

What is a New Covenant prophet?

There are many within the Church who have not understood that there is a New Testament expression of this Old Testament ministry. The Old Testament ministry is clearly revealed, as explained previously, and therefore the New Testament does very little to expound this ministry to us as we would otherwise expect. However, the Christian prophet is revealed in passages like those found in the Book of Acts. For example, prophets associated with the church at Jerusalem visited and ministered at the church at Antioch.

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 11:27).

This was the time that Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch. The passage tells us that one of these prophets, Agabus, predicted a famine that took place during the reign of Caesar Claudius. It is certain that Paul and Barnabas knew Agabus personally. We will relate more about Agabus later. These prophets were not the only ones known to the church at Antioch. In Acts 13, a possible listing of the elders of the church of Antioch, we learn that there were also prophets there. Because of the way this verse is constructed, it is impossible to say which persons were prophets and which were teachers. There must have been at least two of each if we are going to take the plural forms of each word seriously.

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul (Acts 13:1).

We also learn of two more prophets, Judas and Silas, who were involved in ministry along with Paul and Barnabas. These men were sent with Paul and Barnabas as representatives of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem to be witnesses of the decision of this Council addressing the controversy over the relationship of the Law of Moses and the Gentile believers. Again, Paul is interacting with those who have prophetic calls on their lives.

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers (Acts 15:32).

If we assume there were at least two prophets present in each of the passages above where the plural is used, then we can count a minimum of six prophets from these passages alone. However, we must acknowledge that there must have been many more from the following passages found in Paul's writings. From the testimony of Scripture we can determine that the ministry of the Christian prophet was not rare for the early Church, and that it was considered as second only to the apostolic ministry. Paul writes:

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. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? (1 Corinthians 12:28-29).

Paul also lists this ministry gift as second to apostles in the Book of Ephesians:

It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11).

Paul indicates that he expected there would be more than one prophet in any gathering of God's people. In this case, two or three prophets were to speak and other prophets were to judge what was spoken. If we do some math from this passage, adding the prophets speaking ("two or three") to the "others" judging (meaning at least two), we find the sum to be at least four or five prophets in each local church.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said (1Corinthians 14:29; see also 14:32,37).

Paul in these passages also tells us that the Christian prophet is second to the apostle. The indication of "second" does not reveal the relationship between these first and second ministries; however, the Word of God is not silent concerning this relationship. In Ephesians Paul places these ministries together as the foundation of the Church. There is no question that he is referring to the Christian prophet rather than the Old Testament prophet because he says that both apostle and prophet are the foundation with Christ Jesus as Cornerstone.

If Paul were referring to the Old Testament prophet rather than the New Testament prophet, then he could not tell us that Jesus Christ was the cornerstone of this foundation. The Church is built upon the foundation of Christ. The Old Testament prophet is not part of the Church and therefore is not built upon the cornerstone of Christ.

[God's household is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

Paul places these ministries together again as those that are revelational by the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that God is now revealing His mysteries to prophets, clearly indicating that he is speaking about Christian prophets.

...the mystery of Christ, 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 (Ephesians 3:4-5).

Trusting that these passages are enough to establish that the New Testament reveals the Christian prophet to be an expected and welcomed function of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we will now review what the Old Testament reveals about the actual functions of this important ministry.

### Functions of the Prophet

Contrary to popular belief, there were generally many prophets living in Israel at the same time. Of course, there were always considerably fewer than the thousands of priests. Not all of God's prophets were reliable or faithful to God, despite their calling. For the most part, the Old Testament concentrates on the faithful prophets of the Lord, but it does not neglect to tell us of those who were less than pleasing to God. In passages where God speaks correction to His

prophets, there is much to be learned about the prophetic role. We will look at some of these corrections. The following are the ministry functions of the prophets.

### The Ministry of Revelation

Probably the most essential ministry function of the prophet is to stand in the council of the Lord. This is a ministry of revelation that hears and sees what the Lord is saying for a particular situation, nation, city, person, or persons. All other prophetic ministry functions are related to and flow from this one. This is the characteristic that makes a prophet a prophet. Jeremiah wrote:

But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear His word? Who has listened and heard His word? See, the storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until He fully accomplishes the purposes of His heart. In days to come you will understand it clearly. I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, they would have proclaimed My words to My people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds (Jeremiah 23:18-22).

This is clearly correction from God to those who are prophets, but were not sent by God with a message. However, within this passage we learn much about the role of the true prophet. He stands in the council of the Lord and proclaims God's word to His people. In saying this, there are those who would confuse the issue by improperly substituting preaching for prophecy.

### Prophecy Is Not Preaching

There are some who have mistranslated and misunderstood this as referring to the preaching ministry. Most mature prophets are also preachers, but not all modern Christian prophets preach. Some may only function in the ministry of revelation and prophecy. Not all preachers are prophets, nor do they all stand in the council of the Lord as a regular part of their ministry. Preaching is not necessarily prophetic. It can instruct, encourage, and exhort without ever moving into a prophetic flow and gifting. The prophet will bring to the circumstance the specific word of God for the moment, for the individual, for the local church. This is what sets him apart from the ordinary preacher of God's word.

### Prophetic Revelation from Dreams and Visions

This prophetic revelation can come in the form of a vision or dream. Although God may speak to all His servants through dreams and visions from time to time, this is an ongoing experience with the prophet.

He said, "Listen to My words: 'When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal Myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams'" (Numbers 12:6).

Revelation also may come often to the prophet in the form of words. The prophet of Gad regularly ministered to David in this manner. Apparently during the night or early morning, God would speak His word into the prophet's spirit for him to deliver to King David in the morning.

Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer (2 Samuel 24:11).

Other passages show this revelational ministry of the prophet. In Second Kings chapter 3, three kings found themselves in a difficult situation and sought out the prophet Elisha for guidance.

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of the Lord through him?" An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah." Jehoshaphat said, "The word of the Lord is with him." So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him. ...Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you or even notice you" (2 Kings 3:11-12,14).

This passage illustrates that the ministry of the prophet is primarily revelational. The three kings believed they would determine the particular will of God for their situation by consulting with the prophet Elisha. They knew the word of God was with him in a revelational sense. Elisha also gives us a description of himself in the passage in the last verse. "Whom I serve" states his relationship with God. Modern translation has obscured this passage, as well as many others. The New American Standard version translates this phrase as "before whom I stand," which reiterates the relationship of the prophet to God. The prophet stands in the council of the Lord.

God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah about his role as a prophet. Unfortunately, the meaning of this passage is also a somewhat obscured translation of the New International Version. It says this:

Therefore this is what the Lord says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be My spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 15:19-20).

The phrase that you may serve Me is translated, "before Me you will stand" in the New American Standard Version, which tries to approximate the most literal translation. Again, the ministry of the prophet is to stand in the council of the Lord and to utter worthy words of revelation by the Spirit.

It is possible, of course, that a person appearing to be a prophet could mislead God's people. The passage below speaks to that problem. This is one of those passages that is instructive through the corrections that God speaks; the Lord tells us what a proper prophet should be doing in the context of His correction. The proper prophet must speak visions from the mouth of the Lord and not from his own mind.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:16).

It is clear that dreams and visions come from the mouth of the Lord; however, His revealed word is a higher form of revelation and is compared with dreams as grain is compared with straw. In other words, grain is of more value. Lest we think that God is condemning all prophetic utterance, visions, and dreams, a few verses later the Lord encourages those who are prophets to faithfully speak the revelational word that comes from God.

“Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has My word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 23:28).

Prophets can also proclaim a message that the Lord has spoken and expect fulfillment of that word. Messages that predict events in a certain time or season that go unfulfilled by God become a way to measure the prophetic utterance and the prophet. However, it may not always be that simple. There were some positive prophecies that did not seem to be conditional as they were stated in the Old Testament that God did not fulfill because of the sin of the persons involved. On the other hand, there were some prophecies that were negative that God did not fulfill or delayed because of the humility and repentance of the persons involved. So the issue of fulfilled prophecy is not quite so simple, but it still remains a way to test the prophet. Nevertheless, Moses tells us to measure the prophet by measuring the fulfillment of his prophecies.

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:22).

### Prophets Reveal Other Ministries

Prophets also have a function of revealing and anointing other ministries and calling them to their ministry functions, often revealing much of their future ministry. Our earlier discussion on the anointing has already shown much of this function.

Jehu got up and went into the house. Then the prophet poured the oil on Jehu’s head and declared, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anoint you king over the Lord’s people Israel. You are to destroy the house of Ahab your master, and I will avenge the blood of My servants the prophets and the blood of all the Lord’s servants shed by Jezebel’” (2 Kings 9:6-7).

### Prophets Issue Guidance and Warnings From God

Prophets also can issue guidance and warnings to God’s people and His other anointed servants, to wicked individuals, to cities, and to nations. Often the warning will encourage repentance and returning to the Lord.

The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and seers: “Turn from your evil ways. Observe My commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through My servants the prophets. ...until the Lord removed them from His presence, as He had warned through all His servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there (2 Kings 17:13,23).

Prophets often have a message of repentance, of returning to God. Sometimes they are successful in producing repentance, sometimes not.

Although the Lord sent prophets to the people to bring them back to Him, and though they testified against them, they would not listen (2 Chronicles 24:19).

### The New Testament Prophet Agabus

The prophet Agabus is the only Christian prophet described by the New Testament in any detail. The two reference to him in the Book of Acts are ten chapters apart. This implies that he had an ongoing ministry within the first-century Church. We see the ministry of revelation working in him. He clearly stood in the council of the Lord.

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) (Acts 11:27-28)

In the second passage, ten chapters later, Agabus offers a very specific personal prophetic word of warning to Paul about future difficulties. His prophecy revealing a portion of Paul’s future was very accurate, as the rest of the Book of Acts records.

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (Acts 21:10-11).

Two Old Testament prophetic functions of revelation and warning are found in the New Testament prophet Agabus. It is logical to conclude that all the functions of the Old Testament prophet will be found in the New Testament prophet.

There are more references in the New Testament to the New Testament prophet’s ministry that there are to the pastor, evangelist, or teacher. Paul places it in secondary importance only to the apostle, yet a high degree of confusion and ignorance remains regarding this ministry in the modern Church. This must change quickly for the sake of the Kingdom of God.