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An Introduction to the Prophetic Ministry and Office, Part 1

The Old Testament Prophets may be the most neglected portion of the entire Bible. The Prophets are a vast and incredible work whose voice is as relevant today as it was when it was first given.

In this study we will not preach through the entire prophetic corpus; book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Rather, this study will be an introduction to each book, and then preach through select passages of the prophecy. This study will look at these books in this order:

- Joel
- Jonah
- Amos
- Hosea
- Isaiah
- Micah
- Jeremiah
- Zephaniah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk

- Daniel
- Ezekiel
- Obadiah
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

Most people today do not read the prophets today because they don't understand them. It is my hope that through this series that you will gain a familiarity with the corpus such so that you feel at home in the prophets and read, study, and enjoy them. I want you to be better equipped to serve the Lord as a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Many are like me, even though it is my conviction that the prophetic office no longer is operative today, that didn't stop me from wishing for just one more "word from the Lord" and thus a definitive statement from God on the many issues facing the church. *Wouldn't it be great if God came down and explicitly said, "This is right and this is wrong!"?*

However, when I studied the Old Testament Prophets I found each book was NOT an irrelevant messages from an out of touch holy man, BUT the very word of God to a covenant people who were struggling with many if not all of the issues we face today as a church:

- Mysticism.
- False doctrine.
- Worldliness.
- The push for entertainment in our services.
- Division and conflict in the body.
- Wicked, corrupt and immoral leaders.
- An evil day.
- An uncertain tomorrow.
- The issues arising out of false worship.
- And much, much more.

Today we need the prophets. We need this study. If we neglect this corpus we will miss a large commentary on the part of God regarding the issues we face as a people, congregation, and denomination.

Now, in passing I want to note that the Old Testament prophetic books by and large have been placed in our Bibles not in chronological order, but according to the order of their size. And so the Major Prophets, so called because they are so long, have been placed first following the poetic books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The Minor Prophets, so called not because they aren't important, BUT because they are rather short, follow in no particular order (expect for the final three which were written last): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, [and then the post exilic

prophets] Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.¹

Prophetic Ministry and Office

Before we begin our formal study of each book, I want to introduce you to the Prophetic Ministry and Office. Sadly, though we have “the prophetic word which is more reliable than any miracle” (2 Peter 1:19) many today would rather have a miracle or a “word from the Lord.”

Most of us have a vague understanding that

1. In former times God did send prophets in His name to speak His word AND with an understanding that
2. Prophecy is a gift referenced in Paul’s treatment on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14, many are happy to neglect the witness and message of the Prophets in favor of *personal* impressions from the Lord.

Many today say, “*Who needs the prophets? I’ve got a prophetic gift! Why settle for that which is old and stale when you can have a word from the Lord either to yourself or from the brother or sister standing beside you?*” In fact the following letter was written by a person claiming to be a modern day prophet:

I do not feel the need for study of the Scriptures, for I know Jesus as He has revealed Himself to me within; and as He dwells in me, there is the Word. I go to scripture, and scripture is vital and necessary- but neither central nor crucial, for I have Him- rather He has me. Scriptures are a secondary source. Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit the Word in me (the very spiritual body of Jesus Christ) is primary. I say this as a living experience out of what he has given me to say. (MacArthur, 1993, p. 84)

Now, this statement begs these questions:

- What was/is the prophetic office?
- How did God speak to a prophet?
- What was the purpose of this calling?
- Is it still operative in the church today?
- Does God lead today through impressions in the heart?

We will answer these questions in the preparation for our study. We will begin by considering the origin of the Prophetic Office.

¹ We will not look at what is called the former prophets; the work of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha (which encompass Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles as well as Joshua which typically is considered under this title). While these are important works, they have been well studied as they lie within the historical books.

The Origin of the Prophetic Office

Deuteronomy 18:9-17, “9 When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you. 13 You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. 14 For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you *to do so* [Now in contrast to these fallen means of communication with the divine, the Lord would provide for His people a better way...]. 15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. 16 This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ 17 And the Lord said to me, ‘They have spoken well.’”

The book of Deuteronomy is a series of sermons Moses preached to the people of God just prior to their entering the Promised Land. Here Moses instructed God’s people as to whom they should follow when they enter the land.

Deuteronomy 18:14, “For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you *to do so.*”

Rather than listening to Satan, God’s people were to listen to God! God would “raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.” (Deuteronomy 18:15) This verse sets forth the Biblical understanding for the calling and office of Prophet.

The office and gift of Biblical Prophecy has its origins in the Old Testament! In fact by the time of the New Testament the office and gift of prophecy was well established. This may be surprising since today the focus in many churches and denominations is on the gift of prophecy as if it were a New Testament phenomenon. In truth, the prophetic office dates back to the most ancient experiences of God’s people.

Now, when we think of prophecy as an Old Testament gifting or calling, our minds immediately think of what has been called “The Prophetic Age” of the Old Testament with Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea, etc. And yet, from Deuteronomy 18 we discover that the prophetic office had its origins in the era of Moses! In fact, Old Testament prophecy reached its point of highest glory with Moses.²

It is important to note something very important in this regard; that is, as it pertains to the origin

² Compare Deuteronomy 34:10; 2 Corinthians 3:7; and Hebrews 3:3

of Prophecy. In the days prior to Moses, God spoke *personally* to the covenantal heads of the various patriarchal families (think of Noah, Abraham, Job, Adam). This fatherly head would then communicate the word of God to the people entrusted to his care. And yet, when we come to the time of Moses an important and definitive shift occurred.

Deuteronomy 18:16-17, “This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ And the Lord said to me, ‘They have spoken well.’”

The Old Testament office of Prophet began when GOD’S PEOPLE requested a substitute for them. Communication with God was too awesome a thing.³ And thus from this point forward! God was “pleased” (v. 17) to speak to one man alone, the prophet, who then would convey God’s word to the people! The result, in the words of O. Palmer Robertson was this:

The small, simple voice of the prophet substitute[d] for all the awesome signs of Sinai.
(Robertson, 1993, p. 2)

And so as with almost every theological issue and institution in the Bible:

- Marriage.
- The priesthood of the believer.
- Salvation.
- The Sacraments.
- Worship.
- Etc...

The purpose, place, and function of the Prophetic Office took its shape NOT in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament (again, by the time of the New Testament the office was well established)! Thus if we are going to understand the Prophetic office and work, we must understand it in its original context: The Old Testament!⁴

Now these questions are begging to be asked:

- Essentially, what is prophecy?
- What is the nature of the prophetic gift?
- What is being claimed when someone says that they have received, “a word from the Lord”?

The Nature of the Prophetic Gift

Deuteronomy 18:18, “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I

³ Compare Exodus 19:16-19

⁴ We’ll see the importance of this when we get to the New Testament teaching on the Gift of Prophecy.

will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”

In its most essential form, the gift of prophecy was a vehicle of revelation, the communication of God’s word to man.

Deuteronomy 18:18b, “...I will put My words in his mouth...”

The people of God, having been redeemed from slavery, were brought to God at Sinai to receive NOT the words of a man, BUT the WORD of God! And yet as was just referenced (Deuteronomy 18:16, 17) because of the HORRIBLE presence of God, the people asked for a mediator! And this was a request that God was pleased to grant.

Thus

- The thunderous voice of God.
- The lightening.
- The fire.
- The smoke.
- The earthquake.
- The peal of the trumpet.

ALL were replaced by the voice of a single Israelite speaking among his brothers.⁵ And yet, this single voice was understood to be nothing less than the word of God; this is the essence of Revelation, this is the essence of Prophecy! In fact, don’t miss it. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses conveyed the word of the Lord to God’s people, we read this:

Deuteronomy 24:7, “Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that THE LORD HAS SPOKEN we will do, and we will be obedient!’”

The nature of Prophecy is one and the same as revelation; the communication of a word, a message from the Lord! And thus we read this:

Deuteronomy 18:19, “And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him [that is, God will discipline them which at the time resulted in death].”

This is an important point. Because of the NATURE of Biblical Prophecy; that it is a proclamation of God’s Word, not to obey the Prophetic Word was to disobey God; and to do that was to fall into judgment! That is why when Paul said this:

2 Thessalonians 3:14, “And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him [in essence he is to be excommunicated/disciplined]...”

⁵ This point is a quote from Robertson, page 2.

We conclude that Paul understood that his writings were on par with any prophetic word given in the Old Testament, for again that was the consequence if you failed to heed an Old Testament prophet! Truly to neglect or rebel against a prophetic word was a serious thing, which is why to claim the office or gift flippantly was also a serious thing.

Deuteronomy 18:20, “But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.”

In the Bible the gift of prophesy as well as the prophetic office stood for nothing less than a vehicle of Revelation. To misuse the gift/office was to suffer the same consequence as blasphemy, which was death!

From all of this we discover that from the very beginning, prophecy was and is a vehicle of revelation, or in English, the communication of God’s word!

This cannot be too strongly emphasized! To affirm that Biblical Prophecy today continues in either of its basic forms, foretelling or forth telling is to express belief that revelation continues, that the word of God is not complete, and that there is still something that can be added to the Bible. In every era of Biblical history where a prophet is present, nothing less is presumed.⁶

Now having mentioned the possibility of the misuse of the gift, God appends a qualification to the Prophetic Office in Deuteronomy 18. And this brings us to the standard of the prophetic word.

The Standard of the Prophetic Word

Deuteronomy 18:21-22, “And you may say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

This verse establishes for us “The Standard” against which to measure the genuineness/validity of the person claiming to be a prophet. What is the standard? The Prophet must be one hundred percent accurate when it comes to foretelling the future.

With this we ask the question, “How do we know if a person truly is a prophet?” The answer given in Deuteronomy 18 is, “Because HE IS CORRECT NOT just...

- 50 percent of the time.
- 75 percent of the time.

⁶ Often times you hear it stated today that the Biblical Gift of prophesying is nothing more than preaching; this is false. O. Palmer Robertson wrote, “While a contemporary preacher may be ‘prophetic’ in his pulpit ministry, he is not ‘prophesying’ in the biblical sense...” (Robertson, 1993, p. 4)

- 99 percent of the time.
- BUT 100 percent of the time!" Anything less is to testify that he is a FALSE prophet...

Deuteronomy 18:22b, "...The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

This actually was one of three tests of a prophet found in God's word. Because the prophetic office was a vehicle of revelation, God protected it by establishing three qualifications which in their totality could not be faked.

- The Prophet had to do the miraculous, 1 Kings 18:36. In fact, every time you read of a "miracle" in the Bible you could translated the word, "testifying miracle."
- The Prophetic message could not contradict any other portion of God's word, Deuteronomy 13:1-5.
- The Prophet had to foretell the future, Deuteronomy 18:22b.

Here the focus is on the later, foretelling the future, but all three represent the divine standard when it comes to the Prophetic Office. Now speaking of the latter, the standard of foretelling the future, we hear a different testimony today. Those advocating the continuation of the Prophetic Gift have asserted that the Bible advocates a second kind of Revelation; Non-Canonical Revelation, and thus errant Revelation. Charismatic Bob Jones (not of the University) in his teaching titled, *The Shepherd's Rod*, explains why so many modern prophecies go unfulfilled:

[God] said, 'If I release the hundred-percent rhema right now, the accountability would be awesome and you'd have so much Ananias and Sapphiras [sic] going on that the people couldn't grow- they'd be too scared.' But He said, 'If it was on target, it would kill instead of scaring the people to repentance'... That is what He told me, so I figure if I hit two-thirds of it, I'm doing pretty good.

And Mike Bickle, the pastor of Bob's church, added this:

...when Bob first said [this] I said "Two thirds?' He said, 'Well, that's better than it's ever been in this nation up to now... That's the highest level it's ever been."

The fact that a prophecy goes unfulfilled or is even wrong today is no proof that it is false. According to Bob Jones, even if a person's prophecies are wrong 1/3 or more of the time, the gift of prophecy can still be claimed!

Listen once again to Deuteronomy 18 and so one of the standards when it comes to the prophetic message:

Deuteronomy 18:22a, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken..."

And so the standard of Biblical Prophecy is that it must be 100 percent accurate. Anything less is to

testify that the prophet is NOT a prophet of God and that the words of the prophet are false.

Now because of Prophecy's NATURE and STANDARD, we are not shocked to discover the deterrence God used to protect the gift/office of prophesying from misuse or abuse.

Prophecies Deterrence

Here the focus revolves around the second standard to which a prophet was held, fidelity to the rest of Scripture.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5, "1 If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' [recall this was a mark of a prophet, the miraculous. If a prophet rose up and did the miraculous, BUT contradicted God's word...]3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death [which was the consequence if a prophet couldn't accurately foretell the future in Deuteronomy 18:20] because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you."

What according to this passage and Deuteronomy 18:20 was the punishment for any who falsely claimed to be a prophet? Death! That means if someone in the ancient days claimed the office but then could not do a promised miracle, or prophesied a future event that did not take place, or contradicted one verse of Scripture at any time he was to be put to death.

Once again the focus of Deuteronomy 13 is on the prophet's consistency to the rest of God's word. In this context note, upon a cursory reading of Deuteronomy 13, Moses makes it sound as if the words of the false-prophet will be blatantly and obviously wrong. Yet, from the warnings of other passages⁷ we know that this is not the case. Satan's messengers have always been deceptive (2 Corinthians 11:14), and thus God's children are called to be very careful when it comes to following a prophet lest they follow Satan!

Thus God's people, during that time when the prophetic office and gift were operative, were to be very careful as to whom they listened. The Apostle John warned this:

1 John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

⁷ Specifically Matthew 24:11; Mark 13:22

Again what was the test? From a cursory understanding of Deuteronomy 13 and 18 they were to ask of any prophet:

- Does the prophet do miracles?
- Is he 100 percent accurate in his foretelling?
- Is his message contradicted by the rest of God's word?

If only one violation was found in any of the categories, the prophet was to be rejected (and under the Old Covenant executed; which in the New Covenant translated to excommunication)! Now this may sound rather severe, but understand, God's word was at stake! In this context, I appreciate the words of Gary North:⁸

There were biblical sanctions governing false prophecy because the words of the Old Covenant prophet had binding judicial authority. What he said was God's word, God's command. Priests and civil magistrates were legally bound to do what a prophet said. A false prophet was the equivalent of a person who today dons a policeman's uniform, or a general's uniform, and tells people to break the law.

And so as we approach the Old Testament prophetic work, we observe that its roots go back to the time of Moses. The prophetic work was always considered to be a proclamation of the Word of God. Any and every prophet was to be examined against the threefold standard of a prophet. And if they were found to be in error on just one point, they would suffer the death penalty!

Now, there is a lot of talk about the continuation of this gift/office in our day- in fact, there are whole denominations which have been founded on this supposition, that the gift of Prophecy continues today. Even in Reformed denominations there is confusion as to the relevancy of this gift today. Yet listen, if we believe that:

- The Biblical Gift/Office of Prophecy is still operative today.
- God is still speaking new revelation to us.
- God is still adding to His word.

Then we must also believe that the Bible you hold in your hand is not complete or sufficient! And accept the Standard against which to measure a prophet along with the corresponding punishment for rebellion.

Conclusion

The conclusion at which we arrive from just this introduction to the prophetic office is that the gift and office are not applicable today; it passed away with the close of the Apostolic age! That is why as a denomination we have professed this:

Westminster Confession of Faith 1:1, "[That] ...those former ways of God's revealing his will

⁸ Taken from his *Position Paper* (May 1996)

unto his people [through those revelatory organs who occupied the extraordinary offices of apostle and prophet have] ceased.”

Now if all of what we have said and seen is true, then is there any place today for waiting upon “a word from the Lord” outside of the Bible? NO! When it comes to understanding God’s word and will for our lives today, where must we therefore go? The Word of God!

With that, what if I told you that there was an era in redemptive history where God’s people lived much the same way as do we today in Christ? While this era preceded the age in which we currently live, nevertheless the people of God were

- A Kingdom...
- Which existed for the glory and honor of God...
- Whose calling was to live in submission to God’s Word...
- In a day and time when treachery and rebellion could be found on all sides.

What if I told you that during this age, God was pleased to give His people no less than sixteen books containing 245 chapters comprised of 5336 verses all of which specifically and pastorally address some of the greater burdens of the day?- like:

- Mysticism.
- False doctrine.
- The problem of worldliness.
- The push for entertainment in our services.
- Division and conflict in the body.
- Wicked, corrupt and immoral leaders.
- An evil day.
- An uncertain tomorrow.
- The issues arising out of false worship.
- And much, much more.

Wouldn’t you want to know this revelation? That is what we have in the Old Testament Prophetic Corpus. I want to encourage you today to begin studying this great body of Scripture. In a few weeks we will begin by looking at Joel. Let me encourage you to begin there. In the coming weeks read the book many times. If you have commentaries, look up the passages you don’t understand.

In and through it all, ask of the text two questions.

- What should I believe?
- How should I then live?

May God give us His illuminating grace as we take up this great study.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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