

Apostles & Prophets - What's the difference? - November 1984

'You are . . . built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (Ephesians 2:19-20). Trying to distinguish between the foundational ministries of apostles and prophets can sometimes seem as difficult as separating soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12)! Consider Barnabas and Saul. Before they were sent forth as apostles they were described as being among the prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1). When they were commissioned and sent out as apostles (Acts 13:2-3) they continued to operate in their gift area (prophecy or teaching) but with an added apostolic dimension. So if one of these apostles was previously a prophet it would have been quite difficult afterwards to distinguish him from another man who was a prophet pure and simple. Yet there are distinctive features between the two and it is vital that we try to grasp them. For while apostles and prophets belong together in their foundational ministry and should not be divided, the essential elements of their respective roles can be distinguished.

A Seer

The apostle is primarily an architect who is concerned with the overall design of the local church. The prophet, on the other hand, is first and foremost a seer, who sees beyond the present situation and focuses into sharp contrast the purposes of God. He has a perception of the needs of the time and comes to know the mind of God on a particular situation. The prophets of the Old Testament were often not concerned so much with the whole purpose of God as with immediate needs — but with those immediate needs viewed in the light of God's overall purpose. For instance, the prophet Nathan was sent by God to confront David on one vital issue — his unrighteous action in having a man killed in order to gain his wife (2 Samuel 12:1-14). He was not tackling the unrighteousness of a nation on this occasion but one particular sin that God had something to say about. That situation, however, as history testifies, was to have lasting repercussions for the nation as a whole and for the eternal purpose of God. Nathan in this sense was a seer.

Focusing

A prophet excels at helping people understand with absolute clarity what God is saying to them at that time. When he gets up to speak he doesn't have an overall apostolic grasp of things, nor is he likely to bring anything different from the message of the apostle or pastor/teacher, but what he says comes in such a way that the focus becomes sharp and clear. Everyone — leaders and people alike — begins to understand the teaching in a new light. It's a bit like developing a photograph. Two prints from the same negative can be radically different because of the type of photographic paper used. One can be grey and monotonous with no contrast, making it difficult to appreciate. The other can be sharp and crystal clear, understandable at a glance. You might not think that a prophecy with the words "I am with you," declares the

Lord' is very dynamic. Yet that was all that the prophet Haggai brought to get God's people building the temple again (Haggai 1:13-14). It was a prophetic word in season — clear, crisp and to the point.

The teachers might have already said it several times, but when the prophet brought the same message, it all became clear. Teaching and explaining, you see, doesn't necessarily bring things into focus; focusing comes from an anointed understanding. The teacher may bring clarity, but on the lips of the prophet the same message comes with dynamic impact. It strikes home! The prophet may not understand God's plan as well as the apostle nor Explain things like a pastor/teacher, but his prophetic anointing will cause people to see an issue in a way that any amount of careful explanation cannot.

Inspiring

Another distinguishing feature of a prophet is that, when he speaks, he inspires people to action. The word he carries from God demands decision, action, change or adjustment. Not only does he bring you to the point of decision, he also communicates faith for action and then stands with you when you face the consequences of acting on his word. Imagine a church situation where the elders sit down and decide whether, in the next few months, to go for expansion and reaching out to break new ground or for merely consolidating their present position. After careful consideration, using all the wisdom they can muster, they decide to hold back for a while from active organised evangelism until the latest batch of new converts have become established in the faith and the people have recovered from the last outreach effort. Then the prophet speaks his anointed message about moving out in particular areas and the elders forget about their wise counsel! Now they are urging their people to start reaching out along the lines of the prophet's message. His inspiration of faith has provoked a response which leads to action.

When the prophet Agabus came to the Antioch church from Jerusalem, he prophesied about a severe famine spreading throughout the Roman empire. There was an immediate response: 'The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul' (see Acts 11:27-30). At times the prophet can seem a bit like a solo violinist playing a major symphony over and over. He has the tune right but after a while you long for a bit of depth and variety. Yet under God's anointing he is bringing the same message again and again until it results in action. Supposing a church is in bondage to fear. The prophet — using inspiration, perception and motivation — begins to tell the people to move from fear to faith He might preach or teach or prophesy, but the message remains the same — 'Move from fear to faith' — until do it.

A Deposit

The prophet is primarily concerned about keeping things moving, whereas the apostle tends to concentrate more on what is being built and how it is being achieved. The prophet doesn't usually come in, deliver the word

of God and then leave it up to the church. In a very real sense the prophet, like the apostle, is the church's ongoing deposit. He doesn't come to bring the deposit, he is the deposit. He is part of the church's continuing growth and has been raised up to see God's purposes fulfilled in the church. Similarly, the apostle doesn't come into a church situation, establish elders and work himself out of a job. You wouldn't expect a parent to opt out of his children's lives when they grow up. He continues to have a We saw earlier that the apostle and prophet are a church's foundations. How ridiculous it would be to build on the foundations and then pull them away from underneath the structure! I remember a time when I brought the word of God to a church and there was a tremendous response. Two weeks later God told me to preach the same message to the same people using different texts and illustrations. Everyone thought it was a dynamic meeting. Then I reminded them that I'd brought essentially the same word two weeks before! This is the prophet's approach. He will bring the word and watch for a response. If there is a deviation from it, or a resistance to it, he will bring it again until it is grasped and put into action. Then, in a sense, he'll sit back and wait for the next word from God.

Unemployed

Have you noticed how the Old Testament prophets seem to have had times of 'unemployment'? They spent time between their major prophecies in caves (1 Kings 18:4) or on the banks of a river (Ezekiel 1:1).

Prophets don't usually preach every week. They are there to give an understanding of the concept, purpose and will of God for the moment. Then they move back and allow the apostle to fit it into its context and the pastor/teachers to put flesh on the message. We are not suggesting, of course, that the prophet's role is a soft option, with unlimited scope for fishing or playing golf! In his interaction with other men of ministry he will have more than enough to keep him busy in the Kings business. But the actual presentation of God's prophetic word, his distinctive speciality, will in the very nature of things operate intermittently.

Togetherness

In a very real sense apostles and prophets function together. There is a togetherness in their ministry — in terms of initiation as well as gathering, and instructing people — even they may not be in the same place at the same time. Silas and Judas, both prophets, seem to have arrived in Antioch with the apostles Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:25-27,32). Earlier, prophets from Jerusalem visited Antioch after the apostles had come (11:25-27). If that is the case, and the two work so closely together, what can the apostle do that the prophet can't? I believe that the prophet is limited in terms of his wisdom and his authority compared with the apostle.

WISDOM

I'm not implying that the prophet is an unwise man, of course, but that he is concerned only with individual issues. The apostle, with his wisdom to see the whole, is able to take those issues — and the people's response

to them — and fit them into the overall plan and purpose of God for the church. If people respond merely to the single issue of the time, there is a danger of an emphasis on worship one week, dealing with fear the next, followed by having faith using signs and wonders and campaigning against abortion! The apostle fits all these issues into their context so that the people do not become locked into one emphasis or another but start seeing the whole structure. When the issue of circumcision came up in the early church, it was the apostles and elders, not specifically the prophets, who met to discuss it (Acts 15:1-2). Once the apostolic decision had been made in conjunction with the elders, the prophets Judas and Silas were sent along to confirm it and motivate the people to whom it was addressed to respond (15:22-29). The likelihood seems to be that the prophets were among the elders — 'prophet' and 'elder' signifying a gift area and a local church function respectively, in some cases combined in one man, just as Peter combined his eldership with apostleship (1 Peter 5:1).

Authority

The final difference between apostles and prophets is that the apostle's authority is greater than that of the prophet. People sense that a man with an apostolic ministry has an anointing that goes beyond the immediate. They can respond to a prophet's inspiration for the immediate but they have confidence in an ongoing relationship with an apostle. Having said that, some prophets will have more authority than others. There is a cut-off point in every man's ministry. The prophet needs to know that point and not try ministering beyond it because, if he does, he'll make a mess of things. Everyone has a 'measure of faith' (Romans' 12:3) and a measure of grace (Eph 4:7 NASB) beyond which it is disastrous to move. Strong's concordance renders the Greek word '*metron*' as 'a limited portion'. The apostle, too, must see the outer limit of the prophet's gift and ability and restrict the giving of apostolic authority accordingly. To give blanket authority to a man, without considering his limitations, is a recipe for disaster. It is fairly clear from Scripture, for instance, that the choosing and establishing of elders in local churches is a function of the apostles (see Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). You don't find prophets making such decisions without the authority and covering of the apostle — and you certainly don't see local congregations taking this vital function into their own hands!

Great Friends

This difference in authority should cause no problem at all for true apostles and true prophets. Often men with these ministries become very close friends. Some people have a problem with prophets because of their emphases, sharpness of focus or constant pressing home of the same issue. The apostle, on the other hand, hears the prophet getting all steamed up about issues and just smiles. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'We'll get there. It's your responsibility to deliver the message and mine to fit it into the overall plan. Just keep going and we'll make it.' In summary, then: when the prophet, realising his limitations, works in close harmony with the apostle, the church is built, the people are motivated and as a result Jesus Christ is glorified. Can we afford to ignore these vital ministries? Different they may be, but we need them both!