16 "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two ***one*** and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself ***one*** new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this ***one*** body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

And so, when Paul speaks of the foundation of this N.T. church being built upon the apostles and prophets he speaks of N.T. apostles and N.T. prophets. Eph.3:4-5 makes this even clearer.

EPH 3:4-5 "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now ***been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.***"

And so, as we read the English, it would seem that this foundation is placed squarely on the shoulders of two distinct groups. But this

is where can we get ourselves in trouble, because the Greek language will actually allow for another interpretation.

The Greek will allow for these two passages in Ephesians 2 and 3 to read apostles-prophets, or the apostles who are also prophets, showing that Paul is referring to one group, not two. (Grudem)

And so, if we were to look at Eph.2:19-20 and plug in this legitimate interpretation this passage now reads: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles [who are also] prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

But to simply interpret these passages in this way should not be the only evidence which arrives at this conclusion. We should be able to find evidence from other portions of the word of God, and we do.

For example, we find this same Greek construction in a variety of passages, like Ephesians 2 and 3, which are not dealing with two distinct groups, but one group with two attributes. This Greek construction does not include the article "*the*" which is normally used to differentiate it from another noun or office in our case.

"If the New Testament authors want to make it clear that they are talking about two different items or two different groups, they add the word "*the*" before the second noun, giving this construction: *the* [noun, apostle] and *the* [noun, prophet]. If Paul had given this kind of construction, it would have been clear that he meant two different groups, the apostles and the prophets.....

..... But where he omitted the word "*the*" before the second noun (prophets), he used a construction which let the readers know that he was somehow bracketing 'apostles' and 'prophets' as a unit." (Grudem)

And so, when the article "*the*" is not used in the Greek it allows two nouns like apostle and prophet to be combined to speak of one person or thing. The following are a few examples of how this works.

(NASB) Rom.16:7 "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen *and* my fellow-prisoners..." Paul is not talking about two groups, 'kinsmen', and 'fellow-prisoners', but one group, kinsmen who are fellow-prisoners. (Grudem)

GAL 1:7 "... Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion **and** are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ."

We would not arrive at the conclusion that there are two distinct groups here: some people throwing you into confusion, and then a separate group of people trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. The context, with the article "**the**" that is missing shows that there is one group of people accomplishing two things: causing confusion, while perverting the gospel of Christ.

One more. (NASB) 1Thes.5:12 "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, **and** have charge over you in the Lord **and** give you instruction."

Is Paul saying that you appreciate three separate groups here? Those who labor among you, those who have charge over you in the Lord and the third group being those who give you instruction? Of course not. He's talking about one group, leaders, who perform all three tasks.

Again, this is the identical Greek construction to the passages we have in Eph.2:20 and 3:5 where Paul is saying that the church has been built on the foundation of the apostles **and** prophets, which tells us that it is built on the foundation of the apostles who are also prophets.

But there are other reasons for this conclusion. If, on the other hand, this foundation of the church is built upon the apostles together with every person who had the gift of prophecy, then it would cause a real problem in the church in the first century as well as today.

The question would have to be raised, at what point is the foundation finally laid? Or is the foundation an on-going process if we have those who have the gift of prophecy today, thus making them prophets?

After all Paul clearly tells us in 1CO 14:1 "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

Would these people, therefore, who sought and received the gift of prophecy also be part of this foundation found in Eph.2:20? This, by the way, is one of the major reasons that many people in the church today have concluded that the gift of prophecy is no longer valid in the church today.

They see this same dilemma. If anyone who had the gift of prophecy in the first century was on an equal par with the apostles, as foundational to the church, then it stands to reason that it was only meant to be used in the church for a limited time since we have the complete word of God which is foundational to the church, and therefore we no longer need prophets, just like we no longer need apostles.

Interestingly enough, the first century Christians would have had no problem making this distinction between apostles and those with the gift of prophecy. They would have known that their friends and neighbors who were prophets in local congregations, all over the known world at that time, could not claim the same authority as being foundational to the church as a Paul or Peter or John and so forth.

But, if the prophets in the N.T., who have the gift of prophecy, are operating in a sphere which is not with the same authority and purpose of the apostles, who gave us the very word of God, then there would be no reason why we couldn't have prophets today. And next week we will look specifically at what N.T. prophets are and what the gift of prophecy is all about.

But, it's important we see how the word "prophet" may at times refer to apostles and at other times refer to those regular people in local congregations who have the gift of prophecy. Again, this is not that unusual as we look at scripture. This is why we must look at the context to determine how a particular word is being used.

For example we read in 1PE 5:1 "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow *elder*, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:..."

Peter is identifying himself as a fellow elder with the elders he is writing to. Does this imply that the elders he addresses have the same authority as the apostle Peter since he calls himself an elder also?

No. It simply means that an apostle was an elder in the sense that Peter uses it here in 1PE 5:1. He goes on in that text to say in 1PE 5:2 "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers..."

Was Peter not a shepherd? Did Jesus not personally say to Peter, "shepherd My sheep?" Of course he was a shepherd. And this is part of what an elder does. But to draw the conclusion that

because Peter is an elder and a shepherd that we must assume that every elder or shepherd also has the same authority as an apostle is to miss the point Peter is making.

The same could be said of Paul who calls himself a teacher in 1TI 2:7 "And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle - I am telling the truth, I am not lying - and a *teacher* of the true faith to the Gentiles."

He then goes on to identify elders in local congregations who are also teachers.

1TI 3:2 "Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, *able to teach*,..."

Does this mean that since Paul can call himself a teacher as well as apostle that every teacher is therefore an apostle? No. And so, if Paul speaks of apostles as also being prophets in Ephesians 2 and 3, it does not mean that every prophet is an apostle. It does show us however, that the apostles can identify with other gifts without having to force the issue that anyone who shares in those gifts must also be apostles.

And this is what we see in Eph.2:19-20 when Paul is saying that there is only one group of people who are foundational to the N.T. church: apostles who happen to also be prophets as they share in the gift of prophecy. Except when apostles prophesied in the name of the Lord their authority was the same as the O.T. prophets where, in contrast, as we'll see next week, those who were not apostles, who had the gift of prophecy, did not prophesy with the same authority.

But there's one more aspect to this discussion I want to bring to light as we look to Ephesians 3, because this will show that Paul is clearly speaking of one group with two functions in that text. Let's look at it.

EPH 3:4-5 "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it *has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.*"

First of all, what is this mystery Paul refers to? Well, he explains it in EPH 3:6 "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Now, in what sense was this a mystery? Well, it was not a total mystery as far as this truth being revealed in the past. We know, for example that God spoke of this to Abraham when He called him out of the land of Ur of the Chaldees. God told Abraham that all nations would be blessed by him through the covenant God made with him.

We also read in passages like ISA 42:6-7 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, 7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

The Gentiles were always meant to be part of God's kingdom. But it wouldn't be until the Messiah came that this would be revealed in its fullest sense. But the important question here for the sake of this study is who revealed this truth and mystery to the world?

Paul says in Eph.3:5 that"it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."

Again, the question again must be asked, who are these prophets? Are they any prophets who have the gift of prophecy, who have revealed this mystery, or are they apostles alone who are also prophets as we have suggested all throughout this study?

What is fascinating is that as we look at different portions of scripture we find that whenever this mystery is *first* revealed it is always through an apostle which is then revealed to everyone else. It is never revealed, first and foremost, to those are labeled, "prophets".

For example: MAT 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,..."

This is known as the Great commission from Jesus Christ. This is the first formal announcement that all nations, Gentiles and Jews must hear this good news. Who was this first announcement given to? The first disciples who we know as the *apostles*. That's who Jesus was speaking to in that passage.

LUK 24:46-48 "He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to

all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."

Who is this addressed to? The apostles.

In the book of Acts Peter had a vision of heaven being opened up and all animals being declared clean by God. He understood that as God telling him something of this mystery Paul refers to.

We read in ACT 10:34-35 "Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

It is an apostle whom God comes to and reveals this mystery concerning the Gentiles.

We also have the council of Jerusalem which we touched on last week. The whole council was convened to discuss the participation of the Gentiles in the church. We read in Acts 15:6-29 of the speeches given in favor of the Gentiles who were shown by God to be included in the Church together with the Jews by faith in Christ alone.

Who made those speeches? They were made exclusively by Peter and James, both apostles whom God had revealed this mystery to. And then we have the incident on the Damascus road where Jesus strikes down Paul as He graciously gets Paul's attention and calls him to Himself. Paul records what Jesus said to him.

ACT 22:21 "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

Time and time again, whenever this mystery is spoken of being revealed for the first time in a way it had never been revealed in the O.T., it is the apostles exclusively who receive this revelation and then pass it along as they teach others about it.

And so we come back to EPH 3:4-5 "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit *to God's holy apostles and prophets.*"

Paul can only be talking about one group receiving this revelation from God and that is the apostles who are also prophets. He was not talking about two different groups. And he says as much when he continues that thought in EPH 3:8-9 "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, *this grace was given me:* to preach to

the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."

It was through Paul and the rest of the apostles, who are also prophets with the gift of prophecy, that this mystery was first revealed.

I know that this study is somewhat academic, but unless we study the scriptures and dig into the word of God it can be very easy to over-look important passages like the one's we find in Ephesians and it is quite possible to arrive at wrong conclusions as to what the word of God is saying on any particular subject.

A classic case in point is where some in the church today are claiming to be prophets with new revelation which is with the same authority as that of the first century apostles. And they are leading many people astray as they assume an authority that was never intended by God with the N.T. gift of prophecy.

People are treating these "prophets" as though they cannot be questioned and that their word is final, and in many cases can even seem to over-rule the scriptures. This is not what Paul teaches concerning the gift of prophet as used in local churches around the world. He does not confuse that gift with the gift of apostle.

And so, what we find here in Ephesians chapter 2 and 3 is that Paul refers to his unique position as being an apostle-prophet. But when we come to Eph.4:11, as I promise we will do next week, we will see that Paul is most certainly speaking of the legitimate gift which others portions of scripture refer to as the gift of prophecy. And so, in that text it will be made clear that a prophet is simply one who prophecies, and is distinct from the apostles.

What that gift entails is another subject entirely, which hopefully we can clear up next week. But, we praise God that He does give good gifts to the Church. And we praise God that He gives these gifts because He loves us and desires that we grow in relation to our salvation.

But these gifts must be used as He has revealed their use in the word of God. We do not have the option to use them or abuse them in any way we see fit. Because if we do then we turn a gift into a wedge that can actually divide the body of Christ instead of building it up for works of service.

This is why we must heed the words Paul gives us in 1CO 12:1 "Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant."

We must all study to show ourselves approved. And when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit this must also apply. And we must all be seeking to be used of God with the gifts He's given each of us. But as with any gift it must *used* to honor and glorify Christ as we use them in love.

This was Paul's point in 1CO 12:31 "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way."

He then went on to describe that excellent way.

1 Corinthians 13:1-8 ^{AU} **1 Corinthians 13:1** If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails;

Let's love each other enough to use our gifts for each other, but let's use them to love one another for the building up of the body of Christ for works of service to the glory of God.