

Ephesians 4:11 "New Testament Gift of Prophet"

Last week we saw how N.T. apostles were sometimes referred to as prophets. But we also saw how they were sometimes referred to as teachers and preachers and elders. So, when Paul speaks, as he does in EPH 2:20, on how the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone", he means to say that the apostles who are also prophets are the ones who are foundational to the church.

This was also seen when Paul explained how our Lord revealed the mystery of the Gentiles' inclusion into the N.T. church in EPH 3:5 "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.

Here again, this mystery was revealed to the apostles who are also prophets. It does not speak to two groups of people in this instance. For those of you who were not here last week you can get the tape on the study which examined how we showed this distinction from the scriptures.

But there are prophets, as mentioned in Eph.4:11, who are not apostles or foundational to the church. These men and women are given the gift of prophecy by God and this morning we want to examine what a N.T. prophet is and what authority, if any, he or she has or had. What we will find is that the N.T. prophet is in a separate category from the O.T. prophet and N.T. apostle.

One of the reasons we find it difficult to make such a distinction is that when we use the word prophet we automatically associate with people in the O.T. who prophesied on behalf of and in the name of the living God.

A great deal of authority was given to them with the express purpose of giving Israel God's very words and giving us the infallible written word of God. This was also one of the major roles of the apostles as they gave the church the very words of God while giving us the written word as well.

And so, when we come to prophets in the N.T., including today, we need to view them from a different perspective. And that perspective is God's as He has revealed their role and function in the Body of Christ.

Once again, at the outset, I would like to thank Dr. Wayne Grudem and his excellent book, "The Gift of Prophecy in the N.T. and Today" which is a major influence in this study.

To see how the N.T. prophet operates in the church it is probably wise to show some distinctions between them and the O.T. prophets. One of the major distinctions is that the O.T. prophets received and spoke the very words he received from God which we know as the inerrant, infallible word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit.

We read in 1KI 22:14 But Micaiah said, "As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me."

The prophet Micaiah was giving the King of Israel words which had divine authority, and which always came to pass exactly the way the Lord gave it. N.T. prophets on the other hand, as we'll see, receive illuminations from God but are explained in human words which do not carry divine authority.

A N.T. prophet is simply a person who practices the N.T. gift of prophecy. Paul defines what this gift is in 1CO 14:3 "But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

This is in complete harmony with what Paul says in EPH 4:12-13 [these gifts are] "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

If the N.T. prophet and the O.T. prophet were the same then they would both have to come under the same set of rules which God laid down in the O.T., specifically what we find in DEU 18:20 "But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

And so when an O.T. prophet spoke anything that was out of accord with God's revealed will and that prophecy did not come to pass word for word, then that prophet spoke presumptuously and was commanded by God to be put to death.

Is this the same criteria attached to N.T. prophets? No. In fact, what we find is that believers are to simply scrutinize what a N.T. prophet says, and if there is anything which is out of accord with God's revealed word, that false word is simply discarded.

1TH 5:20-22 "do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22 Avoid every kind of evil."

We see this same kind of scrutiny when Paul addressed the Corinthian church.

1CO 14:29 "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said."

The whole idea of weighing carefully is to see if what is said is not out of accord with the written word of God. But there is not any indication that if a N.T. prophecy has elements which may be of the flesh that that prophet should be stoned to death or labeled a heretic, though many a heretic has assumed the role of prophet.

Another thing which should be noted is that prophets were assumed to be Christians who were part of local congregations and who used the gift of prophecy as God gave them illuminations to share with the Body.

This is why Paul can tell the Corinthians to weigh what was said, and yet no admonition is given to watch out for false prophets in that section of 1Corinthians. Therefore it is assumed that these local prophets were friends and neighbors who worked with each other, whose kids played with each other, and they had a very good idea as to whether or not they were true believers.

On the other hand, there are many admonitions to watch out for false prophets. But these were people, in many cases, who were traveling prophets, if you will, and whom these local churches didn't know. Jesus warned of such people.

MAT 7:15-16 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"

Interestingly enough, Jesus says, you will know them, not by their gift, but by their fruit. Peter also points out how we must be on the watch for those who would try to come into our midst to bring false teachings and prove themselves to be false prophets.

2PE 2:1 "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them -bringing swift destruction on themselves."

The apostle John also gives us a warning in 1JO 4:1 "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

The warning in all of these passages is that we must be on the watch for those who come into our midst already assuming the role of prophet. But when Paul writes to the Corinthians he is not writing with that in mind because he knows that these prophets were birthed in that local church as God gave gifts.

And in the practice of their gift they were shown to be reliable, but they were also shown to be less than perfect in the way they tried to convey the illumination God gave them which is why they were commanded to test and scrutinize what was said.

This shows us conclusively that O.T. prophets and N.T. prophets were not operating with the same authority. In fact, this question of authority comes up in our text when Paul says, "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)

We get a similar ordering in 1CO 12:28 "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues."

The implication, by some, is that Paul is laying out the authority structure for the church when in fact he is simply showing the ordering of the gifts which best edify the Body of Christ. If this were an ordering according to authority we would have to wonder why those with the gift of helps would be placed before those with the gift of administration, or why Pastors don't even show up in the list in 1Corinthians 12:28.

When it comes to authority Paul makes it very clear who is to be leading the church. When we look at the Pastoral epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) we see that it is the Pastor who is regarded as the shepherd and the one responsible for choosing elders and deacons to rule with him.

Paul is addressing Timothy who is pastoring a church in Ephesus. We read in 2TI 2:2 "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."

Here, Timothy is responsible to lead and entrust faithful men who will be qualified to teach others. These reliable men would be the elders he chose for that church. The same exhortation is given to Titus, also a Pastor, in TIT 1:5 "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint (Or ordain) elders in every town, as I directed you."

And so when it comes to the authority structure in the first century church it was first, apostles, then Pastors, then elders who served with the Pastor, and then deacons whose role was really one of administering the assets of the church to meet the physical needs of people. Prophets are not even mentioned in the authority structure.

Now that apostles no longer exist, the responsibility rests with the Pastors and elders to lead and rule in the church.

Another interesting side note is that Pastor, elder and deacon are seen as offices in the church in this authority structure. On a variety of occasions we see them being installed or ordained in those offices. We have Paul sent out by the Church in Antioch as the leaders laid hands on them and commissioned them for the work at hand, as the Holy Spirit calls them out.

We have Timothy being sent out to Pastor the church in Ephesus as he was prayed for and in that process prophesy was given him concerning different gifts God would give him for that task. We have deacons being chosen and ordained by the Apostles in the book of Acts to meet the needs of the church.

But we never see anywhere in the N.T. where a prophet is chosen and ordained to the office of prophet. And so what we find is that "prophet appears to be not an office but a designation of function in the New Testament. Those who prophesied frequently or appeared to have the gift of prophecy were called prophets." (Grudem)

Again, if the prophet were an office where they were responsible to lead the Body of Christ we would find that their qualifications would have been set forth just as the qualifications for elder and deacon. But these qualifications for prophet are conspicuously missing.

But this would not be that unusual if prophet was not an office of authority in the church. This does not mean that Pastors and elders and deacons may not have had the gift of prophecy and in that

sense were prophets. But the prophet could have been anyone in the church.

But to suggest that there was an office of prophet simply is not supported by the N.T. scriptures and therefore we must conclude that it did not hold an authoritative position where prophets, like Pastors and elders, shepherded the church of Jesus Christ.

This is also another reason we can have women prophets, and yet as Paul tells us women are not given the role by God to rule over the church. This makes all the sense in the world if prophet is not an authoritative position or office in the church which speaks divine words of authority.

Paul points this out when addressing women in the church with the gift of prophecy.

1CO 11:5 "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head - it is just as though her head were shaved."

Here it is assumed that women will and should prophesy. And yet we come to the passage found in 1CO 14:34 "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says."

Obviously, this cannot mean to restrict women with speaking at all; how would they prophesy unless they open their mouths? Rather, it is only restricting the type of speech which is not being in submission or subordinate as Paul puts it. This subordination does not have to do with prophesying, but rather with assuming authority over the church and men specifically.

Paul brings this out in 1TI 2:12-14 "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."

If you can't teach or have authority over a man then there is no way you can rule or have authority over the church because you would not be able to rule over half of the Body of Christ.

But as far as being prophets, there is no restriction for women. We also read in ACT 21:8-9 "Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. 9 He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied."

And so, before we move on we need to conclude that the prophet in the early church, as well as today, is not one with authority over the church, nor is he or she to be viewed as possessing a special office since nowhere in the N.T. is prophet seen as an office but rather a function.

But this does raise more questions. If one is a prophet because he or she prophesies, then what do their prophecies consist of since it is not like that of the O.T. prophet who spoke with divine authority? And what is the main function of the prophet in the church?

Let's take the last question first. We mentioned earlier that the prophet has an important role in the body of Christ. Paul speaks to this in 1CO 14:3 "But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

The NAS translates this verse in this way. "But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation."

Now, obviously one can do all of these things without being a prophet. But what makes this gift unique is that a prophet is actually receiving, in real time, a message from God to be given to the church which would encourage the church with the type of message that Paul speaks of as being edifying, strengthening and consoling.

This is an aspect of this gift which cannot be overlooked. It shows us the unique closeness Jesus wants with His people that He would enter into our presence with a word that assures us that He is with us and is always there for us while we are in this world.

But, the first thing we notice is that the gift of prophecy is a gift which speaks to men. In other words, whatever the prophet receives is meant to be passed on to the church so that all of us can be edified, exhorted and consoled. If the prophecy is not spoken to the body then it cannot qualify as the gift of prophecy in operation. What is received must be spoken.

Now, the problem which some in the church today have in this area is that they assign more authority to this gift than what God intended. And so, in some circles, if there is a prophet who speaks, especially if that prophet happens to be a Pastor or leader in the church, there is the tendency not to question what was given to the church.

This is very dangerous. And in fact, this is happening more and more today. In our own backyard, so to speak, in Pensacola Fl., is the Brownsville Assembly Church of God. And on a variety of occasions the Pastor, who claims to give prophetic utterances, has essentially told his congregation that if anyone questions what God is doing in their midst, with regard to this laughing revival, which was allegedly prophesied to come, would not be unlike the Pharisees who were whitewashed tombs, and who rejected the Messiah.

In their thinking, to question the prophecy or the supposed move of God is to question the Holy Spirit. How many people do you think want to "blaspheme" the Holy Spirit in these congregations? This is a very intimidating tactic and it is nothing short of spiritual blackmail holding these people hostage while these leaders seek their own agenda.

And yet what do the scriptures tell us?

1TH 5:20-22 "do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 ***Test everything.*** Hold on to the good. 22 Avoid every kind of evil."

1CO 14:29 "Two or three prophets should speak, and the ***others should weigh carefully what is said.***"

And so, if the leadership is not willing to allow the body of Christ to test what is being conveyed then they must be suspect. But why do you suppose God wants us to test everything? Well, one answer is that He expects those who receive these illuminations or revelations to make mistakes.

And the reason we can make mistakes with these prophecies is because, unlike the O.T. prophets who were given divine utterances, and then who spoke those divine utterances just as they were given, (not unlike N.T. apostles), N.T. prophets are given insights or illuminations from God which N.T. prophets then relay in their own words.

This is why if a N.T. prophet gives a false prophecy or if it contradicts with the written word, they are not to be stoned. And yet, in those cases where they are not maliciously and willfully giving false information, they are not necessarily deemed false prophets either. Remember what Paul wrote in 1CO 13:9 "For we know in part and we prophesy in part,..."

But since we don't have much time left let's get to the other question I raised earlier and that is what do N.T. prophecies

consist of since it is not like that of the O.T. prophet who spoke with divine authority?

When God reveals something to one with the gift of prophecy He is personally sharing something that that person would not otherwise have thought about. It is as though God gives you a thought that you didn't dream up. It is distinct and pronounced and it will bear witness with your spirit that God has just shared something with you to be shared with the rest of the body.

But the way in which you convey it is simply with your own thoughts and words on what you just received. This is why these prophecies must be tested, because it would be very easy to add to some thought God has given you or to try and read something into it that God didn't intend.

Why does God allow the possibility for this gift to convey imperfections? The same reason He allows for any other gift to be used imperfectly. What Pastor or teacher or evangelist have you known over the years who is perfect in what he does?

It's not that the gift is deficient, it's the vessels in which the gifts are used. And it is God's design that we not see perfection with these gifts in this world anyhow. We know in part and we prophesy in part. And so when we judge these prophecies we must judge them with the only infallible and inerrant rule we have available to us which is the written word of God.

But how do we know that we're receiving a prophecy from God? Well, oddly enough there is no clear cut scripture that would clearly identify how we would know, and yet we are given some guidance from Paul in 1CO 14:30-31 "And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. 31 For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged."

"Paul seems to think of this revelation as a momentary and quite recognizable occurrence, for it happens spontaneously and with such force that it justifies the interruption of a prophet who is already speaking." (Grudem)

"In fact, it sometimes came so forcefully that the Corinthians were in danger of thinking that they could not resist the Holy Spirit" (Grudem) and so Paul had to reassure them in 1CO 14:32-33 "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

The gift of prophecy is a wonderful way in which God blesses us and encourages, exhorts and comforts us. It may manifest itself with a passage of Scripture the Lord lays on your heart. It may manifest itself with a word of encouragement that someone in the body of Christ may need to hear. It may manifest itself in a word of comfort for the congregation.

If you think you have the gift of prophecy as you think that God has been prompting your heart to share something with the body, let me know and I'll share with you how you might use it here.

But, we should be praying that any gift be used in love and not for our own glory or status as Paul describes in 1Cor.13. Along with seeking this gift there should be the attitude that we would be content with any gift God gives us and that we should be growing and maturing in our walk with God if we are to utilize any of His gifts effectively in His power.

Are you studying His written word and growing in His knowledge and grace to be used for the building up of the body today, or are you waiting for a bolt from heaven to strike you and show you with letters engraved in the clouds before you begin to serve and glorify Christ in your daily life?

If you're not sure what gifts you have from God ask others what they see in your life which might indicate how God may want to use you. This by the way is one reason it's so important to be plugged into a local body. The rest of the Body is able to utilize their gifts to often times encourage you in yours.

If you seem to receive very pronounced promptings from God which you didn't dream up on your own, it may be God prompting you to share something He desires this body to hear, and you may in fact have the gift of prophecy, which will be put to the test from God's written word.

But that same kind of attitude should be applied to any gift which is used to build up the Body of Christ. We should always apply discernment that checks teachings or any other gifts which may be used, against God's word.

Our entire lives should be tested according to the word of God and should come into conformity with His word and with the life of Jesus Christ who is the One we should be imitating in all things.

Paul told Timothy, "don't neglect the spiritual gift within you (1Tim.4:14) and God tells us today not to neglect the spiritual gift

within us, the greatest gift being the gift of eternal life which we should be sharing with the world through our words and deeds.

But, we are called to be one body with one Spirit, one Father, and one Savior, Jesus Christ whom we serve as we serve one another.

GAL 5:13 "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

And as we serve one another in love we will fulfill the greatest commandment which is to love God with all our heart, souls and minds as we reach out to each other and apply biblical principles and guidelines for all of life.

I'll end with the words the Lord gave James in his epistle. It's encouraging and practical.

JAM 1:17-18 "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Be a blessing and be blessed in the process. Give glory to God and bless His name in your life all of your days, as you rely on His power and His Spirit to be the servant He wants you to be.