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An Introduction to the Prophetic Ministry and Office, Part 3

There are many obstacles in the way of studying the gift of the Prophetic Office for most today. So many of us think there is very little benefit in studying the prophets. For example, many believe that the books lack relevancy.

The Obstacle of Relevancy

I'll never listening to "The Bible Answer Man" when a caller asked, "Last week you made it sound as though we shouldn't read the Old Testament. Certainly you didn't mean that, did you?" The host of the program said, "I wouldn't go so far as to say you shouldn't read the Old Testament. It has value in that it contains some incredible stories."

If all that the Old Testament contains is incredible stories, then I dare say that the most neglected portion of the Old Testament is the prophets, which contain few stores. And thus for many this will probably be the last portion of the word of God that they will read.

The Obstacle of Misunderstanding

Most people assume that there is a huge gulf that separates the Old Testament from the New Testament. This causes many to believe that the New Testament prophetic office and gift was distinct from the Old Testament prophetic office and gift. Because of this understanding, in order that one can benefit from the Old Testament prophetic work is to exchange the clear for the unclear.

Hebrews 1:1-2a, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His Son...*”

On the surface, it would appear that this passage indicates that the Old Testament prophetic ministry is shrouded in darkness. If not darkness, it certainly seems inferior to the New Testament. Indeed, we may not be sure as to what Hebrews 1 is saying, but this much seems obvious; if you want understanding and clarity don't go to the Old Testament go to the New Testament where the darkness has been replaced by the light of Christ!

Now if this is the assumption, is it little wonder so few of us have studied this section of Scripture?

It is because of these obstacles to our understanding of the gift and office of the Old Testament Prophet, that I want to continue this introduction to the glorious work and office of the Old Testament Prophet. In fact, I want to take head-on the notion that the prophetic witness of the Old Testament is inferior to that of the New Testament. And to do that, I want to look at the continuance of this office in the New Testament. Notice Joel 2.

The Continuance of the Office of Prophet

Joel 2:28-29, “And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.”

The impetus for the book of Joel was a devastating horde of locusts which came through the land of Judah at the time of the writing. Making full use of this tragedy in his teaching and ministry as a prophet, Joel likened the swarming locusts to God's coming judgment (Joel 1). His message was simple; if God's people don't turn back to God then God would send forth His judgment, a judgment that would resemble all the misery and horror of the present pestilence, yet with greater intensity (Joel 2).

Now in the midst of this warning, God promised a day of restoration and blessing for His people. In fact, Joel 2:28-29 contains a portion of this promised blessing which revolves around a resurrection of the prophetic gift.

Joel 2:28, “And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will

see visions.”

This is an incredible promise. Yet what did Joel expect by way of fulfillment? What was the anticipated experience of God’s people with respect to this prophecy? In answering this I want you to notice two things. The word that Joel uses for “prophecy” is the same word used throughout the Old Testament to denote the Office/Gift of Prophecy that we have already discussed. So we can conclude that when Joel mentions “prophecy” he is speaking in terms of the Old Testament gift. If he were to be asked, “By prophet, you mean the manifestation of this gift as it was at the time of Moses, right?” Clearly he would have said, “Is there any other kind of prophet?”

As such we conclude that whenever Joel’s prophecy would be fulfilled, the same standards and qualifications demanded of the prophet in the Old Testament would be true of the “prophet” who came in fulfillment of Joel’s prediction. In fact, notice Joel’s prophecy specifically mentions the mode of reception which according to Numbers 12 is required of all true prophets in the Bible; “dreams” and “visions.” Joel tells us that when this great and glorious day arrives that “...your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” (Joel 2:28) O. Palmer Robertson wrote concerning this passage:

Joel predicted a widespread manifestation of prophetic revelation in the future. The consummation of the ages would be accompanied by extensive revelatory experiences... Old men would ‘dream dreams’ and young men would ‘see visions’. Both phrases describe experiences of a revelatory nature, drawing on the context of Numbers 12. (Robertson, 1993, p. 12)

This leaves us to conclude that when Joel 2:28 is fulfilled, the Old Testament gift of prophecy will once again be manifested in its fullness! Now, this might not mean much to us who live 2,000 years after the first advent of Christ with a closed Canon. But this prophecy would have meant a great deal to those living at the time following the captivity of God’s people when the prophetic witness dried up. For 400 years, God’s people saw no prophets! Not one!

Ah, but there would come a time, says God in Joel 2, when His people once again would be graced by this glorious office. And that brings us to the question of the fulfillment of Joel 2. When or has Joel’s prophecy come to pass? In answer to this turn let us look at Acts 2.

The Fulfillment of Joel’s Prophecy

On the day of Pentecost when God brought into His Kingdom His first fruits, the Spirit of God manifested Himself to the people of God in a way which was quite foreign to their experience: people were prophesying! To this Peter explained:

Acts 2:16-18, “But this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy.’”

From this we conclude that the gift of prophecy as found in the New Testament is the fulfillment of the prophecy given in Joel 2:28! Do you see it? The New Testament gift was not something new, but the resurrection of the Old Testament office and calling! And thus as we examine the gift of prophecy as manifested in the New Testament, we must understand the gift in light of its Old Testament standard and calling!

This is an important point because there are many today (like Wayne Grudem) who have suggested that in the New Testament, the gift of prophecy had a facet that did not exist in the Old Testament. According to his theory, in the New Testament there was the revelatory and authoritative aspect of this gift as in the Old Testament. But then there was a non-revelatory, non-authoritative aspect of this gift given for the edification of the church, but not for the completion of the canon.¹

I hope you see that this latter view ignores the fact that the New Testament gift of prophecy was nothing less than a continuation of the Old Testament gift which did not have the latter element. And so from the statement of Acts 2:16-18 we conclude that the gift of prophecy as found in the New Testament is nothing less than an authoritative speaking forth of God's word, revelatory, and thus Canonical if God deigned to preserve it.² Thus it would have to conform to the high standards to which God held all His prophets. This is the basis for John's words in 1 John 4.

1 John 4:1, "Beloved, 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."

How were the New Testament people of God to test the prophets if not by the standards and qualifications given in Deuteronomy 13 & 18? From Joel 2 and Acts 2 we conclude that the New Testament manifestation of the gift of Prophecy was a resurrection of the Old Testament office and calling. Now the question is this: does the New Testament bear this out? Indeed it does! To see this, I want you to look with me at five New Testament passages.

Acts 11:27-28

This passage gives the first description of the exercise of this gift in the New Testament after Pentecost.

Acts 11:27-28, "Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius."

This passage corresponds with the standards and characteristics that we have come to expect of

¹ One might cite the many prophets of the prophetic schools under Elijah/Elisha and Samuel as an example of non-authoritative prophesying. While there were many prophets in the OT whose revelations were not recorded, that does not mean that they were not revelation or non-authoritative. It only means that God deigned not to preserve this revelation for the larger gathering of God's people.

² Recall that Paul wrote two other epistles to the Corinthians which God deigned not to preserve.

the Biblical prophet. Agabus' ability to prophecy is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy was objective, and not subjective as in the case of the false prophet (cf. Jeremiah 23:16).

See, as this passage relegates Agabus' prophetic experience to "the work of the Holy Spirit" we conclude that as a prophet he didn't *feel* an impression and so speak.

b. Rather, He who enabled the Prophets to speak via dreams and visions in the OT gave Agabus a glimpse into the future via the same medium. This is nothing less than what Joel promised. Agabus' prophecy was fulfilled with perfect accuracy as a famine did occur during the reign of Claudius. Agabus is here functioning as a spokesman of God- one through whom God spoke. As such his prophecy immediately became the basis for concrete action on the part of the disciples at Antioch- they took up an offering.

Acts 13:1-3

Acts 13:1-3, "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers [the following is a list of those who either were prophets or teachers]: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said [clearly this would not have been through a teacher, but through one or more of the prophets who were present], 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

Notice the Old Testament characteristics of the true prophet in this text. Once again, the prophetic word came by an act of the Holy Spirit, which means that it again wasn't subjective (via an impression) but objective, via a dream or vision. The prophecy was authoritative and binding. Thus in Acts 13:3, God's people obeyed and sent out Barnabas and Saul on what now is known as the first missionary journey.

Acts 21:10-11

Acts 21:10-11, "And as we were staying there for some days [in Caesarea], a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says [the NT equivalent to the OT "Thus says the Lord"]', "In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Once again, notice the Old Testament characteristics of the true prophet. Agabus' ability to prophecy is a result of the work of the Spirit (Acts 21:11), precisely what God said a prophet would do.

Deuteronomy 18:18, "...I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

As the true gift of prophecy always was in the Old Testament, Agabus' prophecy was authoritative such that God's people had no other option but to respond (Acts 21:12).

If it be asked what about Acts 21:4? Paul apparently disobeyed the prophetic word and "set foot in Jerusalem." (cf. Acts 21:17)? Doesn't this prove that in the New Testament, there was a non-authoritative gift of prophecy, as Wayne Grudem suggests? The answer is found in Acts 21:4.

Acts 21:4 is an ambiguous text.

Acts 21:4, "And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem."

Is it that the Spirit of God told Paul through the prophets "not to set foot in Jerusalem" as the translation suggests? Or is it that the Spirit of God told the prophets of the fate that awaited Paul and that the prophets therefore were urging Paul "not to set foot in Jerusalem?" And add to this the message that Paul received from the Spirit in Acts 20:22 that he should go to Jerusalem! And the message that the Prophets received from the Spirit everywhere else concerning Paul that bonds and imprisonment awaited him in Jerusalem (Acts 20:23; 21:11)!

The response of the disciples to this message was that they pleaded for him not to go (Acts 21:12)! Now, don't miss it. The attitude toward the word of God in the Apostolic Age was such that they didn't view a command of God as optional. If God told Paul not to go to Jerusalem, there would have been no need for pleading on the part of God's people. Paul wouldn't have gone! So we can be sure that it wasn't that Paul was commanded not to go to Jerusalem, but that this was the urgings and pleadings of the church.³

From all of this we conclude that the Prophetic office as manifested in Acts 21 comported to the Old Testament gift.

1 Corinthians 14:29-32

1 Corinthians 11-14 contains the fullest treatment of the gift of Prophecy in the New Testament. Throughout these chapters, the gift is presented as the product of the Holy Spirit (just as in the passages above) and thus we conclude that the phenomenon in Corinth is a further manifestation of the fulfillment of the promise given by Joel. Now in these chapters, the gift of Prophecy is mentioned ten times⁴ of which 1 Corinthians 14:29-32 emerges as the most sustained treatment on the gift of prophecy in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 14:29-32, "And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all

³ In fact, many solid commentators have concluded the same (cf. Munck, F.F. Bruce, J. A. Alexander, Calvin, Robertson).

⁴ 1 Cor. 11:4-5; 12:10; 13:2; 13:8; 14:3-4; 14:5-6; 14:22; 14:24-25; 14:29-33; 14:37-40.

the churches of the saints.”

Notice the elements attributed to the New Testament gift of prophecy. Paul required that the message of the prophets be subject to the scrutiny of God’s word.

1 Corinthians 14:29, “And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.”

The Greek term διακρίνω (*diakrinō*) has the basic meaning of “to separate, to sever, or to make a distinction.” Accordingly, the idea here is that whatever is spoken by a prophet must be subjected to the scrutiny of God’s word (as in Deuteronomy 13). If a message does not comport with God’s revelation it was to be rejected, severed, or separated (διακρίνω) from that which was genuine.

The word given by the Prophet was considered to be a “revelation” spoke from God and therefore authoritative.

1 Corinthians 14:30, “But if a revelation is made to another who is seated...”

See, the work of the New Testament prophet did not result in an exhortation from Scripture (as in a sermon), but a revealing of the covenant will of God! As such, as in all Old Testament prophetic work, to reject the word of a prophet was to reject God Himself and so to be judged (cf. Deuteronomy 18:19).

1 Corinthians 14:37-38, “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not recognized.”

In other words, he is to be considered a false prophet! In fact, Paul applied the same standard to the entire body of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:14, “And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him.”

We have seen how in the New Testament those ecclesiastical violations which required execution in the Old Testament now require excommunication. Hence in the Old Testament if someone rejected the word of a *bona fide* prophet, they would be executed (either as a false prophet or a rebel). In the New Testament the same end was administered to the individual but it was carried out in a different way: instead of execution there was excommunication.

As we have seen, the purpose of the revelation given to the prophet was for the growth and edification of the body. Here we see the same element.

1 Corinthians 14:31, “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted.”

In the Old Testament the speaking forth of God’s word was for the ultimate end of glorifying God

via the edification and so instruction of the believer. Such was the case in the New Testament gift of prophecy.

2 Peter 1:20-21

2 Peter 1:20-21, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for [or "because"] no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

With this verse, we have in effect Peter's definition of "prophecy." This definition is one to which he says that there are no exceptions, "NO prophecy was ever made." So this serves as the standard for ALL Biblical Prophecy whether New Testament or Old Testament!

What is the Biblical gift of prophecy? It did NOT arise out of the heart of a man it was not...

1 Peter 1:20b, "...according to one's own interpretation..."

1 Peter 1:21b, "...an act of human will..."

RATHER it was given by the objective working of the Spirit of God whereby God gave to the message-bearer (the prophet) a revelation of His will (which would have been through dreams and visions). Now what makes this such a crucial statement is that the man who wrote this passage, is the one who quoted Joel 2 when the gift suddenly manifested itself in the New Testament time. In other words, is it conceivable that the man who in 2 Peter described the New Testament gift of prophecy in terms of the Old Testament gift? Is it possible that this man had a different standard when he claimed that the New Testament gift was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel?

You say, "No!" Yet many charismatic teachings claim that Acts 2 describes the gift as a personal, subjective, non-authoritative manifestation of the gift. I hope you see that this is nonsense. Truly, to those who might claim that the gift of prophecy as evidenced at Pentecost or in the New Testament "differed" from Old Testament prophecy the words of the New Testament Prophet were of less authority than those of the New Testament.

Peter unequivocally declares the product of the prophetic gift, that which also was manifest at Pentecost to be nothing less than the Word of God (whether written or spoken), equivalent to all Biblical Prophecy, and so authoritative for the body of Christ. Truly from what have seen this morning we conclude that the New Testament gift/office of prophet was one and the same as the Old Testament gift/office of prophet! O. Palmer Robertson wrote this:

The prophetic experience that had brought God's word to the old covenant community now communicated the truth about this new era to God's new covenant people. (Robertson, 1993, p. 18)

And thus when it comes to prophecy in the New Testament we confess that the characteristics that governed the true gift of prophecy in the Old Testament are one and the same as in the New

Testament. As such

- The NATURE of New Testament prophecy was that it is revelation, a speaking forth of the Word of God.
- The STANDARD of New Testament prophecy was that it must be 100% accurate.
- The DETERRENCE of New Testament prophecy likewise was death, which in the New Covenant was excommunication.⁵
- The MODE OF RECEPTION of New Testament prophecy was through “dreams” and “visions.”
- The MODE OF EXPRESSION of New Testament prophecy was that it is an authoritative proclamation of the Word of God.
- The VERIFICATION of New Testament prophecy was the doing of the miraculous, which would have been part of the basis upon which someone could “test the prophetic spirit” (1 John 4:1) to determine the false prophet from the genuine.

This was the nature and function of the gift as manifested in the New Testament!

Now up to this point we’ve been rather “heady.” So, what is the point? Why spend so much time demonstrating that the Old Testament prophetic gift is one and the same at the New Testament prophetic gift?

It is my observation that we love the New Testament prophetic gift which produced such passages as the gospel of John, 1, 2, 3 John, Revelation, and clearly the Pauline⁶ corpus. We all have benefited from this glorious gift in real and tangible ways as we study and endeavor to apply the word of God to our lives. Well if in tasting this New Testament gift we are built up, encouraged, and inspired to serve the Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:31), don’t miss it: the Old Testament gift was/is no different from the New Testament gift!

Let me put it this way, what is it about New Testament prophecy that is such a delight to the child of God? Is it not Christ? Well get this, Christ is the focus, content, and message of every Old Testament prophet.

1 Peter 1:10-11, “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.”

The Old Testament prophetic corpus is the direct result of a moving of the Spirit of Christ upon Old Testament men! As such, and get this, in the words of the last Biblical prophet of this age:

Revelation 19:10b, “...the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

⁵ For an example of Physical Death, the account of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) could be referenced as an example of two people “lying” to the Holy Spirit- the essence of false prophecy!

⁶ cf. 1 Cor. 14:37-38; 2 Thes. 3:14.

All who love Christ, let us understand that Christ, His Kingdom, His will, His glory, His concern is at the heart and soul of Old Testament prophetic corpus. As that is the case, how do we therefore understand?

Hebrews 1:1-2a, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His Son...*"

This passage describes the transition that occurred between the Old Testament form of revelation (the gift of prophecy) to the New Testament form (the gift of Christ). Thus the contrast is between the word revealed in Scripture and the Word incarnate! Now speaking of the word revealed in Scripture, the Old Testament prophetic witness Hebrews 1 says that God spoke to the prophets, "in many portions [as in books] and in many ways [as in "dreams" and "visions"- the normative means by which God spoke to a prophet]."

The conclusion we derive from this statement is that revelation in the Old Testament was NOT inferior to the New Testament (after all, it is nothing less than the spirit of Christ, Revelation 19)). RATHER it was/is just incomplete. And so for example:

- To Noah was revealed the quarter of the world from which Messiah would come.
- To Micah, the town where He would be born.
- To Daniel, the time of His birth.
- To Malachi, the forerunner who would come before Him.
- To Jonah, His resurrection was typified.

Indeed! Christ, His Kingdom, His regency, and His glory was and is the focus of all the Bible. And when Christ walked the earth, the revelation concerning God's redemptive plan came to completion. Now having said this, I hope you see that this doesn't mean the Old Testament testimony is any less important or authoritative than the New Testament.

Let me put it this way: In college the engineer learned how to build a bridge, but it took twenty-eight classes! Now that he has graduated and started his career, does he throw out all that he learned in his classes which in themselves were incomplete? No. Rather he is thankful that now that he has the big picture he can piece together his coursework and truly see their rhyme and reason.

So it is with us who live as New Testament Christians, to gaze upon the Old Testament prophetic witness is not to gaze upon that which is irrelevant, but that which is incomplete. Thus, as ones who have the completed word of God in our hands, we are at a point, like no other child of God in prior ages, to behold the prophetic message and see it as it was truly intended. As such you must see that a glorious prospect awaits us as we approach this magnificent portion of God's word!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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