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### The Prophets of the New Testament Church

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THE PROPHETS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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by  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The reader of the New Testament Scripture frequently comes across references to prophets and the gift of prophecy in the New Testament Church. At first thought the casual reader may pay little attention to these references since prophets are referred to again and again in the Old Testament. Upon further reflection, however, he may become curious as to what their office and function really was. After all, prophecy is often regarded to have ended with the coming of John the Baptist, and very few ever think of comparing an Agabus, for example, with a Jeremiah, although both are classified as prophets in Scripture. It is surprising too that very few books have been written directly on the subject of Christian prophets.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to find out as much as possible about the prophets of the New Testament Church, to find out who they were, where they were found, what was their function, and what was their influence in the early Christian Church. The study is so organized as to give the reader a brief overview of the prophetic institution prior to the time of the New Testament Church first, as this will lend to a better understanding of those chapters which speak of the New Testament prophets themselves. Whenever Scripture is quoted, the Authorized Version is used unless otherwise designated.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PROPHETIC INSTITUTION IN ISRAEL BEFORE THE TIME OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

A Study of the Israelite people and nation of Old Testament times reveals to the historian what a tremendous influence the prophetic institution had upon the Jewish people and how the members of this prophetic institution actually influenced the very life and action of the nation itself. In our brief overview of the prophetic institution as it existed in Israel before the time of the New Testament Church, it is important for us to note first of all that this was not a man-made institution, but one instituted by God Himself. In this sense it is unique over against similar institutions existing in the heathen countries round about them. The Canaanites had their diviners and soothsayers of all sorts, and witches practiced their Satanic arts among them; the Egyptians had their magicians, sorcerers, and star gazers, but only Israel could claim a prophetic institution of divine origin which had for its members men who were divinely called to this institution and who truly acted as God's spokesmen to His people Israel.

There is one passage in particular in the Old Testament which speaks with some detail about the divine origin of the prophetic institution in Israel. It is Deuteronomy 18:9-22. This passage contains part of the message which Moses told to the people of Israel by divine command shortly before they were to enter the promised land of Canaan.

In the verses immediately preceding this passage Moses had described the functions of the Levites, who were the appointed guardians and promoters of the Law. The chief task of these Levites was to instruct the people in the Law and also to promote a living fellowship and relationship with the Lord by means of the sacrifices at the altar.<sup>1</sup> God knew, however, that the Mosaic institutions in themselves would prove insufficient for the needs of the Israelite people in the altered circumstances of the new land they were to inhabit. The revelation at Sinai, to be sure, was amply sufficient to make known the will of God, but God knew too the sinfulness of man's heart and man's natural tendency to go astray. There was a need for God to give to His people a more detailed and concrete instruction in the way in which He would have them walk. Therefore, in order to help the Israelite people overcome the temptations which would face them, especially as they came into contact with the idolatrous and superstitious practices of the Canaanite nations, God gave to His people the gift of the prophetic institution. Through this institution the Israelites would receive further revelation from God as it was needed.

Thus in verses 9-14 of Deuteronomy 18 God warns the Israelites against learning the abominable practices of the heathen nations with whom they would come into contact. Nine superstitions and practices are enumerated. In contrast to these idolatrous and superstitious practices, which range from various methods of divination to the practice of sorcery and consulting with the dead, Moses spoke to the people saying, Deuteronomy 18:14-18:

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Young, My Servants The Prophets (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 20.

But as for thee, the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; according to all that thou desirest of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let not me hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

Here we see set forth the vast difference between the diviners and the enchanters of the people of Canaan and the prophets who were to speak for God to the people of Israel. Whereas the Canaanites hearkened to the word of man, the Israelites are to give ear only to the Word of God as spoken by the prophets. Attempts have sometimes been made to advance various theories to account for an extra-Hebrew origin of prophecy, and some wish to overlook the sharp distinction between soothsaying and prophecy in an attempt to discount Hebrew prophecy as a unique divine bestowal,<sup>2</sup> but the passage just cited very clearly points out that prophecy, the gift of God, and the superstitions of Canaan, have nothing to do with one another. They are placed in complete contrast with each other.

Most scholars see in Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18 a direct Messianic reference to Christ, and that there is such a reference is certified by the testimony of the Apostle Peter and Stephen in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> We shall discuss this point more fully later. Most scholars also agree,

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<sup>2</sup>For further information on Hebrew prophecy as a unique divine bestowal see *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27. Also see Walter A. Maier, "Hebrew Prophecy A Unique Divine Bestowal," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, V (March, 1934), 199-205.

<sup>3</sup>Acts 3:22-26; 7:37,52.

however, that this prophecy has its immediate fulfillment in the long line of prophets who served as God's spokesmen to the people of Israel whenever they were in need of such revelation. Andrew Harper, a noted Hebrew exegete, states:

It was not only in the far-off Messianic time that Israel was to find this divinely sent prophet that knowledge of God's will and purposes which it needed. Israel of all times, tempted by the customs of its heathen neighbors to go to the diviners, was to have in Jahweh's prophet a continual deliverance from the temptation. That implies that this Nabhi, or prophet like unto Moses, was to be continually recurring, at every turn and crisis of this nation's career.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Edward Young summarizes the study of most scholars on this passage by stating that it contains the following double reference:

1. There was to be a body of prophets, an institution, which would declare the words that God commanded.
2. There was to be one great prophet, who alone would be like Moses and might be compared with him, namely, the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

At present we shall discuss this passage only in the sense that it refers to the prophetic institution being established in Israel, and we want to note the basic characteristics which it ascribes to the members of the prophetic institution.

We notice first of all that the prophet whom the Lord will raise up is said to be "from the midst of thee" and "from thy brethren." In other words he is to be an Israelite. As far as can be established this is a basic characteristic which is common to all prophets, both literary and non-literary, of Old Testament times. There is but one exception-- that of Balaam, who prophesied for Balak, the Moabite king.<sup>6</sup> Balaam,

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<sup>4</sup>Andrew Harper, The Book of Deuteronomy in The Expositors Bible (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), V, 337-38.

<sup>5</sup>Young, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>6</sup>Numbers 22-24.



therefore, is excluded from the true line of prophets, and we note that he was but a heathen soothsayer to whom the Lord gave divine revelation at that one particular time.

Secondly, we notice that the prophet is to be "like unto me [Moses]." Moses is not necessarily put upon an equal plane with the prophets by this statement, or even called a prophet. Rather, he is regarded as a standard or measure with which the prophets may be compared. As Moses was God's representative before the people, so the prophet was to be also.<sup>7</sup> The Old Testament contains numerous references to the prophet as a "man of God." The very name by which the prophet is called, אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים, implies that he was God's representative. Its meaning will be more fully explained later.

Thirdly, and this point contains several sub-divisions, the prophet is spoken of as the "mouthpiece" of God. Verse 18 declares, "I will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." This, perhaps, can be regarded as the most important characteristic of the prophets, namely, that the Lord in some way or another revealed to the prophets the very words which they were to speak, words which they in turn were to transmit to the people. For this reason the prophets came before the nation, not as religious leaders who had a word to speak in their own name, but rather as those who were com-

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<sup>7</sup>S. R. Driver, Deuteronomy, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 228. "It is not that the promised prophet is to be 'like' Moses in every respect, or in other words to be equal with him: he is to be like him, as v. 16-18 show, in the fact of being Jehovah's representative with the people, but not necessarily in being His representative in the same degree in which Moses was . . . ."

pelled to give utterance to a word which had come to them from the Lord. This constraint upon the prophets to speak that message which God had revealed to them is shown in Amos 3:8, "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophecy?" It is also shown in Jeremiah 20:9, "But His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay." On the other hand, for the prophets to proclaim anything as God's word which was not God's word was strictly forbidden. Thus in Deuteronomy 18:20 we read, "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die."

In speaking of the prophet as the recipient of revelation we note that the source of his inspiration is indicated as the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. Thus the prophet Micah testifies in Micah 3:8, "But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, and of judgment, and of might . . . ." In 2 Peter 2:21 we read, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Other passages also could be noted in this connection.<sup>8</sup> This coming of the Holy Spirit to the prophet sometimes brought on a state of ecstasy.<sup>9</sup> The question is often raised why such a condition was imposed upon the recipient of revelation. In answer to this Dr. Edward Young explains that it was necessary for the entire personality to be conquered and controlled while the

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<sup>8</sup>Nehemiah 9:30; Job 32:8; Heb. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:11.

<sup>9</sup>1 Samuel 19:20; Numbers 24:4.

Spirit communicated His message; especially was this true in the case of a Balaam and a Saul, in whom the spiritual condition of receptivity was most likely at a low ebb. It does not necessarily follow, he adds, that this was always the case when visions were revealed unto the prophets, although a certain amount of bodily subjection may have been present even in the revelation given to an Isaiah or an Amos.<sup>10</sup>

The manner in which the Spirit conveyed the prophetic message varied. Deuteronomy 18:18 merely states that the Lord would put His words into the prophet's mouth and does not explain how He would put them there. Yet we know there were various ways in which the Holy Spirit made His will known to the prophets. Phrases such as "thus saith the Lord," "the Lord sent a word," "and the word of the Lord came unto me," occur again and again in the writings of the prophets. They seem to indicate that the most common way for the prophet to receive a revelation was through his sense of hearing. It may be, however, that God could cause the words which He spoke to be heard or impressed upon the mind of the recipient so that he was aware of the impression without the use of the physical organs of hearing.<sup>11</sup> A reference to support this would be Isaiah chapter 6, which records the words God spoke to Isaiah in his inaugural vision. At times, however, we know that the physical organs of hearing were directly employed, as when the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Lord revealing Himself "in my ears."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Young, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>12</sup>Isaiah 22:14.

God also revealed His words by means of vision or sight. In support of this statement it may be helpful to consider briefly the basic meaning of two Hebrew words sometimes used in the Old Testament for "Prophet." Up until the days of Samuel the word commonly used by the Jewish people to designate the prophet was  $\text{נָבִיא}$ .<sup>13</sup> As for the etymology of this word, it is the participial form of the root  $\text{נָוָה}$ , meaning "to see." Hence,  $\text{נָבִיא}$  literally means one who sees, a see-er, and refers to one who sees the revelation which God grants to him.<sup>14</sup> This Hebrew word for prophet indicates by its basic meaning that God at times did make use of the prophets' sense of sight in revealing prophecy. That this is true is also supported by various passages in Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

The other Hebrew word used for prophet which stresses the use of sight or visions for the reception of the prophetic message is  $\text{נִבְיָא}$ . It is derived from the root  $\text{נָוָה}$ , and, as opposed to  $\text{נָוָה}$ , which has special reference to seeing in the physical sense,  $\text{נִבְיָא}$  has special reference to seeing as an inner, thoughtful sight.<sup>16</sup> This word is usually used when referring to the false prophets, although Amos is also called a  $\text{נִבְיָא}$ .<sup>17</sup>

Two other methods by which the Holy Spirit revealed His message were

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<sup>13</sup>1 Samuel 9:9.

<sup>14</sup>Young, op. cit. pp. 65-65.

<sup>15</sup>Amos 8:8; 8:2.

<sup>16</sup>Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, translated with additions and corrections by Samuel Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 268.

<sup>17</sup>Amos 7:12.

by dreams<sup>18</sup> and by theophanies—visions in which the prophet saw God. The inaugural visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel are examples of this type of revelation.

Having discussed the prophet as the recipient of revelation, the man who had a message from Jahweh, we must also now view him as the spokesman of this revelation, for he was also a man who had a mission to the people. This is the thought contained in the latter part of Deuteronomy 18:18, and it is also the thought expressed by the principal Hebrew word used for prophet, נָבִיא. The exact etymology of the word is uncertain. Gesenius suggests that it comes from the root נָבַח, meaning "to bubble forth."<sup>19</sup> The word would then take on an active meaning and refer to the prophet as one who speaks forth, excited by inspiration. Some say it is derived from an Arabic root meaning "to announce," and still others have a number of different ideas.<sup>20</sup> Fairbairn thinks that there is a difference of opinion as to its original import, whether of active or of passive signification, but he states that practically, both the active and passive ideas are contained in the word, for the true prophet was always one who received communications from Jahweh, but also one who received these communications so that he might import them to others.<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate the point which Fairbairn makes, we might cite a few

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<sup>18</sup>Numbers 12:6; Jer. 23:28.

<sup>19</sup>Wilhelm Gesenius, Thesaurus Philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti (n. p., 1840), II, 838.

<sup>20</sup>Young, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

<sup>21</sup>Patrick Fairbairn, Prophecy (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), Appendix A.

usages of נ'ִיִּי in Scripture. The very passage we have been studying, Deuteronomy 18:18b, shows both the active and passive idea. The נ'ִיִּי is one who declares the word of God which has been given him by God. The same thought appears in Exodus 7:1; 4:15,16. Exodus 7:1 reads, "Behold I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron, thy brother, shall be thy prophet." Exodus 4:15, 16 says, "Thou shalt speak unto Aaron and put words in his mouth, and he shall be thy spokesman unto the people." In receiving the message from Moses as from God and in communicating this message to others, Aaron was to do the prophet's part.

Thus we conclude that the prophet was a person especially called to carry on this twofold relation towards God and man—on the one side to receive, on the other to speak that which was received—to be, in a manner, God's mouth, for the purpose of declaring the truths and unfolding the secrets which God would impart to him by special revelation. This was the peculiar calling of the prophet, and whatever was uttered in the fulfillment of such a calling was a prophecy. Thus Jeremiah, one of the prophets of the Lord, calls himself the Lord's mouth.<sup>22</sup> Using the mouth, both for preaching and for conversing, was, of course, the chief method employed by the prophets to deliver their message. We might note, however, that they also used other methods, such as acting out their message<sup>23</sup> and writing down their message.

Another important factor of the prophetic institution given in Deuteronomy 18:9-22 is the reaction the people were to have to the

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<sup>22</sup>Jer. 1:17; 15:19.

<sup>23</sup>1 Kings 20:35-42; Jer. 13:1-11; Ezekiel 5:1-6; 12:1-11; et. al.

prophet's message. In verse 15 is the command "unto him ye shall hearken." "Hearken" is the translation for the Hebrew verb  $\text{שָׁמַע}$  which means more than just listening to the prophet and hearing what he has to say. It implies obedience to the message of the prophet, who speaks as God's mouthpiece. The importance of giving heed to the message of the prophet is borne out in verse 19, where we read, "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him." The final downfall of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel were the final tragedy destined to come upon the Hebrew race because the people failed to hearken to the voice of the prophets.

The final characteristic of the members of the prophetic institution is one which the Lord cites as a means by which the true prophets could be distinguished from the false. It is contained in Deuteronomy 18:21,22, where we read:

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken. When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

In connection with this final point a few remarks should be made concerning the content of the prophet's message. In ordinary language we think of prophecy as that which is a prediction of the future. In the original and proper sense, however, this is but a part of prophecy. The prophets were men who had a divine message to proclaim. They represent God before men. Their task, therefore, was to lead the chosen people in establishing the kingdom of God in the world, a task which meant keeping the Israelites from all forms of idolatry and keeping them true to Jahveh. It is in keeping with this task of theirs

that the primary aim of their message was not merely to announce beforehand the coming events although they did this too, as the passage quoted above indicates and their messages substantiate, but the grand object seems rather to have been to deal with men, as in God's stead, for the establishment of God's kingdom in this world.<sup>24</sup> Because of this objective the prophets sometimes spoke of past events in order to justify the ways of God to men by showing how He had dealt with His chosen people before, and how from God's point of view all history rebukes sin and encourages righteousness. Because of this objective the prophets also dealt with the present, in which the men of God pointed out the way of truth and duty and warned the people not to walk in the way of the world. Only in so far as might be required for the benefit of God and His Kingdom did the prophets, inspired by divine revelation, lay open the prospect of things to come.<sup>25</sup> As spokesmen of God, however, it follows that whatever they spoke should be true; and if at any time that which a prophet spoke was found to be false, then the people could rest assured that such a person was no true spokesman of the Lord at all but a false prophet, as Deuteronomy 18:21,22 states.

In summary we might list the characteristics of the members of the prophetic institution in the Old Testament as follows:

1. They were Israelites.
2. They were "like unto Moses" in the respect that they were God's representatives to the people.

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<sup>24</sup>Fairbairn, op. cit., pp. 20, 21.

<sup>25</sup>Andrew Blackwood, The Prophets - Elijah To Christ (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1917), p. 39.



3. They were God's mouthpiece, that is:
  - a. They were recipients of divine revelation by the Holy Spirit, who put His words into their mouth.
  - b. They transmitted the divine message which they received, to the people and thus served as God's spokesman or mouthpiece.
4. They were men unto whom the people were to hearken.
5. They were men who as God's representatives spoke inspired messages dealing either with the past, present, or future. What they uttered was in the interest of God and of His Kingdom and was so reliable that the false prophet could be distinguished from the true by whether what was foretold came to pass or not.

Before we turn our attention from these Old Testament prophets it may be worth-while to add that unlike the priestly and kingly office in Israel, the prophetic office did not necessarily pass from father to son; rather, such as God chose and sent belonged to this office. Thus Amos was called to the prophetic office though a former shepherd and fruit-dresser of Tekoa. Jeremiah, whose father was Hilkiah, a priest, was called to the prophetic office.

Then, too, we must remember that the prophet was not like the professional preacher of today. Although his primary concern was teaching and proclaiming the word of God, yet, as Blackwood states, he was also a "public man of affairs," looked upon as statesman, reformer, politician, iconoclast, sometimes even as a traitor by his contemporaries.<sup>26</sup> Usually the prophet kept close to the king, declaring to him the will of God for him and for his land. Often his message was rejected. Then he appealed from the king to the people, but again he often spoke in vain. Where he was not ignored he was often persecuted,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-24.

and many prophets sealed their testimony with their blood. However, regardless of how distasteful his task must have seemed at times there still was no nobler office than that assigned to the prophet. He did not merely transfer to the people and teach that which God had revealed to another, as the priests did, but he transferred and taught that which God directly revealed to him. He was God's spokesman, and as such he held the highest and noblest office in all Israel, yes, in all the world.

For many centuries after the days of Moses the people of Israel were waiting for the coming of "that Prophet" who should be the complete fulfillment of Moses' prophetic statement in Deuteronomy 18:15-22. It is little wonder then that when John the Baptist appeared upon the scene after four hundred years of relative silence, many of the people thought he was the Prophet long awaited. Many came to hear John's message, but when asked whether he was "That Prophet," John's humble reply was in the negative. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness," he stated. "I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not. He it is who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe latchet I am not worthy to unloose." The next day after he had said this a man from Galilee came toward him named Jesus of Nazareth. John pointed to Him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world."

Jesus of Nazareth grew in popularity in the days and months that followed. It soon became obvious to the people that He was more than just an ordinary Rabbi; many recognized Him as a prophet. When His followers saw Him resurrect the widow's son from the dead outside the

village of Nain, they glorified God and said, "A great prophet is risen up among us."<sup>27</sup> The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well was so amazed at all the things Jesus could tell her about herself that she said, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet."<sup>28</sup> Even King Herod soon heard about Jesus, and though he himself thought Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life whom he had beheaded, others said, "He is a prophet, or as one of the prophets."<sup>29</sup> Even Jesus Himself claimed that He was a prophet, for when He was rejected in His home town, He said, "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house."<sup>30</sup>

There were some who saw in Jesus more than just an ordinary prophet. Some of the men who were present when Jesus fed five thousand people with but five barley loaves and two small fishes were so impressed that they said, "This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world."<sup>31</sup> These men probably did not know the full significance of what they were saying, but they were right. Several years later on the day of Pentecost, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached to the large crowd gathered together there in the city of Jerusalem and proclaimed Jesus as no less than "that Prophet" foretold by Moses.<sup>32</sup> Stephen implied that Jesus was no less than "that prophet" in the ser-

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<sup>27</sup>Luke 7:16.

<sup>28</sup>John 4:19.

<sup>29</sup>Mark 6:15.

<sup>30</sup>Matt. 13:57.

<sup>31</sup>John 6:14.

<sup>32</sup>Acts 3:22-26.

non he delivered before he was put to death.<sup>33</sup>

Thus we see that Scripture truly testifies to the fact that Jesus was not only a prophet but also "that Prophet" long foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-22. He, as the climax and crown to the long line of prophets making up the prophetic institution, fulfilled this prophetic statement in Deuteronomy to the fullest degree possible. Was there ever a prophet who was "like unto Moses" to such a degree as Jesus was? Moses had talked to God "face to face." None of the other prophets had done that, though they still served as God's representatives. Jesus, however, not only talked to God "face to face," but He was God made manifest in the flesh. As Fairbairn describes it, on the basis of Hebrew 3:5f, "Moses had the honor of being counted faithful as a servant over the house of God, Christ, however, has the place of a son."<sup>34</sup>

The Prophet like unto Moses was to be an Israelite, and was not Jesus an Israelite? It is likewise foretold that the prophet should receive revelation from God. In this respect the prophets following Moses did not receive such a direct revelation of God's will as Moses had.<sup>35</sup> None of them, not even Moses, received such direct revelation as He of whom it can be said that God was not speaking to man but rather that God was speaking in man and through man.<sup>36</sup> Nor could any prophet compare to Jesus as a spokesman of God, for they could but speak God's will as it was revealed to them, whereas every word Jesus spoke

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<sup>33</sup>Acts 7:37, 52.

<sup>34</sup>Fairbairn, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup>Deut. 34:10.

<sup>36</sup>John 1:18; 14:10.

was always God speaking. Were the people told to hearken unto the prophets? They were likewise told to hear Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Did the prophets foretell? Jesus likewise foretold.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Jesus Himself said, "If you had believed Moses, you would have believed in Me, for he wrote concerning Me."<sup>39</sup>

To summarize, in Christ we see the climax to the prophetic institution. Although there is a marked inferiority in the case of the ordinary prophets when compared to Moses, in Christ we have one who is superior even to Moses in all respects. As "that Prophet" Christ completed the revelation of the divine will which Moses had left imperfect;<sup>40</sup> and none shall now come of whom it can be said that he is a prophet like to Christ. Christ, we know, is still performing His prophetic office in the Church. He did so after His ascension by sending the promised Spirit unto His apostles to guide them into all truth, and to qualify them for publishing and confirming the Gospel to the world.<sup>41</sup> Christ still continues to exercise His prophetic office by the Spirit, giving gifts unto men for the work of the ministry and the edification of His body.

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<sup>37</sup>Matt. 17:5; John 12:48,49.

<sup>38</sup>Matt. 21:1-11; 25:31-46.

<sup>39</sup>John 5:47.

<sup>40</sup>Robert Jamieson and A. M. Fausset and David Brown, A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, And Practical, on the Old And New Testament (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., n.d.), I, 664.

<sup>41</sup>Acts 2:32,33; 4:20,31; Rom. 15:19.

## CHAPTER III

### PROPHETS WITHIN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Having now become somewhat familiar with the prophetic institution as it existed in Israel, we turn our attention to Christian prophecy and prophets within the New Testament Church. The Christian era properly begins with the coming of the long-awaited Christ-child, and we notice that His very coming was greeted with an outburst of prophetic utterance. The priest Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, Christ's forerunner, was moved by the Holy Ghost to utter the well-known "Benedictus";<sup>1</sup> Simeon, an aged man living in Jerusalem, uttered words of prophecy as he held the child Jesus in his arms;<sup>2</sup> a prophetess named Anna, "which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day," likewise gave thanks unto the Lord when she saw the Christ-child, and spoke of Him to all that looked for redemption in Jerusalem;<sup>3</sup> John the Baptist, whose birth an angel had foretold,<sup>4</sup> and whom Jesus Himself later called a prophet and more than a prophet,<sup>5</sup> appeared upon the scene some years later.

The Christian era truly begins with prophets and prophecy, and though we would properly classify these prophetic utterances in the same

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 1:67-78.

<sup>2</sup>Luke 2:25-35.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 2:36-38.

<sup>4</sup>Luke 1:13-17.

<sup>5</sup>Matt. 11:9.

category as Old Testament prophecy,<sup>6</sup> yet we note the very close connecting link they are between prophecy of the Old Testament and Christian prophecy as such, which properly begins with the ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, we have the climax and ultimate fulfillment of the prophetic institution of Israel. In Jesus we also have the Founder of a new line of prophets,<sup>8</sup> for He it is who endowed His new Israel with the same prophetic Spirit which had been the glory of the ancient people of God. Thus during His ministry Jesus spoke in the future tense as He said, "I will send them prophets and apostles."<sup>9</sup> He promised the prophetic Spirit to His Church of the future too as He said:

When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall shew it unto you.<sup>10</sup>

We see then that just as the people of the Old Testament were to receive direct revelation from God through the prophets to supplement the instruction given them in the Mosaic Law, so the Church of the New Testament was to have prophets, who, speaking through immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit, would bear the Spirit's testimony to the words which the Apostles and other eyewitnesses of the Lord should speak concerning the works and deeds of the Lord. Jesus Himself alluded to such

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Luke 11:49.

<sup>10</sup>John 16:13,14.

prophets of the future, as can be proven from Luke 11:49, cited above. Jesus alludes to them in other passages also.<sup>11</sup> The Apostles likewise speak of the gift of prophecy. On the day of Pentecost the Apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, spoke to the people and applied the words of the prophet Joel to the future Israel, saying:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture does not state how soon a recognized order of prophets arose in the Church of Jerusalem, but we do know that about the year 43-44 A.D.,<sup>13</sup> Christian prophets from Jerusalem, Agabus and others, journeyed to Antioch.<sup>14</sup> Shortly afterwards we read of resident prophets ministering in the congregation at Antioch too.<sup>15</sup> Five are mentioned by name, the first and last of which are already familiar to us as the names of the two famous missionaries to the Gentiles, Saul (Paul) and Barnabas. Saul, we remember, was the former Jewish fanatic and pharisee from Tarsus, converted to Christianity while on his way to Damascus to persecute the very group of which he later became a member. Barnabas, also called Joses, was a Levite, and originally came from Cyprus.<sup>16</sup> Little else is told us about him. Concerning the other

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<sup>11</sup>Matt. 7:22; 10:41; 23:34.

<sup>12</sup>Acts 2:17f.

<sup>13</sup>James Hastings, A Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 415ff.

<sup>14</sup>Acts 11:27f.

<sup>15</sup>Acts 13:1f.

<sup>16</sup>Acts 4:36.



three prophets mentioned we know even less. Their names were Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen. Simeon most likely was a Jew who also had the Roman name of "Niger."<sup>17</sup> According to Bruce, some scholars link Simeon with Simon of Cyrene,<sup>18</sup> but if that were true, it seems strange that Lucius should be expressly mentioned as a Cyrenaeen and not Simeon. Lucius is a Latin name, but since he came from Cyrene,<sup>19</sup> on the north coast of Africa, where there were many Jews, he probably was a Jew also, a Hellenistic Jew.<sup>20</sup> Some feel that Lucius may refer to Luke the Evangelist, but this is very doubtful, as Lucius was a very common name. It is possible, however, that he may have been one of the men of Cyrene referred to in Acts 13:1, who first preached the Gospel at Antioch. Others have proposed to identify him with the Lucius of Romans 16:21.<sup>21</sup> Manaen, the fifth of the prophets, is called a *βύρραρος* of Herod the tetrarch. This is a title given to boys of the same age as princes, who were brought up with the princes at court.<sup>22</sup> From this we surmise that Manaen had been brought up at the court of Herod the Great and was a close boyhood associate of Herod Antipas.

After the conference at Jerusalem (A.D. 49), we read of two pro-

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<sup>17</sup>Acts 13:1.

<sup>18</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), p. 260.

<sup>19</sup>Acts 13:1.

<sup>20</sup>Miles W. Smith, On Whom The Spirit Came (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1948), p. 98.

<sup>21</sup>R. J. Knowling, The Acts of the Apostles, in The Expositor's Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), II, 282.

<sup>22</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles (London: The Tyndale Press, 1951) p. 253.

phets accompanying Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch from Jerusalem, in order that they might substantiate by word of mouth the letter which the Christians at Jerusalem had written to them concerning Gentile converts.<sup>23</sup> Their names were Judas, surnamed Barsabas, and Silas. Judas, surnamed Barsabas, is regarded by some as a brother of Joseph Barsabbas mentioned in Acts 1:23.<sup>24</sup> If this is true, he too may have been among the personal followers of the Lord. Of Silas (Silvanus) there are many other references in Scripture. He accompanied the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey.<sup>25</sup> The Apostle Peter also makes mention of him in his first epistle.<sup>26</sup> He seems to have been a faithful companion of both.

Seven years later, possibly in 56 A.D.,<sup>27</sup> Agabus appears on the scene again, this time at Caesarea, where, like another Jeremiah, he bound Paul's hands and feet and said, "Thus said the Holy Ghost, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"<sup>28</sup> So much respect was accorded to the words of this prophet that those who heard him began to exhort Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Nor did Paul deny that what the prophet said might take place. In fact, the prophecy of Agabus came as no surprise at all to the Apostle Paul, for he had received

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<sup>23</sup>Acts 15:22,32.

<sup>24</sup>Knowling, op. cit., p. 326.

<sup>25</sup>Acts 15:40; 16:19,25,29; 17:4,10,14; 18:5.

<sup>26</sup>1 Peter 5:12.

<sup>27</sup>Hastings, op. cit., pp. 435ff.

<sup>28</sup>Acts 21:10.

similar warnings from Christian prophets in the cities through which he had passed on his way to Palestine.<sup>29</sup>

Evidently prophets were very common in the churches planted and founded by the Apostle Paul. The epistles of Paul bear record to this fact. To the Christians at Thessalonica, for example, Paul wrote, 1 Thessalonians 5:19,20, "Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings." Evidently the believers at Thessalonica likewise received extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, the "charismata." To repress the person who had such a gift may have resulted in repressing the Spirit, and so the Apostle Paul told them not to repress such a person. In verse twenty he particularly mentions the gift of prophecy in this connection, thereby showing that these people too had the gift of prophecy among them. 2. Second Thess. 2:2 indicates there may have been some local abuses of ecstatic prophecy, either in prediction or in some exaggerated counsels of perfection. The result was that some of the believers questioned the value of the prophetic gift.<sup>30</sup> The passage does show, however, that the prophetic gift was practised among them.

We also ascertain from Paul's writings that there were prophets in the church at Corinth. The charismatic gifts of the Spirit evidently presented somewhat of a problem in the congregation at Corinth, for one surmises from Paul's letter that the services were carried on in a rather disorderly manner. First this one would speak in tongues and then another, even though there was no one around to interpret what they

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<sup>29</sup>Acts 20:23; 21:4.

<sup>30</sup>James Moffatt, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, in The Expositors Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), IV, 42.

were saying. Those who had the gift of prophecy were disorderly, too, and sometimes there would be several of them standing up and speaking at the same time. The Apostle Paul, therefore, wrote a whole chapter on this problem in his first epistle to them,<sup>31</sup> which he closed by saying, "Let all things be done decently and in order." This long chapter by Paul on the subject of prophecy and speaking in tongues leaves no doubt in one's mind that Christian prophets also could be found in the church at Corinth. Still other references to prophets or the gift of prophecy in Corinth can be found in I Corinthians 11:4,5; 12:10,28, 29; 13:2,8.

Some scholars believe that certain passages in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians have direct reference to Christian prophets. Others disagree with them. The passages in question are the following:

Ephesians 2:20: "And are built upon the foundation of the apostle and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone."

Ephesians 3:5: "Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit."

Ephesians 4:11: "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." Particularly is there a difference of opinion concerning the  $\pi\rho\phi\eta\tau\alpha\iota$  mentioned in Ephesians 2:20. Among those who hold to the view that this passage speaks of Old Testament prophets are such Church fathers as Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Jerome,<sup>32</sup> such theologians from the Reforma-

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<sup>31</sup>1 Cor. 14.

<sup>32</sup>S. D. F. Salmond, The Epistle to the Ephesians, in The Expositors Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), III, 299.

tion Period as Erasmus, Calvin, Deza, and Barnes,<sup>33</sup> and even such more recent exegetes as Stoeckhardt.<sup>34</sup>

In support of this view Stoeckhardt lists the following points:

(1) New Testament prophets were not of equal rank with the apostles; (2) New Testament prophets were not of equal importance for the New Testament Church of the future; (3) Old Testament prophets and writings were and are essential for the church through the ages; (4) The fact that prophets are mentioned last is but natural, as this was written to Gentiles who would have heard of the apostles first and then of the prophets of old.<sup>35</sup> Other exegetes point out that this view is favoured also by the frequent use the New Testament makes of the writings of these prophets,<sup>36</sup> and by the view given of them as "evangelists before the time."<sup>37</sup>

Alford, however, has shown that a more probable reference is to Christian prophets,<sup>38</sup> and most interpreters today agree with him.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>John Eadie, A Commentary of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861), p. 198.

<sup>34</sup>George Stoeckhardt, Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, translated from the German by Martin S. Sommer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 153.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Salmond, op. cit., p. 299.

<sup>37</sup>Luke 24:25; Acts 3:18; Romans 16:26.

<sup>38</sup>Edward G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter (London: Macmillan and Sons, 1946), p. 262.

<sup>39</sup>Knowling, op. cit., pp. 299, 300; J. Armitage Robinson, St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909), pp. 97, 98.  
Charles Hodge, Ephesians (New York: Carter & Bros., 1857), p. 149.  
Handley C. G. Moule, Ephesian Studies (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), pp. 91, 92.  
B. F. Westcott, Epistle to the Ephesians (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), p. 40.  
Eadie, op. cit., p. 198.

The reasons given to support this view may be summarized as follows:

(1) The previous statements clearly refer to Christian times—to the preaching after Christ's death. There is no reason why this passage cannot refer to the time after Christ's death also. (2) It would more naturally mention prophets first and apostles second if the Old Testament prophets had been intended (cf. I Cor. 12:28). (3) The statement here made that the apostles and prophets are, or have laid, the foundation of that house of which the Gentiles are a part, is more obviously true of the New Testament than of the Old Testament prophets. (4) The prophets of the New Testament were a class of sufficient importance and rank to be designated along with the apostles. This is proven by the frequency with which they are referred to, the place assigned to them next to the apostles (I Cor. 12:28; Ephesians 4:11), and the fact that since they spoke from immediate revelation, they stood in such a relation to those early churches as the written oracles stand to us. One also notes the high value which Paul attaches to prophecy in I Cor. 14:1-5, 39, where he regards the gift of prophecy as a much greater gift than the gift of tongues. (5) Ephesians 3:5 reads, "The mystery of Christ is now ( $\nu\tilde{\nu}$ ) revealed to holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." This certainly speaks of prophets existing at that very time and not of some previous day and age. The evidence seems to show rather convincingly that there were Christian prophets in the circle of churches Paul is addressing in the Epistle to the Ephesians also.<sup>40</sup>

Even Rome had its Christian prophets, or at least those blessed with the gift of prophecy. In Romans 12:6 prophecy is mentioned as a

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<sup>40</sup> Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians probably is an encyclical addressed to all the Asian churches. Cf. Swete, op. cit., p. xix; J. A. Robinson, op. cit., p. 11.

recognized gift with recognized limitations, for it was to be exercised "according to the proportion of faith."

These many references to prophets certainly seem to show that the gift of prophecy was rather common in New Testament times, and that prophets were found in practically all the Christian congregations of the first century. Other passages not cited previously which refer to prophets and prophecy in general during New Testament times are the following:

Acts 19:6: "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied."

I Timothy 1:18: "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare." (Here we see that utterances by Christian prophets had pointed out that Timothy would be a useful worker. The plural points to more than one such occasion. Such prophecies may have come from Silas, who, as we have seen, was himself a prophet.)<sup>41</sup>

I Timothy 4:14: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy."

According to Selwyn, I Peter 1:10 also refers to Christian prophets. It reads as follows: "Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you." Selwyn's main reasons for believing this passage is a reference to New Testament prophets are: (1) the "seeking and searching" in verse ten are not easily identifiable with what we know of the activities of the Old Testament prophets. The "searching" in particular sug-

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<sup>41</sup>Walter Lock, The Pastoral Epistles, in the International Critical Commentary, translated from the German by Christian Friedrich Kling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 18.

gests work on written materials. (2) The phrase "the spirit of Christ" is without parallel if applied to the Old Testament prophets. (3) In verse eleven the prophetic activity alluded to is one of research into the fulfillment of prophecy.<sup>42</sup> Most scholars disagree with Selwyn, however, and claim this passage refers to Old Testament prophets<sup>43</sup> (cf. Matt. 13:17 and Luke 10:24). Since the suffering of Christ and the glory that should follow seem to refer to happenings in the future, the present writer is inclined to agree with the latter, who claim this passage is only a reference to Old Testament prophets.

It is also very important that we do not overlook the references to prophets and prophecy which are found in the one canonical book directly attributed to a prophet, the prophet and apostle John.<sup>44</sup> Both in the prologue and in the epilogue, the work of John lays claim to a prophetic character,<sup>45</sup> and the writer represents himself as hearing a voice which warns him, "Thou must prophesy again."<sup>46</sup> The writer also speaks of "brother-prophets,"<sup>47</sup> who apparently are very influential in the local churches. The writer also speaks of God's "servants the prophets,"

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<sup>42</sup>E. G. Selwyn, op. cit., pp. 262-68.

<sup>43</sup>J. W. C. Wand, The General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude, in the Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen & Co., 1934), p. 49; Francis W. Beare, First Epistle of Peter (Oxford, Clarendon Pr., 1930), p. 65.

<sup>44</sup>Some scholars believe that the author of Revelation is not John, the son of Zebedee, but rather John the Elder. For further information on this see Swete, op. cit., Introd. chap. XV.

<sup>45</sup>Rev. 1:3; 22:10,18.

<sup>46</sup>Rev. 10:11.

<sup>47</sup>Rev. 22:9.



of "prophets and saints," and of "saints, apostles, and prophets."<sup>48</sup>  
 These passages may refer to Old Testament prophets too, but there is no reason to suppose that they do not refer to New Testament prophets.

Since there are so many references to Christian prophets in Scripture, one would expect to find references to them in other contemporary literature also, and such indeed is the case. Apart from Scripture, perhaps the most famous and well-known of all Christian writings in the first century and early part of the second century was the Didache, "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." We find numerous references to Christian prophets in this work, and various portions of it will be quoted later in this study. "The Shepherd of Hermas," another early second century document, likewise refers to the Christian prophets.<sup>49</sup>

Another look at Acts 2:16-18 will show us that there is a reference to "daughters" prophesying also, and the logical question which comes to mind is whether women received the gift of prophecy and belonged to the Christian prophets as well as men. We must go to Scripture to receive further information on this point. In Acts 21:8,9, we read of Philip the Evangelist who had "four daughters, virgins, who did prophesy." Evidently there were women who possessed the gift of prophecy, but this need not surprise us. The Old Testament speaks of prophetesses too. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is called a prophetess.<sup>50</sup> Deborah, one of the judges of Israel, is called a prophetess.<sup>51</sup> A prophetess

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<sup>48</sup>Rev. 10:7; 16:6; 18:20,28.

<sup>49</sup>Clarence Tucker Craig, The Beginning of Christianity (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), p. 275.

<sup>50</sup>Exodus 15:20.

<sup>51</sup>Judges 4:4.

by the name of Noadiah is referred to during the days of Nehemiah.<sup>53</sup> Just how extensive the gift of prophecy was among Christian women we do not know. It is referred to only three times in the New Testament, once in Luke where Anna is called a prophetess, once in Acts, as cited, and once in Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. One would expect prophetesses at Corinth if anywhere, where spiritual gifts were so plentiful. In I Corinthians 11:4,5, we read, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven." As Hodge says, praying and prophesying were the two principal exercises in the public worship of the early Christians.<sup>54</sup> Evidently the women were prophesying in church then too. We know, however, that Paul did not want women to speak in church and flatly told them so in two of his epistles.<sup>55</sup> Was Paul being inconsistent by allowing them to prophesy, as I Corinthians 11:4,5, seems to indicate? In answer to this Alfred Plummer reasons this way: The women probably had stated that if the Spirit moved them to speak, they had to speak, and how could they speak if their faces were veiled? The Apostle Paul tells them that if such should be the case, although he doubts it, the women must speak veiled. They were not to go against what was proper merely because of the remote possibility that the Spirit may compel them to speak.<sup>56</sup> Neander adds,

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<sup>52</sup> 2 Kings 22:14.

<sup>53</sup> Nehemiah 6:14.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1891), p. 208.

<sup>55</sup> I Cor. 14:34 and I Tim. 2:12.

<sup>56</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, in The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), p. 230.

on the basis of 1 Timothy 2, that one reason why Paul was against the public speaking of females was the greater danger of self-deception in the weaker sex and the spread of errors arising from it. Women lacked sober reflectiveness.<sup>57</sup> On the basis of the passage cited, however, one must conclude that women also possessed the gift of prophecy, and even as late as the second century Tertullian writes in his De Anima, "We have with us today a sister whose lot it is to possess the gifts of revelations, which she suffers during Lord's day services in church in a state of spiritual ecstasy."<sup>58</sup>

Not all who claimed to be prophets or prophetesses of the Lord were such, however, and soon impostors and pretenders appeared here and there as in Old Testament times. Jesus already had warned against false prophets, saying, "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."<sup>59</sup> On another occasion, when He had talked to His disciples about the future, Jesus had said, "For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect."<sup>60</sup> These false prophets of whom Jesus had warned soon appeared upon the scene. Paul and Barnabas came upon such a Jewish false prophet at Paphos in Cyprus on their first missionary journey. He is called Elyman the

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<sup>57</sup> Augustus Neander, History of the Planting and Training of the Christian Church, translated from the third edition of the original German by J. E. Ryland (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), pp. 147-48.

<sup>58</sup> Tertullian's De Anima 9.

<sup>59</sup> Matt. 7:15.

<sup>60</sup> Matt. 24:24.

sorcerer.<sup>61</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the writings of the apostles also warn against false prophets. In Paul's parting words to the Ephesian elders he told them, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."<sup>62</sup> Peter warns against false prophets and teachers too, for in 2 Peter 2:1 we read, "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you." The Apostle John speaks of false prophets having gone out into the world and asks the people to try the spirits whether they are of God.<sup>63</sup> In the book of Revelation he warns the people against a woman named Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and seduces Christians to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols.<sup>64</sup>

There were all manner of false prophets and prophetesses, and, as in Old Testament times, the chief way of finding them out was by determining whether or not the message they spoke came from God. One infers from Paul's writings that at Corinth the church was given the task and ability to test all who came and to determine whether their messages were of God or only of human origin. The Didache has a very informative section on this point too. It states as follows:

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<sup>61</sup>Acts 13:6-8.

<sup>62</sup>Acts 20:29,30.

<sup>63</sup>I John 4:1f.

<sup>64</sup>Rev. 2:20.

About apostles and prophets, follow the rule of the Gospel, which is this: Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he shall not stay more than one day, and if it is necessary, the next day also. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when an apostle leaves, let him take nothing except bread to last until he finds his next lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.

You shall not test or examine any prophet who speaks in the spirit. For every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven. But not everyone who speaks in the spirit is a prophet, but only if he has the ways of the Lord. So the false prophet and the prophet will be known by their ways. No prophet who orders a meal under the spirit's influence shall eat of it; if he does, he is a false prophet. Every prophet who teaches the truth, if he does not do what he teaches, is a false prophet. No prophet, tried and true, who does anything as an earthly symbol of the church, but does not teach others to do what he does, shall be judged among you, for he has his judgment with God, for the ancient prophets also did this. But whoever says in the spirit, "Give me money," or something else, you shall not listen to him, but if he tells you to give for others who are in want, let no one judge him.

Let everyone who comes in the name of the Lord be welcomed, and afterward when you have tested him you will know him, for you will have understanding of true and false. If the one who comes is a traveler, help him all you can. But he must not stay with you more than two or if necessary three days. If he wants to settle among you and has a trade, let him work for his living. But if he has no trade, see to it in your understanding that no one lives among you in idleness because he is a Christian. If he will not do this, he is trading on Christ. Beware of such men. <sup>65</sup>

We see from this that not only the teaching and message of the prophet was regarded as a means by which he could be tested, but also his conduct could reveal to the Christians whether he was a true man of God. The fact that the Didache goes into such detail concerning methods of distinguishing between the false and the true prophets shows how common it was to have false prophets come among them.

In concluding this chapter, we may summarize its contents by saying

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<sup>65</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Apostolic Fathers: An American Translation (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), pp. 16, 17.

that there is abundant evidence, both in Scripture and outside Scripture, that Jesus Christ gave to His church Christian prophets to work with and alongside His holy Apostles. Few are mentioned by name, and little is known about those who are mentioned, but the general references to them are too numerous to brush them aside as only a small and insignificant group in the early Christian Church. Besides the prophets there were also prophetesses, although little mention is made of them. False prophets too entered into the church, as Jesus had forewarned, and how serious a problem there actually was with false prophets is especially pointed out in I John and in the Didache. Christ's church is never without its wolves in sheep's clothing.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PROPHETS

To gain some insight as to the nature and function of these Christian prophets it may be helpful to begin this chapter by making a brief study into the etymology of the word *προφῆτης*, the word by which they as well as the Old Testament prophets are always designated in the New Testament. *Προφῆτης* is derived from two common Greek words, the pronoun *πρό*, and the verb *φημί*. *φημί* means "to say, speak, or tell," and the pronoun *πρό* means "before." The pronoun, however, can mean "before" in reference to place, as well as "before" in reference to time. Thus according to its etymology there are two very possible meanings of *προφῆτης*. The first is that he is one who speaks forth, that is, one who stands before a group of people and tells them something; the other is that he is one who tells beforehand, that is, one who fore-tells. A third idea contained in the word *προφῆτης* is demonstrated by its usage in classical Greek. According to Fairbairn *προφῆτης* is often used to denote one who discloses the mind of another, or one who speaks for a divine person. Thus poets were called "the prophets of the Muses," and Apollo "the prophet of Jupiter," and the Pythoness was "the prophetess of Apollo," each being viewed as the oracle of the parties they represented.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Fairbairn, Prophecy (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), pp. 482ff.

In general, then, we can say that a *προβήτης* is one who "foretells," that is, one who can utter predictions, or foretell the future; he is also one who "forth-tells," that is, one who stands before people and addresses them; and finally, we can speak of him as one who "for-tells," that is, he is one who speaks for God, serving as no less than God's spokesman.<sup>2</sup> These three definitions of *προβήτης*, based on its etymology and classical usage, very aptly define the main function of the New Testament prophet too. Therefore, these definitions shall be used as the basic outline for this chapter.

First we shall speak of the Christian prophet as one who "forth-tells," that is, as one who most likely stood before people and addressed them as a public speaker or preacher would today. That this is true of the New Testament prophet is pointed out by a number of passages. Acts 11:28, for instance, says, "And there stood up (*ἀναστῆς*) one of them named Agabus, and signified (*ἐσήμακεν*) by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world." In Acts 15:32 we read, "And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren (*παρεκάλειεν τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς*)." I Corinthians 14:3 reads, "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men (*ἑνθρόνους λαλεῖ*), to edification, and exhortation, and comfort." One of the problems in the Corinthian congregation was that a number of prophets were getting up and addressing the people at the same time (I Cor. 14:29-33). Paul therefore told them to prophesy one at a time, still implying, however,

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<sup>2</sup>In Lindell and Scott's Dictionary of Classical Greek *πρός* used in the sense of "for, in lieu of, instead of" is listed as one of the possible usages. The very etymology of *πρός* therefore, likewise favors this third definition.



that the prophets who spoke were to get up and address the entire assembly.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, we note that the prophets are mentioned as a part of the preaching ministry of the church in a number of instances, which certainly would indicate that the prophet was one who took the forefront in the congregational assembly and quite frequently stood before the assembly and addressed the people. Thus in 1 Corinthians 12:28 we read, "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, . . . ." We notice that in this enumeration of the various gifts which Christ has given to His church the prophets are placed between two groups which definitely belong to the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. From this it is natural to assume that the prophets likewise were a group who served as spokesmen in the church. Also in Ephesians 4:11 the prophets are listed together with apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers, as those whom Christ has chosen "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." It seems safe to conclude then that the prophet very often did address the Christian congregation just as the preacher or minister of today does.

To speak of the prophet only as a preacher, however, does less than justice to him. He was more than that. E. C. Selwyn, whose book on the Christian prophets is often cited as the best English work on the subject, states, "To treat the prophets in the New Testament as mere preachers would be as unjust on the one hand as to label them

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<sup>3</sup>G. G. Findlay, "St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians," The Expositor's Greek Testament, II, edited by W. Robertson Nicholl (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 913.

chiliasts or believers in the millenium would be unfair on the other."<sup>4</sup> Goudge, the author of an exegetical study on Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, would rather speak of the prophets as "inspired" preachers.<sup>5</sup> This, perhaps, comes closer to a good definition of the Christian prophet, for not only was the prophet a "forth-teller," but, as stated previously, he was also a "fore-teller," that is, one who spoke for God as God's spokesman. That is the next point we wish to consider in this chapter.

As "for-teller" we think of the prophet as one who talked for God; but if this is true, he must first of all be sent by God. To show that the prophets were truly sent by God to His church to serve in this peculiar relationship to God as His spokesman, we cite Jesus' own words in Luke 11:49, "Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, . . .".<sup>6</sup> In Ephesians 3:5 the word "prophets" is modified by "His," the antecedent of which is Christ, thus also showing that the prophets were Christ's and therefore also sent by Him. The prophets are mentioned as God's prophets also in Revelation 10:7; 11:18; 22:6. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 they are mentioned as those whom God hath set (ἐπέστειλε) in the church, and in Ephesians 4:11 they are mentioned as those whom Christ gave (ἐδώκεν) to His church. We conclude, therefore, that these prophets were not just any prophets, but they were God's prophets whom God set in His

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<sup>4</sup>Edward Garus Selwyn, The Christian Prophets (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1900), pp. vii, viii.

<sup>5</sup>H. L. Goudge, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, in Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen and Co., 1903), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Matt. 23:34.

church, evidently for a specific purpose.

That specific purpose for which God gave prophets to the church was, as Plummer says, that they might deliver God's message to the various congregations of believers.<sup>7</sup> Just as the prophets of Israel, therefore, the Christian prophets were to speak not their own words, but whatever words God gave them to utter. This gift of theirs to speak God's words and not just their own is the real essence of prophecy. It is that which the New Testament calls the gift of prophecy (*χάρισμα προφητείας*).<sup>8</sup> The Christian prophets too, as the prophets of Israel, spoke as they were divinely inspired by the Holy Ghost. Quite a number of passages can be cited to substantiate this statement. Agabus is said to have "signified by the Spirit (*διὰ τοῦ Πνεύματος*)" that there should be great dearth throughout all the world (Acts 11:26). Again in Acts 21:11 where Agabus' prediction of Paul's imprisonment is recorded, the prophet begins his utterance by saying "Thus said the Holy Ghost." In Acts 13:2, where the prophets are mentioned as ministering to the Lord, Luke reports that, as they were doing this, "the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Paul and Barnabas." In Acts 2:16-18 the prophesying of sons and daughters is spoken of as the result of God's pouring out His Spirit upon all flesh. In Acts 19:6 we notice that certain people upon whom Paul had laid his hands spoke with tongues and prophesied after the Holy Ghost came upon them. In warning the believers at Thessalonica not to

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<sup>7</sup>Alfred Plummer and Archibald Robertson, First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, in The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911), p. 230.

<sup>8</sup>1 Cor. 13:2; Rom. 12:6.

despise prophesyings, Paul says, "Quench not the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19). Ephesians 3:5 speaks of the mysteries of Christ being revealed unto Christ's holy apostles and prophets "by the Spirit" (ἐν Πνεύματι). The Apostle John says of himself that he was "in the spirit" (ἐν Πνεύματι)<sup>9</sup> when he heard a great voice speaking to him the utterances which he records in the book of Revelation. 1 Corinthians 12:11 explains that all the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of prophecy, were the result of the working of the Holy Spirit.

These passages prove then that the prophet spoke in the Spirit (ἐν Πνεύματι) and by the Spirit (ἐκ τοῦ Πνεύματος). The Holy Spirit, worked in him, and whatever the prophet uttered he uttered by divine inspiration. Before we draw any final conclusions, however, we must also take into consideration what the Apostle Paul says on this subject in 1 Corinthians 14:29-32. These verses read as follows:

(29) Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. (30) If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. (31) For ye may all prophecy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. (32) And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

On the basis of these verses Neander remarks that Paul did not recognize the prophets of the church as pure organs of the Divine Spirit. The divine and human element in prophecy was easily confounded, he says, and the prophets sometimes confounded the two.<sup>10</sup> Goudge comes to the conclusion that the utterances of the prophet could be supernatural

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<sup>9</sup>Rev. 1:10.

<sup>10</sup>Augustus Neander, History of the Planting and Training of the Christian Church, translated from the third edition of the original German by J. E. Ryland (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), p. 138.

without being Divine, or Divine in part, without being so wholly.<sup>11</sup> What about these statements? One can hardly deny that with every divine prophecy by a prophet the human element likewise entered in, for in the prophet God was using a human instrument to deliver His message. Whether the divine and human elements in prophecy, however, were distinguished by the prophet only with difficulty, as Neander thinks, or whether they were purposely confounded at times because of man's own carnal nature, that is not clearly stated by Paul. Plummer favors the latter view, for, as he says, there was the possibility that some of the prophets took the honor upon themselves of prophesying without being called upon by God to do so.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the reason for confounding the divine and human element may have been, we do note, verse 29, that Paul desires the listening prophets to judge what in another prophets' discourse proceeds from the Spirit of God and what proceeds from a foreign spirit.<sup>13</sup> The church had to guard against human impurities being looked upon as a suggestion of the Divine Spirit or at least being delivered as such. These verses of Paul to the Corinthians imply that the Apostle Paul did not regard the Christian prophets as being infallible, for he had them submit to the judgment of their fellow prophets and whoever else may have possessed the gift of discernment.<sup>14</sup>

A very pertinent passage to consider at this point is Romans 12:6, where, speaking about various spiritual gifts, Paul says, "Having then

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<sup>11</sup>Goudge, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>12</sup>Plummer and Robertson, op. cit., p. 322.

<sup>13</sup>John Peter Lange, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, I Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 295.

<sup>14</sup>1 Cor. 12:10.

gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith (κατὰ τῆν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως).<sup>15</sup> Here we see that the measure in which the prophets possessed the prophetic gift varied in accordance with the faith which God had given them.<sup>15</sup> It was necessary, then, for the prophet to restrain himself and not to go over and beyond the bounds of his own faith. The prophets at Corinth evidently did not practise this self-restraint at all times, and therefore Paul has to speak to them as he does.

It has been mentioned that Paul insists there be critics of the prophets in the congregation at Corinth. In the Didache a contrary instruction is given. Didache 11:7 reads, "You shall not test or examine any prophet who speaks in the spirit. For every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven." This regulation of the Didache, however, according to Findlay, only implies pre-arrangement among the speakers.<sup>16</sup>

To continue our discussion on the verses cited from 1 Corinthians 14, we notice that verses 30 and 31 imply that even among the prophets who were truly speaking by divine inspiration, those who addressed the congregation might be tempted to continue speaking even after their message was delivered, and they would then need the exhortations and warnings of other inspired prophets. Paul therefore urges the prophet speaking to show consideration for his fellow-prophets,

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<sup>15</sup>James Denney, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," The Expositor's Greek Testament, II, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 690.

<sup>16</sup>Findlay, *op. cit.*, p. 913.

realizing that others possessed the prophetic gift too. In connection with this Lange quotes Burger as saying, "The fact that the Spirit impelled another to speak was a hint to the first speaker that it was time for him to be done."<sup>17</sup>

In regard to verse 32, which reads in the original, "καὶ πνεύματα προφητῶν προβήτας ὑποτάσσεται," Swete states in his reference to this passage that πνεύματα προφητῶν here mentioned are to be regarded as the natural faculties of the prophets, raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit, but still under human control, and standing in a creaturely relation to God.<sup>18</sup> The writer is in favor of this interpretation, as are most exegetes,<sup>19</sup> although others hold that πνεύματα προφητῶν refers to the inspiring Spirit in the variety of its manifestations.<sup>20</sup> The next question which arises is, Who are the prophets to whom the spirits are subject? One possible interpretation is that the subjection is to be to the other prophets; but, as Plummer states, the juxtaposition of προφητῶν and προβήτας is against this.<sup>21</sup> Most scholars<sup>22</sup> will agree with Lange's interpretation, who says that the prophets have control over their own spirit of prophecy, no matter how powerfully excited they may be, for they

<sup>17</sup>Lange, op. cit., p. 295.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (London: Macmillan and Co., Lt'd., 1907), p. 303.

<sup>19</sup>Meyer, Alford, Stanley, Lange, and others. Cf. Lange, op. cit., p. 295.

<sup>20</sup>Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1891), p. 302f; Goudge, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>21</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 323.

<sup>22</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 913; Plummer, op. cit., p. 323.

are voluntary agents.<sup>23</sup> This passage, incidentally, shows the difference between the spirits of Christian prophets, and the spirits of sibyls and pythonesses. The spirits of the latter were not under the control of the one speaking, rather, their utterance continued until the impulse ceased.<sup>24</sup> The Christian prophet without self-control, on the other hand, was no true prophet, and his uncontrolled religious feeling was sure to lead to trouble.

What conclusion then can be drawn concerning the inspiration of the message of the Christian prophet? It is obvious that there is room for some difference of opinion here, but on the basis of what has been mentioned, it is the writer's opinion that the prophet as a "for-teller" was a spokesman for God blessed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of prophecy, a gift which meant that his own spirit was raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit, was still under human control however, and stood in a creaturely relation to God. The measure in which a prophet possessed the prophetic gift varied in proportion to the amount of faith given by God. Thus we see that although the prophet's utterances were not to be regarded as infallible because of the human element involved, yet the inspired messages he spoke placed him above the common teacher in the church, as is indicated in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11, but still below the apostles whose word held absolute authority in the church and whose writings are still recognized as being completely inspired by God. Perhaps a few words should be added to further explain the difference between the prophet and those designated as teachers (διδάσκαλοι). As has been indicated, the

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<sup>23</sup>Lange, op. cit., p. 296.

<sup>24</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 323.



chief difference lay in the fact that the prophet spoke by immediate revelation, whereas the teacher, though certainly possessing the gift of teaching given by the Spirit, nevertheless did not speak under the immediate divine impulse of the Spirit. The result was that the *διδάσκαλος* spoke in a calm, connected, didactic discourse.<sup>25</sup>

The prophet, however, spoke more from the impulse of immediate revelation at the moment. As Neander states, the prophet's address proceeded more from an instantaneous, immediate, inward awakening by the power of the Holy Spirit, in which a divine afflatus was felt both by the speaker and by the hearers.<sup>26</sup>

Having thus established the Christian prophet both as a "forth-teller" and as a "for-teller," it is important to know what his message as prophet contained. The answer given in Revelation 19:10 is this: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." In expounding this passage Swete says that in the prophets of the Old Testament the Spirit of Christ bore witness of the coming passion and glory.<sup>27</sup> Similarly it is the office of New Testament prophecy to bear witness to the Christ as already come and glorified, and to point men to the future *παρουσία*.<sup>28</sup>

Another indication of what the prophet's message contained is given in 1 Corinthians 14:3,4: "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the

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<sup>25</sup>Edward Robinson, A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament (Revised edition; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), p. 638.

<sup>26</sup>Neander, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>27</sup>1 Peter 1:11.

<sup>28</sup>Swete, op. cit., p. 249.

church. He who has the *χάρισμα γλώσσης λαλῆν* cannot edify the church. His utterance is delivered in a rapture and must have been very vague and unintelligible to the listener. Its only value lies in the fact that it powerfully confirmed the faith of the one possessing the gift, giving him an abiding sense of possession by the Spirit of God.<sup>29</sup> Far more to be desired was the gift of prophecy, whereby a person could edify, not only himself, but the whole church. So much does Paul stress the relatively greater importance of the gift of prophecy as compared with that of tongues that he only speaks of the latter gift as being permissible, whereas he urges the Corinthian believers to desire earnestly the gift of prophecy.

The one who prophesies does so for a three-fold purpose, says Paul—that of edification, exhortation, and comfort. First he speaks unto men to edification (*οἰκοδομή*). This Greek word meaning edification is a compound formed by combining *οἶκος*, meaning "House" and *δέμω*, meaning "build." Literally then, *οἰκοδομή* means to build a house. To better understand its spiritual meaning we must remember that in the New Testament both the Christian Church and individual Christians are spoken of as a building or temple of God.<sup>30</sup> It is also urged that they be built up progressively and unceasingly more and more upon Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone of the building. Those who by action, instruction, exhortation, or comfort, promote the Christian knowledge of others and help them to live a life according to the Christian truths which they have learned, those individuals are regarded as taking part in the erection of that building,

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<sup>29</sup>Findlay, *op. cit.*, p. 902.

<sup>30</sup>1 Cor. 3:9,16f; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:2.

and therefore are said to edify.<sup>31</sup> To edify, then, covers the whole sphere of the Christian's activity in which he endeavors to build up the spiritual life of his brother. To edify includes every activity in which the end goal is always to make the individual Christian or the church more Christlike in character. This was one of the chief functions of the prophet—to edify the church.

One method of edification, though not the only method, is recorded in Acts 13:2, where the prophets are ministering when they receive the command to separate Barnabas and Saul. This seems to imply some such position as we find in the Didache, where the prophet is spoken of as the proper person to conduct the public worship and the only person free to give thanks in what words he thinks fit.<sup>32</sup> 1 Timothy 1:18 also indicates that the prophet was rather prominent in such things as ordination, for in this passage reference is made to prophecy being uttered at the ordination of Timothy, together with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.

Secondly according to 1 Corinthians 14:3, the prophet as God's spokesman was to speak unto men to exhort them. The Greek word used is *παράκλησις*. As for its etymology, the word is derived from *παρά* and *καλέω*, *παρά* being a preposition indicating close proximity and *καλέω* a verb meaning "to call." As used in the New Testament *παράκλησις* can mean: (1) entreaty or persuasion, as in 2 Cor. 8:4; (2) consolation, comfort, solace, as in Romans 15:4; 2 Corinthians 1:4,5,6,7; (3) imploration, supplication,

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<sup>31</sup>A Greek—English Lexicon of the New Testament, translated, revised, and enlarged by Joseph Henry Thayer (Corrected edition; New York: American Book Company, 1886), p. 440.

<sup>32</sup>Didache 10.

entreaty, as in 2 Corinthians 8:4; (4) exhortation, admonition, encouragement, as in Acts 15:31; 2 Corinthians 8:17; Philipians 2:1.<sup>33</sup> Thayer and Robinson both classify *παράκλησις* as meaning exhortation, admonition, and encouragement in the passage under discussion. Lange speaks of it as that by which the will is aroused to greater earnestness in self-culture and to greater Christian activity and to more zealous endeavors.<sup>34</sup> Let us look at another passage in Scripture which speaks of prophets exhorting. Judas and Silas, two prophets chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with the findings of the Council at Jerusalem "exhorted the brethren with many words and confirmed them" (Acts 15:32). In this instance E. G. Selwyn interprets *παράκλησις* as signifying the moral strengthening which comes from the presence and guidance of those who are strong in the faith.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly according to 1 Corinthians 14:3, the prophets were to speak unto men to comfort (*παράμυθια*). As for its general meaning, Thayer defines *παράμυθια* as any address, whether made for the purpose of persuading, or of arousing and stimulating, or of calming and consoling.<sup>34</sup> As for its meaning in this passage, Lange speaks of it as that by which the spirit is quieted and cheered. It is an address which is consoling, being tender and soothing.<sup>36</sup> Findlay calls it that which strengthens the Christian spirit.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 483.

<sup>34</sup>Lange, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>35</sup>Edward G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter (London: Macmillan & Sons, 1946), p. 262.

<sup>36</sup>Lange, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>37</sup>Findlay, *op. cit.*, p. 902.

What then can we conclude concerning the message of the prophet? It seems quite obvious that the Christian prophet not only received inspiration from the Holy Spirit, but he likewise was given the power so to impart his Christ-centered message that it might be of value for the building up of men's characters, for quickening their wills, and for encouraging their spirits. In all that he did, the prophet's chief goal was to edify the church. Although prophecy incidentally served to convert unbelievers too (1 Cor. 14:22), it was, strictly speaking, the sign for believers.

Having now spoken of the prophet both as a "forth-teller" and as a "for-teller" and having more fully defined the essence of his message, we proceed to the final point in this chapter, in which we shall speak of the prophet as one who "fore-tells." The ability to foretell was quite common among the Old Testament prophets, although we pointed out too in our study of them that they predicted the future only if that was a part of the message which God gave them to proclaim. They did not foretell the future merely for the sake of foretelling. Certainly the same applies to the prophets of the New Testament church. Foretelling the future seems to have been a relatively insignificant part of their ministry. One prophet in particular is mentioned, however, as being able to foretell future events. His name is Agabus. In Acts 11:28, we read, "And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar." Claudius was the Roman emperor from 41-54 A.D.<sup>38</sup> The Roman historian Suetonius

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<sup>38</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), p. 243.

writes that his reign was marked by a succession of bad harvests and serious famines in various parts of the empire.<sup>39</sup> Josephus also reports a famine in Palestine about 46 A.D.<sup>40</sup> Thus we see that in the person of Agabus we have a prophet who foretold a future event that definitely came to pass. Acts 21:11 also speaks of Agabus as a fore-teller:

And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

Thus like another Jeremiah, Agabus here conveyed his message both by deed and word, and what he said came to pass, as is recorded in Acts 22.

We must remember, though, that Agabus was not an exception among the prophets. Others were able to foretell, too, for Acts 21:4 indicates that other Christian prophets likewise had warned Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then, too, in 1 Timothy 1:18 we read, "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare." Here too we evidently have an example of prophets foretelling, for they pointed out Timothy's promise of useful work before his ordination. Some scholars believe that these prophecies referred to in this verse may have come from Silas, who himself was a prophet.<sup>41</sup> The whole book of Revelation, of course, likewise is an unfolding of the mysteries of

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<sup>39</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Spreading Flame (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), p. 103.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Walter Lock, The Pastoral Epistles in The International Critical Commentary, translated from the German by Christian Friedrich Kling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 18.

God as they were revealed to the seer John, and as such it contains many references to future events. Further details regarding the Book of Revelation and other apocalyptic literature will be discussed in the next chapter.

One can conclude, therefore, that the Christian prophets did not lose the gift to foretell, but they foretold the future just as their predecessors in Israel had. We do note, however, that also among the Christian prophets very little reference is made to actual foretelling. This seems to be a clear indication that it was not a very common happening. Evidently God did not deem it necessary for the growth and welfare of His kingdom that prophets again and again foretell the future.

Briefly to summarize the contents of this chapter then, we might say that the nature and function of the prophet can be divided into three categories: (1) that of "forth-telling," that is, getting up before people and addressing them with a message; (2) that of "fore-telling," which means serving as God's spokesman, and as such, speaking by divine revelation as his own spirit was raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit, though still under human control and in a creaturely relation to God; (3) and that of "fore-telling," a definite gift attributed to several prophets, though in general it seems to have been but a minor aspect of prophecy, the chief aim of the prophet being to speak unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. In carrying out this chief objective of theirs, the prophets took a very active part in the worship services and in whatever activities there may have been to further the spiritual growth of the members within the Christian congregation.

## CHAPTER V

### THE INFLUENCE OF PROPHETS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

As has been stated previously in this study, the many references to Christian prophets in the New Testament and in non-canonical writings such as the Didache are so numerous that one cannot lightly dismiss the prophets as having no influence in the early church whatsoever. The purpose of this chapter is to determine what their influence was. If the prophets are to be accorded any kind of a position or if they are to be credited with any kind of influence in the early Christian Church it is but natural to assume that prophets were rather common, not only in isolated communities, but throughout the church. The evidence seems to prove decisively that this is the case, for from the New Testament we can trace the gift and exercise of prophecy from Jerusalem to Antioch, and from there down through the Pauline churches in Asia Minor, to the Greek cities of Thessalonica and Corinth, and even to the non-Pauline church of Rome.<sup>1</sup> McGiffert states that belief in prophecy was universal in the early church and the exercise of the gift was widespread.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, even if there did happen to be some churches which did not have any local prophets, passages from Scripture and the Didache seem

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<sup>1</sup>The passages which prove this are cited in chapter three of this study.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Cushman McGiffert, A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age, in the International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 527.



to indicate that prophets traveled,<sup>3</sup> thus reaching all the Christian communities and broadening the scope of their influence.

Concerning the honor accorded a prophet in the church, we note that prior to the founding of the New Testament church prophets were generally held in great honor. Thus in Matthew 21:26 we read that the chief priests and elders were afraid to say anything against John because all people regarded him as a prophet (cf. Matt. 14:5). Matthew 21:46 says that the chief priests and Pharisees refused to lay hands on Jesus for fear of the people, who regarded Jesus as a prophet. The context of Matthew 10:41 seems to indicate that the prophet's reward shall be greater than the ordinary, thus also according him special honor. In the early church, however, the prophet, or at least the gift of prophecy, was not always honored. At Thessalonica the people were inclined to think lightly of it, and even at Corinth it was valued less highly than the gift of tongues. The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, urges the people to have a high regard for the prophet. While admitting the need for discrimination between the prophet and the pretender or between worthy utterances and unworthy,<sup>4</sup> St. Paul insists that after the apostle, the prophet was the greatest of the gifts bestowed upon the church by the ascended Christ.<sup>5</sup> In his First Epistle to the Corinthians Paul also states that the gift of prophecy was greatly to be preferred to the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:3,4).

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<sup>3</sup>Acts 11:27; 21:10; Didache 11:3-5; 12.

<sup>4</sup>1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Cor. 14:29.

<sup>5</sup>1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11.

John speaks of the prophet in an exalted tone in his Book of Revelation. He mentions his "brother—prophets" in Revelation 22:9, and seems to speak of them as forming the most conspicuous circle in the local churches.<sup>6</sup> Again and again he speaks of God's "servants the prophets." From this one concludes that St. John assigns just as much prominence, if not more, to the prophets as the Apostle Paul does. At the time when the Apocalypse was written, as in the days of the Apostle Paul, the churches of Asia undoubtedly had their presbyters and deacons, but for St. John they were overshadowed by the greater importance of the charismatic orders. Such a view of the ministry, says Swete, is but natural for a prophetic book, but that it should have been presented frankly and without reserve to such important and well organized churches as those of Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, is very good evidence of the high honor in which the Christian prophet was held in Asia at the time.<sup>7</sup>

The Didache too assigns to the prophet a place of prominence and honor in the Christian community. He alone, it appears, could extemporize a prayer under the promptings of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup> He also appears to be the one who was in charge of celebrating the Eucharist, and he alone was given special liturgical freedom in doing it.<sup>9</sup> To further illustrate the honor bestowed upon the prophet the following passage from Didache 13 may be cited:

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (London: Macmillan and Co., Lt'd., 1907), p. xx.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>8</sup>Didache 10:7.

<sup>9</sup>Didache 9:10.

But every true prophet who wants to settle among you deserves his food. . . . So you shall take the first fruits of the produce of the wine press and the threshing floor and of cattle and sheep and give the first fruits to the prophets, for they are your high priests. But if you have no prophet, give it to the poor. If you make bread, take the first fruits and give them according to the command. In like manner, when you open a jar of wine or oil, take the first fruits and give them to the prophets. And of money and clothing and everything you get, take the first fruits, as you think best, and give, according to the command.

The prophets here are mentioned as the recipients of the tithes and first fruits of the community; this certainly signifies the bestowal of great honor upon them as God's representatives.

Another point which illustrates the honor bestowed upon prophets is the fact that the Christians of New Testament times sought to give the office of elder, bishop, and deacon to men particularly blessed with spiritual gifts (Acts. 6:3).<sup>10</sup> Goudge states that the prophets and teachers of 1 Corinthians 12:28 would not be distinct from the presbyterate and deaconate, but that they themselves would be, perhaps in all cases, presbyters or deacons.<sup>11</sup> Goudge adds, however, that the position and importance of the prophet may have varied in different churches. It is the present writer's opinion too that whereas the prophet was a man of honor in the religious community, though not of an indelible character,<sup>12</sup> it is quite natural to assume that other offices in the church would be delegated to him as long as it did not interfere with

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Ewing Brown, The Apostolic Church (Anderson, Indiana: The Warner Press, 1947), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> H. L. Goudge, The First Epistle to the Corinthians in the Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen and Co., 1903), p. xxxvi.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that people could prophesy did not mean that they had an indelible character. Balaam and Saul were instances of persons who had supernatural gifts and yet were morally degraded. This is also implied in 1 Corinthians 13:2. A person who prophesies but has not love is as nothing.

his prophetic ministry. To state that the prophet always held another office would be an exaggerated statement, however.

The next major division of this chapter concerns the position of the prophet in the church. Scripture does not say anything definite on this matter, but there are some passages which seem to imply rather strongly that in the days when the presbyterate, diaconate, and episcopate had not yet reached their full prominence, the prophets constituted a recognized order, as did the apostles and teachers. Among those who speak of the prophets as a recognized order in the New Testament church are E. G. Selwyn,<sup>13</sup> Swete,<sup>14</sup> and Harnack.<sup>15</sup> Plummer<sup>16</sup> and Findlay<sup>17</sup> likewise refer to the apostles, prophets, and teachers as the three "orders." Others are opposed to calling the prophets an order.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the acceptance or rejection of the classification of the prophets as a recognized order depends upon the definition given to the term "order." When speaking of an "order" of prophets, the present writer is taking the view that there was an order of prophets in the particular sense of inspired rulers of the Christian societies, who were clothed

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<sup>13</sup>Edward Garus Selwyn, The Christian Prophets (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1900), pp. vii, viii.

<sup>14</sup>Swete, op. cit., p. xix.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph A. Robinson, "The Christian Ministry in the Apostolic and Sub-Apostolic Periods," Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry, edited by H. B. Swete (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1921), pp. 60-66.

<sup>16</sup>Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, in The International Critical Commentary (Second edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. 279.

<sup>17</sup>G. G. Findlay, "St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians," The Expositor's Greek Testament, II, edited by W. Robertson Nicholl (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 895.

<sup>18</sup>J. A. Robinson, op. cit., pp. 67-80.

with an authority only short of apostolic.

In his excellent essay on this subject<sup>19</sup> J. A. Robinson states the reasons for believing the prophets did constitute such an order.

The reasons given are as follows:

1. Apostles, Prophets, and Teachers form the triad of the Christian ministry in the earliest period. Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons have no connexion with these, though some of the functions of the former class pass over in time to members of the latter class.
2. Apostles, Prophets, and Teachers were what they were in virtue of a 'charisma,' or special endowment of the Holy Spirit, which marked them out for their ministry and inspired them in the exercise of it. This 'charisma' was the direct gift of God, not mediated in any way by man, and beyond all challenge: its existence was self-evident: it was its own continual justification.
3. This 'charisma' was essentially a Lehrgabe, a gift of teaching, a power to declare the word of God. As the word of God was the ultimate law of the Christian Church, it follows that those who possessed this 'charisma' . . . were the authoritative rulers of the church.
4. Whereas Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons were at the outset a purely local institution, Apostles, Prophets, and Teachers moved freely from one community to another, having everywhere their due recognition on the ground of their 'charisma.' They thus formed the most important bond between the many communities of the universal Church, and were the main cause of the general uniformity of its development.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from these reasons listed to support the contention that prophets were a recognized order in the early church, we must also note that the locus classicus for the triad of apostles, prophets, and teachers is 1 Corinthians 12:28-31:

And some hath God set in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-92.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 63, 64.

of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts.

This passage seems to teach that apostles, prophets, and teachers hold a definite position apart from all other members of the church and in a definite order or rank. They are mentioned as being directly appointed by God, and their service is for the whole church and is not restricted to a local community.<sup>21</sup> That these are the only members of the church whose "charisma" gives them personal authority, status, and precedence, is shown by the fact that the terms which follow in St. Paul's list are impersonal, and by the fact that definite enumeration ceases after these three "orders" of ministry are given.

Another similar classification occurs in Ephesians 4:11f, where we read:

And He Himself gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

The words "He Himself gave" in this passage correspond to the phrase "God hath appointed in the church," found in 1 Corinthians 12:28. These point out that members of the early Christian ministry are the gift of Christ and not the choice of man, a statement to which Hastings would also agree.<sup>22</sup> We note too that the original triad is further developed to include the evangelists, suggesting that the term "apostles" is becoming narrowed and confined to the Twelve and Paul.<sup>23</sup> The teachers are

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<sup>21</sup>Goudge, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>22</sup>A Dictionary of the Bible, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), IV, 128.

<sup>23</sup>J. A. Robinson, op. cit., p. 65.

here called pastors and teachers, thus defining their function more clearly.

Swete states that it was perhaps chiefly at Ephesus and in the other cities of Asia that the prophets took root as a recognized order.<sup>24</sup> The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, which, as stated previously, may have been an encyclical letter addressed to all the Asian churches, does not merely assign to the prophetic order the same place of honor which they receive in 1 Corinthians, but also lays stress on the greatness of their work. The local church had been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets;<sup>25</sup> the prophets as well as the pastors and teachers had been given "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."<sup>26</sup> The writer would also like to refer the reader to what has been stated previously in this chapter concerning the honor and prominence accorded the prophet in the Book of Revelation, in which the presbyter and deacon appear to be overshadowed by the greater importance of the charismatic orders.

The Didache also has much of value to say concerning these three "orders," particularly concerning the prophets. As was mentioned previously in this chapter, the Didache accords great honor to the prophets, accounting them: (1) free to celebrate the Eucharist without following the usual prescribed formula; (2) free from criticism once their genuineness has been established; (3) and worthy to receive the firstfruits, "for they are your highpriests." The Didache also testifies to the fact

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<sup>24</sup>Swete, op. cit., p. xix.

<sup>25</sup>Eph. 2:20.

<sup>26</sup>Eph. 4:12. See D. Armitage Robinson's note: St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909), p. 99.

that the prophets are essentially non-local;<sup>27</sup> although a prophet or a teacher might, if he chose, settle in a particular community<sup>28</sup> and would in that case exercise commanding authority in that community by reason of his "charisma," as a speaker of the word of God.<sup>29</sup> Prophets, as opposed to the local ministers, could not be appointed but were only proved and recognized by the community;<sup>30</sup> thus their status as "charismatic persons" is indicated. The Didache therefore also speaks of the prophets as constituting a very important and honorable position in the early Christian Church.

On the basis of the evidence cited it seems logical to conclude that the prophets did constitute what might be called a recognized order. Whatever attempts have been made to discredit this claim seem to fall far short of doing so. Robinson rather thoroughly cross-examines most of the evidence cited above in his essay on the primitive ministry,<sup>31</sup> and although he shows that there is room for doubt on this matter and that not all of the evidence cited above is invulnerable, yet after studying his arguments it is the present writer's opinion that the evidence in favor of accepting the prophets as a recognized order is too great to push aside. A few points, however, need modification. When the prophets are spoken of as a recognized order, one must be careful of over-generalizing. One would hardly suppose that the Christians at Corinth or Thessalonica were any too quick to give

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<sup>27</sup>Didache 12:2.

<sup>28</sup>Didache 13:1.

<sup>29</sup>Didache 11:2,3; 15:2.

<sup>30</sup>Didache 11:1,2.

<sup>31</sup>J. A. Robinson, op. cit., pp. 67-79.



the prophets much authority. They had found out from experience that not everything the prophets said came from divine inspiration. The human element also was involved. Then, too, although the prophets are placed next in honor to the apostles, there is no ground for supposing that they had full authority as rulers, even if their messages and warnings were not lightly to be set aside. The authority accorded them would rather be in keeping with the honor the Christians would bestow on one who had the gift of prophecy. The authority of the prophets (the person not the message) varied with the person and with localities. One must always be careful not to place too much emphasis on the prophet per se. It is the gift of prophecy which makes the prophet important. 1 Corinthians 14:29-31 points that out. Paul did not care which prophet was prophesying as long as the gift of prophecy was being exercised in its purity. The comments in this paragraph have been added to avoid leaving the impression that the prophets formed a recognized order whose authority was accepted everywhere in all matters pertaining to church life. They did constitute a recognized order in that the church looked upon them as God's spokesmen and thus accorded them honor second only to the apostles.

Another important question to be answered is whether the prophets exerted any influence through their writings. One would expect that at least some of the prophetic utterances of a group as prominent and influential among the early Christians as the prophets would have been preserved in writing. The Book of Revelation is one such a writing that has been preserved, and it stands out as the one great literary product of early Christian prophecy. Outside the Book of Revelation, some scholars believe there are other passages in the New Testament books

which possibly refer to writings of the prophets. E. G. Selwyn cites Ephesians 5:19,20 in particular.<sup>32</sup> It reads as follows:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the passage cited above the Apostle Paul urges the believers to speak words of praise and thanks in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Evidently there were certain hymns and spiritual songs known to the people besides the Psalms of the Old Testament. Perhaps these spiritual songs the people would sing included the beautiful prophetic words of Simeon, or those of Mary, or of Elizabeth, or of Zacharias. Is it not very possible that the believers would repeat these beautiful prophetic utterances? Is it not possible too that Christian prophets were the authors of still other hymns and spiritual songs? E. G. Selwyn seems to think so,<sup>33</sup> and it does seem very probable. As was mentioned earlier, the Didache states that the prophets usually spoke the public prayers of thanks at the Christian assemblies. It is very likely then that they were also the inspired authors of some hymns and spiritual songs with which they might give thanks and praise unto God. Kidd points out the possibility that Paul may have incorporated some of these hymns or sayings of the prophets into his epistles.<sup>34</sup> He cites 1 Timothy 3:16 as a hymn of the incarnation. Nestle even sets these words off as a poem or hymn in the Greek text.

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<sup>32</sup>E. G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter (London: Macmillan & Sons, 1946), pp. 266, 267.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>B. J. Kidd, A History of the Church (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), I, 32.

As translated it reads:

God was manifest in the flesh,  
Justified in the Spirit,  
Seen of angels,  
Preached unto the Gentiles,  
Believed in the world,  
Received up into glory.

Then too, we notice that at four different times Paul uses the phrase "This is a faithful saying" in his epistles. Could it be that these "faithful sayings" to which Paul refers also are utterances of Christian prophets? The phrase occurs in Titus 3:8, and Kidd refers to Titus 3:4-7 as a hymn of Baptism.<sup>35</sup> The phrase occurs also in 2 Timothy 2:11 and Kidd refers to 2 Timothy 2:11-13 as a hymn of martyrdom.<sup>36</sup> The other two passages where Paul's phrase occurs are 1 Timothy 1:15 and 1 Timothy 4:9. These passages, too, may refer to certain sayings commonly known to the people which may have been first uttered by the prophets.

One must also take note of Luke's statement in his preface to the Gospel narrative: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are believed among us . . . ." Those who have attempted to set forth such a declaration are later described by Luke as being eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word. The prophets certainly were ministers of the word and undoubtedly many of them had been eyewitnesses of the Lord's deeds. Thus prophets may also be included among those who attempted to write Gospel narratives. With this in mind one could also possibly conclude that the Apostle Paul has these writings of the New Testament prophets

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

in mind when he says in Romans 16:25,26:

Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith.

The present writer is inclined to agree with Denney,<sup>37</sup> however, who says that the *γραφαί προφητικαί* are the Old Testament Scriptures, of which Paul made constant use in preaching the Gospel.<sup>38</sup>

Then too, McGiffert attributes to the prophets the set forms of prayer used in the early Christian Church.<sup>39</sup> Prayer was regarded as a spiritual exercise indulged in under the prompting of the Spirit, and therefore the prophet usually spoke the prayers in public assemblies. In the absence of prophets McGiffert says that the leaders would repeat the prayers which the prophets or prophet had spoken when present, thinking the repetition of these prayers was the best they could do. Thus the Christian assemblies soon developed set forms of prayer which may be attributed to the prophets.

We turn our attention now to the apocalyptic literature of the period. An apocalypse is defined as a revelation, the converse of concealment, the process of casting aside the veil that hides a mystery.<sup>40</sup> St. Paul uses the noun *ἑποκάλυψις* in reference both to the gift of spiritual vision and to its results (Ephesians 1:17; 1 Corinthians

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<sup>37</sup>James Denney, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," The Expositor's Greek Testament, II, edited by W. Robertson Nicholl (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 724.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *κατὰ τὰς γραφάς* in 1 Cor. 15:3,4.

<sup>39</sup>McGiffert, op. cit., p. 532.

<sup>40</sup>Swete, op. cit., p. xxii.

14:6,26). The gift of revelation, says Swete, is a particular manifestation of the prophetic Spirit, in which the spirit of the prophet seemed to be carried up into a higher sphere, endowed for the time with new powers of vision, and enabled to hear words which could not be reproduced in the terms of human thought, or could be reproduced only through the medium of symbolical imagery.<sup>41</sup> While the prophets normally dealt with human life in its relation to God, he who had an apocalypse strove to express his personal realization of the unseen or of the distant future. Apocalyptic literature dates all the way back to Old Testament times, being especially prominent in the book of Daniel. There were also many non-canonical Jewish apocalypses written in the centuries immediately before the time of Christ or shortly after, such as the Book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Fourth Book of Esdras, and many others.<sup>42</sup>

The first and only Christian apocalypse which deserved the name of prophecy is the Apocalypse of John.<sup>43</sup> This apocalypse differs from the Jewish apocalypses current in that day in a number of ways. For one thing, whereas Jewish apocalypses used the names of great Jewish leaders of the past to gain recognition, the Christian apocalypse of John bears the author's own name, thereby showing that the prophet John was conscious of direct inspiration.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the Apocalypse of John makes no secret of its origin and destination as the Jewish

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. xciii.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. xciv-xxviii.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. xxxi.

<sup>44</sup>William Bancroft Hill, The Apostolic Age (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1922), p. 317.

apocalypses do. It also has a religious spirit which is different from that of its non-canonical predecessors.

Every unbiased critic admits that apocalyptic literature is inferior in form to the prophetic,<sup>45</sup> and one wonders why John chose this form of utterance. Perhaps the danger of the time urged this type of writing, which conceals the real meaning of its contents in symbolism. Then too, it was in this form that John received his inspiration (Rev. 1:1). It was but natural then that he should set it forth in this way too. In Revelation 1:19 we read: "Write what thou hast seen, and the things that are, and the things that are about to be after these." Accordingly, John wrote the revelation according to the divine direction as he beheld the panorama of the future.

The purpose of the book is declared to be, "To show unto his servants the things which must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1:1). This clause, "which must shortly come to pass," does not necessarily mean that the fulfillment will actually begin at once, but merely that it is to begin at any time in the future, for God does not reckon time as we do (2 Peter 3:8). Involved in this general purpose are such immediate aims as the purification, encouragement, and fortification of the seven churches, and beyond them the whole church. Swete summarizes the contents by saying the Apocalypse of John is an apocalypse of the glory of the exalted Christ, and also an apocalypse of the sufferings and the ultimate triumph of the militant church.<sup>46</sup>

A brief outline and interpretation of the Apocalypse of John

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<sup>45</sup>Frederic W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity (New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1882), II, 235.

<sup>46</sup>Swete, op. cit., p. xxxi.

taken from J. T. Mueller's class notes reads as follows:

Division I: Prologue and Introduction - Chapters 1-3

Division II: The First Woe - Chapters 4-9

- A. Persecution of the Church by Paganism - Chapters 4-6
- B. Persecution of the Church by Heresies - Chapters 7-9

Division III: Second Woe - Chapters 9-11:14  
(Persecution of the Church by Islam)

Division IV: The Third Woe - Chapters 11:15-19:21

- A. Pagan Roman Empire - Chapters 11:15-12:17
- B. Restored Roman Empire - Chapters 13:1-10
- C. Papal Roman Empire - Chapters 13:11-19:21

Division V: Great Modern Missionary Period and Final Triumph of Una Sancta - Chapters 20:1-22:5

Division VI: Epilogue - Chapter 22:6-21

The theme for the Apocalypse of John as formulated by J. T. Mueller reads as follows: The living triumphant Christ protects His church in all its afflictions and leads His elect saints through tribulation to triumph.

As for the influence of the Apocalypse of John, one would expect that copies of it were immediately circulated among the seven churches addressed and that the immediate neighborhood had soon heard about it. It is fairly certain that by the end of the second century the Apocalypse had received wide distribution throughout the church.<sup>47</sup> Though its canonicity was questioned by many, by the time of the Carthaginian Council in 396 A.D., it had taken its place in all Western lists of the canonical Scriptures and been generally accepted by the great Latin church fathers.<sup>48</sup>

The next subject for discussion is the decline of the Christian

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. cvii.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., o, cxvii.

prophet. From what has been said thus far we gain the impression that the prophets did exert considerable influence in the church. High honor is accorded to the prophet both in the New Testament writings and in the Didache; however, the subsequent history of Apocalypse and prophecy as a Christian gift is generally one of decadence and depreciation. Clement of Rome has nothing to say about prophecy as a living force in the then Church of Christ, and Ignatius, though he recognizes an apocalyptic influence within himself, hastens to add, "obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undistracted mind."<sup>49</sup> Prophecy probably survived in the Syrian churches until the end of the first century,<sup>50</sup> when, as the Didache already reveals, many false prophets were coming into the ranks of the prophets. Prophecy was revived to some degree in the second century in Asia Minor among the Montanists, but a closer examination of this revival of prophecy would go beyond the scope of this study. Among the reasons given why prophets and prophecy became rarer in later times, Bruce lists the following:

1. The churches became suspicious that not all who claimed the gift were genuine prophets.
2. The growth of ecclesiastical organization left little room for such unarranged ministry.
3. The prophetic gift itself became less common.<sup>51</sup>

It seems as though the passing away of the miraculously endowed is a part of the divine order. Kidd<sup>52</sup> remarks that this is seen in the

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<sup>49</sup>E. C. Selwyn, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>50</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Spreading Flame (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 103.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Kidd, op. cit., p. 43.



history of Israel as well as in that of Christendom. The divine order tends generally to the substitution of the ordinary and continuous for the miraculous and extraordinary powers of the Kingdom of God. Whether the gift of prophecy still is given to some individuals today and whether it ever was given to people since New Testament times would be an interesting topic requiring further research.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study, as stated in the introduction was to find out as much as possible concerning the Christian prophets of the New Testament Church. In the brief overview of prophets and prophecy prior to New Testament times it was shown that a prophetic institution of divine origin existed in Israel since the days of Moses, an institution which reached its climax and ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we also have the Founder of the new line of prophets, the Christian prophets of the New Testament Church. It was shown that although few Christian prophets are mentioned by name and very little is known about those who are mentioned, nevertheless, the general references to them both in Scripture and outside Scripture, are too numerous to permit us to brush them aside as only a small and insignificant group in the church. They evidently were found in Jerusalem, Antioch, and in the many churches planted by the Apostle Paul. Paul even speaks as though the gift of prophecy was found at Rome. Besides the prophets there were also prophetesses, although little mention is made of them. False prophets, too, entered the church as Jesus had forewarned, and how serious a problem there actually was with false prophets is especially pointed out in the First Epistle of John and in the Didache.

The nature and function of the New Testament prophet is defined as that of: (1) "forth-telling," that is, getting up before people

and addressing them with a message; (2) "for-telling," which means serving as God's spokesman, and, as such, speaking by divine revelation as his own spirit was raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit, though still under human control and in a creaturely relation to God; (3) "fore-telling," a definite gift attributed to several prophets, though in general it seems to have been but a minor aspect of prophecy, the chief aim of the prophet being to speak unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort.

It was shown, too, that prophets exerted a wide influence, for prophets were found in practically all the Christian churches. The prophets traveled and thus would reach those localities also which may have had no local prophets. Generally, the prophets are held in high esteem in the Bible, and the Apostle Paul regarded the gift of prophecy as far more to be desired than the gift of tongues. The prophet is accorded prominence and honor also in the Book of Revelation and in the Didache. Abuses of the prophetic gift caused it to be looked down upon in some localities, however. In other localities prophets often were given other important, official positions in the church.

The prophets are grouped together with the apostles and teachers as forming the triad of the Christian ministry during the Apostolic Age. As a part of this triad the prophets of the New Testament church often are called a recognized order. Though their authority was not accepted everywhere in all matters pertaining to church life, it was shown that they did constitute a recognized order in that the church looked upon them as God's spokesman and thus accorded them honor second only to the apostles.

The prophets likewise may have exerted some influence through

writings, for it was shown that prophets may have been the authors of various hymns and spiritual songs. It was shown that they also may have been the authors of what later became set forms of prayer. The one truly great literary product of early Christian prophecy is, of course, the Book of Revelation. This prophetic book exerts a great influence even to this very day.

The decline and disappearance of Christian prophets occurred during the second century, probably because of the growth of ecclesiastical organization and because of the fact that the prophetic gift itself became less common. The prophetic gift of the New Testament was Pentecostal and disappeared with the apostolic period.

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