

Who are the “prophets” in the New Testament?

1. “Prophet” and “prophecy” in OT and NT

In the Old Testament the “prophet” is a person given special revelation from God, to speak to the people, and whose words (because of their divine origin) cannot err. (See Deut. 18:15-22).

In the New Testament we need to draw the following distinctions with respect to prophets and prophecy:

- Acts 2 teaches that *all Christians* “shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17), i.e. all Christians are prophets in that we all the knowledge of God which in the OT was the preserve of the prophet alone.
- Revelation 11 describes the activity of *the church* as “prophesying” (Revelation 11:1-13), i.e. the relationship of the church to the world is one of speaking God’s powerful word.
- Ephesians (2:20, 3:5, 4:11) speaks of “apostles and prophets.” Our question concerns the identity and the role of those “prophets.”

2. The identity of these “prophets”

The “prophets” referred to in Ephesians are *not* the prophets of the Old Testament. Ephesians 3:5 makes clear that, together with the apostles, they were recipients of revelation which had not been made known to previous generations. The “prophets” we read of in Ephesians were, in other words, contemporary with the apostles and associated with them. Specific examples are found in the book of Acts:

- Acts 11:27-28, Agabus foretells “by the Spirit that there would be a great famine” – which happened;
- Acts 13:1-2, “prophets and teachers” through whom the Holy Spirit speaks;
- Acts 21:9-14, Agabus uses a prophetic sign act (linking him to OT prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah) and speaks the Spirit’s words concerning Paul’s imprisonment
- Acts 28:17 tells us that Paul understands this prediction to have been fulfilled.

3. The role and status of the NT prophets

From Ephesians 3:4-5 we’ve seen that they are recipients of revelation from God and that they were closely associated with the apostles. But what exactly was their role and status?

(a) They were prophets!

They spoke truth from God. Note how, in the references from Acts above, the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets of the NT church. They spoke from God, with God’s authority, and without error. In that respect they were like the prophets of the Old Testament.

It’s sometimes suggested that the NT prophets were somehow less authoritative and were capable of error. However, these verses suggest otherwise.

(b) They established the “foundation” of the NT church

Their task, together with the apostles, was to provide the “foundation” of the NT church. Ephesians 2:20 teaches that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.” Everything we need to know for salvation and sanctification has been given us through the teaching of the apostles and prophets.

The early churches didn’t have the complete canon of Scripture. The apostles – plus an authoritative and infallible prophetic ministry – laid the foundation for the church in those early days. With the completion of the New Testament the “foundation” was completed. That means we do not need further revelation from God, and should not expect to find prophets in the church today.

4. Why won’t we find “prophets” in the church today?

(a) The Bible is entirely sufficient revelation from God

Two key NT texts explicitly teach us that Scripture is complete and entirely sufficient revelation from God. First, Jude 3 tells us to “contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all.” Just as Christ’s death on the Cross was said to be “once for all” (Gk. *hapax* – see 1 Peter 3:18), so too the “faith delivered to the saints” is said to be “once for all” (same word) – i.e. entirely sufficient and in need of no addition.

Second, in the start of Hebrews 1 we read of sufficiency in revelation (“he has spoken to us by Son”) alongside sufficiency in salvation (“he sat down at the right hand” of God). Christ’s saving work is complete; so too the testimony to that work has been completed in the Scriptures.

We do not, therefore, expect fresh revelation from God – simply, we don’t need it. And that’s why Jesus no longer gives Apostles and Prophets to his church.

(b) Jesus no longer gives Apostles and Prophets to his church

We know for sure that we no longer have apostles like Paul, Peter or John. The apostles had to be eyewitnesses to the risen Lord and personally sent by him (see Acts 2:21-22). Such people have ceased to exist with the deaths of the 12 apostles. They were appointed for the early days of the church to establish orthodox doctrine. There is no warrant for a person to claim to be an apostle today.

If the gift of apostleship has ended, if the foundation is already established in the Scriptures, then we should conclude that the office of NT prophet has also ended. When we read about “prophets” in Ephesians 4:11 or in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 we should conclude that *this* type of gift no longer exists in the church.

5. Some conclusions and reflections

Clearly, the church always has a “prophetic” role. Every Christian knows the counsels of God in the same sort of intimate way as the OT prophet did. The Spirit “illuminates” Scripture to us freshly – continuing to reveal how the unchanging Word applies in every situation.

Further, believers today are sometimes moved by God to offer “impressions” or insights into events and situations. For, whilst some special gifts in the NT era are no longer given to the church, some continuing gifts have some things in common with them. There are, for example, analogies between the ministry of the apostle and the ministry of the preacher;¹ the Puritans sometimes termed preaching “prophesying.”

But it’s very unhelpful to speak of fresh “revelation” or of an ongoing office of prophet. For, the regular and normal office of “prophet” has not existed since the completion of the canon of Scripture. The Westminster Confession (our doctrinal basis – to which our elders subscribe) expresses Scripture’s sufficiency like this:

- “those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased” [WCF 1.1].
- “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men...” [WCF 1.6].

Gifted and godly people disagree with this conclusion. (Sam Storms and Wayne Grudem are examples of fine “continuationists”). And church members might share their view. We can cheerfully live with that, insofar as we understand the convictions from which we teach – believing them to be both true and good.

Further reading: two articles and two books... in order of increasing length!

(1) *Why I am a cessationist*, by Thomas Schreiner - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cessationist/>

(2) *It all depends upon prophecy: a brief case for nuanced cessationism* (Themelios 44 /1) -

<http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/it-all-depends-upon-prophecy-a-brief-case-for-nuanced-cessationism>

(3) *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit*, Richard Gaffin.

(4) *The Holy Spirit*, Sinclair Ferguson.

¹ John Owen commented: “But although all these gifts and operations *ceased* in some respect, some of them absolutely, and some of them as to the immediate manner of communication and degree of excellency; yet so far as the edification of the church was concerned in them, something that is *analogous* unto them was and is continued.” (Cited in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, p233)