

WOMEN PROPHETS

by Rev. Kathryn J. Riss

THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY

The basic definition of a prophet is one who speaks for God. Prophecy consists largely in speaking God's word, calling people to repentance, warning of future judgments, and praising the Lord. Whenever the Holy Spirit moves on a chosen vessel to speak Divine communications, the spirit of prophecy is at work.

The Bible makes no distinction between the prophetic ministry of men and women. A prophet, whether male or female, is God's servant, called and anointed by Him. Prophets are chosen by God, who opens their spiritual ears, gives them a message, and directs them as to when and to whom to speak His Word. This Divine calling and direction constitutes the basis for their spiritual authority. God often gives His prophets and prophetesses words of rebuke and correction to those in authority. Often, prophets are rejected and persecuted by those in power, because the messages God gives through them frequently call these powers to account. Their responsibility is to speak the word of the Lord and leave to God whether or not their messages are received, believed and obeyed.

The exercise of the prophetic ministry is under the authority of the prophet as directed by God; but in public settings, common courtesy and due regard for the upbuilding of others are to be maintained. New Testament prophets are, along with apostles, builders of the church's foundation. They catch God's vision for His people, speak it boldly, and exhort others to follow Christ. As they pray and fast together, seeking God's will for the church, the Holy Spirit gives direction to them for the church's mission (Acts 13:1-3).

PROPHECY AND TEACHING

I Cor. 14:3-5 states, "Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" and "builds up the church." Verses 29-31 state that prophets receive God's revelation so that all may learn and all may be comforted. Thus, the teaching function is inherent in prophecy. That prophecy was not forbidden to women is clear from I Cor. 11:5, where women's public prophesying is presupposed and their deportment regulated. Paul was not trying to quench the Holy Spirit from speaking through women, but he wanted to ensure that women who spoke for God acted modestly in a way that could not bring legal accusations against the church. Doubtless, his concern to protect the women leaders who were being persecuted in unspeakable ways motivated his cautions.

NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY AS A MESSIANIC SIGN

Concerning the ministry of prophecy during the Church Age, Acts 2:17-18 states, "And it shall come to pass, in the last days, says God, I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." Here, Peter quotes Joel 2:28 to explain the phenomena of Pentecost. He goes on to show that in the Messianic "last days" that Jesus has inaugurated, the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled. Without respect of persons, God will pour out His Spirit upon all people, and they will speak Divine revelations. The Gospel is offered to all, and the sign of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced in speaking in tongues and prophecy, is offered freely to all who believe.

On the day of Pentecost, one hundred and twenty followers of Christ were filled with the Holy Ghost and spoke in languages they had never learned, publicly proclaiming "the wonderful works of God." According to Acts 1:14, these one hundred and twenty Holy Spirit-inspired preachers included both men and women. Their speech was not just ecstatic praise, although that would be wonderful enough, but inspired preaching which listeners understood in their own languages. Its purpose and effect was the conversion to Christ of hearers from many lands and languages and their becoming unified as members of His Body, the church, the community of believers in Jesus.

PROPHECY AND EVANGELISM

New Testament tongues and prophecy, given both to men and women, thus have an evangelistic purpose. They are signs and wonders demonstrating the marvel of God's mercy and abundant grace offered to all and poured out for all through Jesus Christ. This is why it is so important that the freedom to prophesy and preach not be restricted. We can only demonstrate the Gospel by allowing God to be God and letting all those He fills with His Spirit and so directly testify of His wonderful works! The medium IS the message. A church that allows only a few professionals to preach the Gospel conveys a false message that free participation in the Gospel is only for the elite. But when all believers are free to exercise the gifts God gives them, the Gospel is seen for what it truly is-- good news for all people..

PROPHECY GIVEN WITHOUT RESPECT OF PERSONS

Acts goes on to quote Joel that "even upon my menservants and maidservants I will pour out of My Spirit, and they shall prophesy." Note that God calls those He sovereignly fills with His Spirit His servants and says that "all flesh" shall prophesy. New Testament prophecy is not reserved for the spiritually mature, but a gift God offers freely to all believers. Thus, the prayer of Moses is fulfilled, "would God that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them." (Num. 11:29) Through the free exercise of inspired preaching in the church, God demonstrates His extravagant grace!

The gift of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by speaking in unknown languages and declaring the praises of God, was also poured out upon new Gentile converts to Christ at the household of Cornelius in Capernaum. Here, the grace of God was extended cross-culturally. How difficult it must have been for Peter and his Jewish-Christian friends to accept the fact that God had given His Holy Spirit to Gentiles, who were despised as unclean by religious Jews! God had to prepare Peter by giving him a vision three times. When the leaders of the church at Jerusalem questioned what Peter had done in baptizing these Gentiles, he said, "Since God gave them the same gift as to us, who believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I to oppose God?" (Acts 11:17) This is an attitude all Christians would do well to emulate.



WOMEN PROPHETS BEFORE CHRIST

God is no respecter of persons. There had always been women prophets in Israel. Miriam, who by her faith and courage saved her baby brother Moses from death when she was just a child, prophesied to the nation and was set before them as a leader by God Himself along with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4). Miriam led the women of Israel in antiphonal praise to God at the Red Sea, exulting with the men in God's victory over Pharaoh's armies.

Deborah-- prophetess, judge and military leader-- is the most celebrated woman prophet of the Old Testament because she brought liberty to Israel through her faith, courage and boldness. Judges 4:4 is generally translated as "Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lapidoth. . ." but the Hebrew word here translated "wife" usually means "woman," and Lapidoth is not attested elsewhere as a man's name. Rather, it is the ordinary feminine plural for the word "fire." As her career demonstrates, Deborah was a fiery woman! The Hebrew is emphatic that SHE judged Israel at that time. Respecting her as a wise woman who heard from God and knew His Law, the people of Israel came to her for judgment. When the word of the Lord came to Deborah, she summoned Barak from Naphtali and directed him to obey God by mustering troops against the oppressor Sisera. When Barak agreed to do so only if Deborah accompanied him, she did not hesitate to go and rally the troops.

After the victory, in the ode of celebration, Deborah sings, "The villages ceased, they ceased in Israel until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose a mother in Israel." Deborah heard the word of the Lord and was obedient to God's call. In response to that call, not human invitation, Deborah rose up to lead her nation, inspiring others to follow her faith. Because of her courage and fear of God, not man, the nation was set free and enjoyed peace for forty years.

The prophetess Huldah taught at the college in Jerusalem and brought revival to the nation when she confirmed the Word of God brought to her and prophesied judgment and grace to King Josiah, the high priest, and the religious elite of her day. These men received and acted upon her declaration as it was, the word of God, not a human. Note that this occurred during the ministry of Jeremiah, who had been prophesying at Jerusalem for five years by the time the Lord used Huldah to speak His message. God wasn't out of men to use! He deliberately chose to use this woman. According to the original edition of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "The standing and reputation of Huldah in the city are attested by the fact that she was consulted when the Book of the Law was discovered. The king, high priest, counselors, etc. appealed to her rather than to Jeremiah, and her word was accepted by all of the word of Jehovah." ("*Huldah*" by J. J. Reeve, ISBE, Vol. III, Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915, p. 1389)

PROPHECY IN THE MESSIANIC AGE

It is ironic that some today assume that God would have His New Testament handmaidens--washed in the blood of His Son, filled with His Holy Spirit, and set free from the Law--do less than His handmaidens under the old

covenant! Especially since Jesus told His followers, "greater works than these shall ye do, because I go to my Father." The only winner in this battle is Satan, who divides the church, silences the female majority, and deludes the minority to trust in the flesh instead of God's Spirit. Like Deborah, we need to let God be God and be faithful to Him. Like Barak, we need to listen to God speaking to us through His chosen prophets, whether male or female.

NEW TESTAMENT PROPHETESSES

New Testament prophetesses include Anna (Luke 2:36-38), the first to proclaim Jesus as the Redeemer publicly; Elizabeth (Luke 2:41-45), who recognized Christ while still in His mother's womb; Mary (Luke 2:46-55), who through faith conceived God in the flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit; and a false prophetess called Jezebel, whom God called to repent from immorality.

Prophets are well known for predicting future events; and Mary, the mother of Jesus, did just that when she said, "The Lord has regarded the humble estate of His handmaiden; from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed." (Lk.1:48) So did her cousin Elizabeth, who declared, "Blessed is she who believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Lk.1:45) Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mary also rightly interpreted Scripture concerning the Abrahamic Covenant as fulfilled in her Divine Son (vs.54-55).

The Book of Acts tells us that the evangelist Philip had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. The early fourth-century historian Eusebius writes that the family moved to Asia. In the epistle of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to Victor, bishop of Rome, we learn that "in Asia, also, mighty luminaries have fallen asleep . . . Philip, one of the twelve apostles who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. Another of his daughters, who lived in the holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus." (*Eusebius, Book II*, ch XXXI) Eusebius goes on to say, "But we must now show how Papias, coming to them (at Hierapolis), received a wonderful account from the daughters of Philip. For he writes that in his time there was one raised from the dead." (*Ibid*, ch. XXXIX)

Eusebius mentions this as part of Papias' credentials, who "professes to have received the declarations of the apostles from those that were in company with them. . ." Thus, the accounts Papias received from the daughters of Philip, along with other trustworthy Christians who were likewise acquainted with the apostles, were accepted as authoritative.

This account is significant because Papias was a second-generation believer very highly regarded by the early church. A disciple of John at Ephesus and link to the bishop and martyr Polycarp, Papias is our earliest source for much post-apostolic tradition. Eusebius was the foremost church historian of his age who documented both the New Testament and sub-apostolic periods. The fact that Eusebius cites Papias' contact with the daughters of Philip as proof in part of Papias' own credentials as a reliable authority for early Christians shows the very high regard in which these prophetesses were held.

That these women prophets were highly regarded by the early church is evident from the writing of Apollinaris of Hierapolis, who in refuting the claims of the ecstatic prophets Montanus and Maximilla, wrote, "But the false prophet is carried away by a vehement ecstasy, accompanied by want of all shame and fear. Beginning, indeed, with a designed ignorance and terminating in involuntary madness. They will never be able to show that any of the Old or any of the New Testament were thus violently agitated and carried away in spirit. Neither will they be able to boast that Agabus or Judas or Silas or the daughters of Philip or Ammias in Philadelphia or Quadratus or others that do not belong to them ever acted in this way." (*Eusebius Book V ch. XVII*) Here, Apollinaris points to the daughters of Philip as examples of true, Godly prophets.



REJECTION OF CHARISMATA AND THE RISE OF MONTANISM

Quite early in the church's history, Christians who continued to exercise charismatic gifts including prophecy after the apostolic age were considered to be heretics. With increasing persecutions against the church, emphasis shifted from evangelism with signs following to courage and witness under the tortures of martyrdom. Reverence for the apostles and prophets who founded the church produced an attitude of humility which deterred people from seeking to emulate their ministry themselves. The healing ministry continued through the intercession of martyrs more than through living believers; and with the formalization of the New Testament canon, the ministry of prophets was seen as no longer needed. A growing church hierarchy had a dampening effect on lay ministry. As the practice of charismatic gifts died out in most churches, ecstatic prophets were viewed as too similar to pagan prophets, with whom they were categorized.

During the latter part of the second century, a Christian sect developed in Phrygia, led by one Montanus and two prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla. Church historian Philip Schaff writes, "During the bloody persecutions under the Antonines, which raged in Asia Minor and caused the death of Polycarp AD155, all three went forth as prophets and reformers of the Christian life, and proclaimed the near approach of the age of the Holy Spirit and of the millennial reign in Pepuza, a small village of Phrygia, upon which the new Jerusalem was to come down. Scenes took place similar to those under the preaching of the first Quakers, and the glossolalia and prophesying in the Irvingite congregations." (Philip Schaff, *History of The Christian Church*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882-1910, vol 2, p. 414.)

The Montanists adhered to Catholic church doctrine but called believers to a higher standard of holiness and to the practice of prophetic gifts. They believed in preparing for the coming Judgment, return of Christ and the millennial age by fasting and other ascetic practices, terming themselves "spiritual" as opposed to "carnal" Christians. Montanist prophets sometimes fell into trances and prophesied in the first person. These practices, along with the fact that their leadership did not arise from the Catholic clergy but from lay men and even women, brought criticism.

Philip Schaff wrote, "This brings us to another feature of the Montanistic movement, the assertion of the universal priesthood of Christians, even of females, against the special priesthood in the Catholic church. Under this view, (Montanism) may be called a democratic reaction against the clerical aristocracy, which from the time of Ignatius had more and more monopolized all ministerial privileges and functions. The Montanists found the true qualification and appointment for the office of teacher in direct endowment by the Spirit of God, in distinction from outward ordination and episcopal succession. They everywhere proposed the supernatural element and the free motion of the Spirit against the mechanism of a fixed ecclesiastical order." (*Schaff*, op. cit, p. 418). Catholic clerics denounced the Montanists as presumptuous and assumed that their supernatural manifestations were demonic, not divine. Most of them were excommunicated.

The theologian Tertullian, who became a Montanist at the turn of the third century, wrote, ". . . we have among us now a sister who has been granted gifts of revelations, which she experiences in church during the Sunday services through ecstatic vision in the Spirit. . . And after the people have been dismissed at the end of the service it is her custom to relate to us what she has seen. . ." (*Tertullian, De Anima, ix c.210*)

The Montanist movement attracted a wide following in Rome, Asia, Constantinople and North Africa and continued in the church to the sixth century, when its rigors caused it to die out. Schaff writes, "But the religious earnestness which animated it, its prophecies and visions, its millennialism, and the fanatical extremes into which it ran, have since reappeared, under various names and forms, and in new combinations, in Novatianism, Donatism, the spiritualism of the Franciscans, Anabaptism, the Camisard enthusiasm, Puritanism, Quakerism, Quietism, Pietism, Second Adventism, Irvingism, and so on, by way of protest and wholesome reaction against various evils in the church." (*Schaff*, op. cit, p. 427) Many would include the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement and its child, the charismatic movement, with their emphasis on freedom in the Holy Spirit under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in this tradition.