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NEW TESTAMENT PROPHETS

A Necessary foundation

Ephesians 2:20 says of the household of God, that it has *“been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone”*. This is a very important verse and like all verses in the Bible must be studied and understood in the context of the Scriptures.

In every generation God is building His house in the earth. One of the major mistakes of the church historically has been to build on the foundation of the teachers from previous generations. Maybe in some instances those teachers were apostles and prophets, but never are we meant to build on yesterday’s teaching. This has been the origin and practice of all denominations, that is, to build on the foundation of men who have lived and ministered in a previous generation. Yes, we can learn from teachers of previous generations, but the foundation of the church must be established in the word in every generation.

The church is the church of the living God (**1Tim.3:15**); it is never the church of a great man of God of the past. The Scripture says the church is built on the **foundation of apostles and prophets (Eph.2:20)**. This is not referring to Old Testaments prophets; it is clearly referring to New Testament prophets. In each generation God is building His house, the church, in the earth, and each generation needs to receive apostles and prophets and make sure that the foundation of the church in each generation is properly laid. This is done by the apostles and prophets who have received the revelation of the mystery of Christ from the Spirit (**Eph.3:5**)

Receivers of revelation

It is necessary for each generation to receive the word of God and that word is to be brought firstly through apostles and prophets according to **Ephesians 3:5**. It is by the revelation of the Spirit: *“The mystery of Christ which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.”* Notice the revelation is **“Now”**, not yesterday, nor primarily referring to Old Testament prophets, **not “in other ages”**. According to Paul, they did not know the mystery. Jesus Christ gave the gift ministries to His church *“When He ascended on high”* (**Eph.4:8**).

Appointed by God

Another important Scripture to consider in coming to an understanding of the ministry and work of prophets in the New Testament church is given to us in **1Cor.12:28**. *“And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers”*. Again, the reference to prophets being appointed is in the context of the New Testament church; it is not a reference to Old Testament prophets.

We need functioning apostles who receive the revelation of the word; we need functioning prophets who make known that revelation and bring understanding to the church; we need functioning teachers who are properly founded in the foundations of the mystery of Christ, having received those foundations through the apostles and prophets. When this

happens, the church will be well on the way to the *“unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God”* (Eph.4:13).

The office of the prophet

Ephesians 4:7-11 tells us that when Jesus ascended on high he *“gave gifts to men”* (v.8). Verse 7 tells us that these gifts release grace to us: *“to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”*

This grace gift given by Jesus after His ascension is a five-fold gift: *“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers”* (v11).

The prophet ministry referred to in this verse is the office of the prophet. Not just the gift of prophecy (**Rom.12:6**); not just the spiritual gift of prophecy or of receiving a word of knowledge (**1Cor.12:10**); this is the ministry gift set in the church by God.

The ministry of the prophet is a gift ministry given by Jesus after His ascension. It is an individual appointment. We learn from **Deuteronomy 18:15&18** that God puts His words in the mouth of the prophet and the word of the prophet is to be heard.

PROPHETS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a prophet called by God before he was born, to go before the face of the Lord, and to prepare a way for Him. The angel, speaking to Zacharias before John was born, said *“He will go before Him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”* Luke 1:17.

The spirit and power of Elijah upon John the Baptist was:

- ➔ To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.
- ➔ To turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.
- ➔ To make a people prepared for the Lord.

We learn from **Luke 1:17** that, in general, the spirit and power of Elijah is upon the prophet.

Anna the prophetess

In **Luke 2:36-38** we read of the prophetess Anna. *“Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of great age and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity”* v.36. Anna was **called by name and known by God**. The prophet is a clearly identified and anointed ministry. The Bible gives much detail about who Anna is. We learn that a **woman can be a prophet**.

“And this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” v.37. As a prophet Anna stayed close to God and practiced prayer and fasting.

“And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him, to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” v.38. The prophet **speaks about Jesus**; even as Anna recognized the visitation of God and spoke prophetically of His redemptive purpose.

She recognized His coming, even in the Child Jesus. The prophet **needs to know what God is doing** in this present day. This is the present truth that God is speaking to the church, explaining what God is doing now.

THE MINISTRY OF THE PROPHET in the NEW TESTAMENT

1) To help lay foundations

“Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” Eph.2:20. From this verse we learn that the apostle and prophet are foundational ministries in the building of the house of God. The prophet is a foundational ministry, laying the foundation of the church, by bringing the revelation of Jesus Christ.

2) To bring the revelation of the mystery

The revelation of the mystery *“which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” Eph.3:5.* Apostles and prophets are anointed to know the mystery, to have revelation of the mystery by the Spirit.

Grace has been given to the apostles and prophets to make known this mystery. It is a ministry gift of grace to be able to teach the deeper truths of God’s word; the revelation of the mystery (v.7).

The revelation is given to ‘**holy**’ apostles and prophets, that is, ones who are set apart, separated unto God’s purpose. Many may be apostles and prophets, but they have not set themselves apart to wait upon God and get the message; many do not seem to know the mystery.

3) Appointed in the church by God

“And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues” 1Cor12:28. It is God who has appointed this order in His church. The ministry of the apostle, prophet and teacher are key ministries in the New Testament.

Pastors and bishops are included as teachers in the context of this verse as these senior leaders often have the responsibility of more than one church. The primary role of teachers, pastors, bishops in the local churches is to teach the word of God.

PROPHETS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

1. Prophets are sent

The first mention of the prophet in the book of Acts is in **Acts 11:27**, *“And in those days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch”*. Jerusalem was the mother church and Antioch was a daughter church in the region. Prophets came from the mother church, sent from the mother church, to the church at Antioch. They did not just turn up, they were sent! Prophets need to be sent from an established base.

2. Agabus, an example of a prophet functioning

“Then one of them named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout the world which also happened in the days of Claudius

Caesar” v.28. Agabus is named as a prophet; he is known as a prophet; therefore, he has to be accountable. We know who he is; we know who spoke this prophesy; it was spoken among witnesses and he is accountable for the word he has spoken.

Agabus, the prophet was foretelling the future. He was not ministering the Holy Spirit gift of prophecy. The Bible also records that the prophecy was true, and the famine took place in the days of Claudius Caesar. Agabus was a true prophet of God. A true prophet is known by name and is accountable to somebody

Part of the ministry role of the prophet is to foretell the future, knowing that their prophesy will be tested. The Holy Spirit showed Agabus what was going to happen; he had a vision. God does speak to the prophet through visions. Because Agabus was known as a true prophet, the church believed the word he spoke and acted on that word (v.29).

3. Prophets link with other ministries

The next mention of prophets in the New Testament is **Acts 13:1**: *“Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers”*. The church in Antioch was clearly being led by prophets and teachers. Prophets can be on the ministry team of a local church.

4. The prophet speaks the word of the Lord

These prophets and teachers were ministering to the Lord and fasting and the Holy Spirit spoke saying, *“Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”* (v.2). Prophets spend time ministering to the Lord with prayers and fastings, knowing that God will speak.

One of the prophets prophesied the word that the Holy Spirit gave. The prophet is to speak the word of the Lord. Through prophesy God can make His will known.

Remember God said through Moses in **Deuteronomy 18:18**, He would raise up a Prophet and would *“put My words in His mouth”*. We must heed what the prophet says.

5. The ministry calling can change

It is interesting to note that by **Acts 14:14** Paul and Barnabas are now called apostles. A person’s ministry can change, for here we have a prophet and a teacher now functioning as apostles. This was the will of God revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Each of the five-fold ministry gifts is an appointment by God. Some have been functioning in a particular gift, then they hear about the ministry of the apostle and suddenly change their title to ‘apostle’. We need to hear from God and obey His voice, not just change our title.

6. Prophets: part of the eldership of the church

The next mention of prophets is in **Acts 15**. At the end of an important discussion by the Jerusalem council, it is decided that a letter be written and sent out into the regional churches.

“It pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas ... and Silas, leading men among the brethren” (v.22). Judas and Silas were among this council of elders in the church at Jerusalem, and they were prophets (v.32).

7. Prophets exhort and strengthen

From **verse 32** we learn that Judas and Silas were prophets: *“Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets”*; and as prophets, they *“exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words”*. The ministry of the prophet is meant to exhort and strengthen the brethren. This is ministering to the corporate body of believers. It does not mean that there was a lot of personal prophesies. It may include that, but the primary work of the prophet is to speak the word of God to make known the mystery so that every one of us can be built up.

8. Prophets bring the revelation of the word

The ministry of the prophet is ‘with many words’, that is, teaching the prophetic understanding of the word of God. The primary ministry of the prophet is to make known the revelation of the mystery (**Eph.3:5**).

9. The prophet receives the prophetic word

In **Acts 21:10** we find out more about Agabus the prophet. He has come to the house of Phillip the evangelist. The apostle Paul is already there with the team. Agabus received a prophetic word for Paul, which he illustrated with a prophetic act.

“He took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’” v.11. Here Agabus is speaking by the Holy Spirit. The first time we read of Agabus, he was shown something by the Spirit, now he is speaking by the Spirit.

- Prophets can speak out of visions
- Prophets can give a direct utterance by the Holy Spirit
- Prophets can give a personal prophesy or foretell a future event – such as the famine prophesied by Agabus.

10. The prophetic word brings confirmation

We need to note that the prophecy given to Paul by Agabus, was not new revelation. Paul had already heard from God and knew that suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. *“I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulation await me”* Acts 20:22-23.

11. Apostles & prophets will see Babylon fall

In **Revelation 18:20** we are told that finally Babylon will fall because of the apostles and prophets. *“Rejoice over her [Babylon], O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!”* Why would Babylon fall because of apostles and prophets? Babylon means confusion. Confusion will depart from the earth as God raises up apostles and prophets to speak the truth of His word.

Babylon only rules the human race because the human race is ignorant of God’s word. As true apostles and prophets are restored to the church, proclaiming the truth of God’s word, and bringing the revelation of the mysteries, confusion will go.

The *“unsearchable riches of Christ”* are to be preached, so that all will come to see *“what is the fellowship of the mystery”* (**Eph.3:8-9**). This mystery *“from the beginning of the*

ages has been hidden in God”, but it is the responsibility of apostles and prophets to make known this mystery.

This is how Babylon is overthrown: by the clear preaching and teaching of the deeper wisdom of the word of God (**1Cor.2:7**).

In the course of the restoration of prophets in recent history, there has been much emphasis on personal prophecies, and on foretelling the future; there has been little emphasis given by most prophets on **making known the mystery**, the deeper wisdom of God’s word.

The role of the prophet is to preach and teach the word of God, with prophetic revelation and understanding; to build up the church, bringing all the saints to the knowledge of the riches of the glory of God.