

New Testament Prophets — Revelatory Voices in Acts and the Epistles

Series: 30 Prophets of the Bible - Dr. Randy White

I. Identifying the Prophets of the Apostolic Age

The Same Essential Definition

- A prophet is one who receives and speaks revelation from God; a prophet is not merely an insightful teacher or forceful preacher.
- Prediction may be part of prophecy, but the essential work is speaking what God has revealed (Acts 11:27–28; 13:1–2; 21:10–11).
- The New Testament does not loosen the biblical definition of a prophet. Its prophets speak by the Holy Ghost, and their words carry a claim of divine origin.

Their Historical Setting

- Acts records prophets during the transition from the kingdom proclamation in Jerusalem to the widening ministry among the Gentiles.
- The Epistles place prophets among the revelatory gifts operating during the apostolic age (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 3:5; 4:11).

II. Named Prophets in the Book of Acts

Agabus — Famine and Bonds Foretold

- Agabus came with other prophets from Jerusalem to Antioch and foretold by the Spirit a great dearth throughout the world (Acts 11:27–28).
- The disciples responded with practical charity, sending relief to the brethren in Judaea (Acts 11:29–30).
- Years later, Agabus met Paul at Caesarea, bound his own hands and feet with Paul's girdle, and declared what the Holy Ghost said about Paul's coming bonds in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10–11).
- His enacted sign resembles the symbolic actions of Old Testament prophets, joining revealed words with a visible warning.

Prophets and Teachers at Antioch

- Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul are named among the "prophets and teachers" at Antioch (Acts 13:1).
- The wording identifies the leadership group but does not specify with certainty which men served in each of the two roles.
- As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost directed that Barnabas and Saul be separated for the work to which He had called them (Acts 13:2–3).
- Antioch shows prophetic ministry operating in a local assembly and participating in a decisive expansion of the work among the Gentiles.

Judas and Silas — Prophets Who Exhorted

- Judas Barsabas and Silas were leading men sent from Jerusalem with the apostolic letter concerning Gentile believers (Acts 15:22–27).
- Both men are explicitly called prophets (Acts 15:32).
- They "exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them," showing that prophecy included Spirit-given strengthening as well as prediction (Acts 15:32).
- Their ministry supported and confirmed the written apostolic judgment rather than competing with it.

Philip's Four Daughters — Women Who Prophesied

- Philip the evangelist had four unmarried daughters "which did prophesy" (Acts 21:8–9).
- Scripture gives neither their names nor the content of their prophecies.
- Their presence confirms that women exercised the gift of prophecy in the apostolic period (compare Acts 2:17–18; 1 Cor. 11:5).

III. Prophets in the Apostolic Assemblies

A Gift Given by God

- God set prophets in the assembly after apostles and before teachers in the ordering of 1 Corinthians 12:28.
- Prophecy was distributed by the Spirit according to His will, not acquired by training or claimed through personal ambition (1 Cor. 12:10–11).
- Romans speaks of prophecy according to "the proportion of faith," emphasizing faithful exercise within the grace given (Rom. 12:6).

Revelation for Edification

- The one prophesying spoke "to edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3).
- Prophecy could disclose what had been revealed to another believer present in the meeting (1 Cor. 14:29–31).
- It could also expose the secrets of an unbeliever's heart, bringing conviction that God was truly among them (1 Cor. 14:24–25).
- Edification did not reduce prophecy to an ordinary sermon; the chapter repeatedly describes it as revelation given by the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:26, 30).

Order and Judgment

- Prophets were to speak by two or three, and the others were to judge (1 Cor. 14:29).
- One speaker was to yield when revelation was given to another; genuine inspiration did not excuse disorder (1 Cor. 14:30–33).
- "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets," so a claim of uncontrollable spiritual impulse was no defense for confusion (1 Cor. 14:32).
- The apostolic command governed prophetic activity, for God is the author of peace in the assemblies (1 Cor. 14:33, 37–40).

IV. Prophets, Apostles, and Revelation

The Foundation of the Church

- The household of God is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:19–20).
- The mystery of Christ was revealed "unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph. 3:4–6).
- **Note:** "The mystery of Christ" may refer, at least in part, to the Spirit-given revelation that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus said the Spirit would "testify of me" and "glorify me" (John 15:26; 16:13–15); Paul said no one can say that Jesus is Lord "but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3); and the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost supported Peter's declaration that Jesus is "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32–36; compare 1 John 5:6).
- Their ministry belongs to the laying of a revelatory foundation, not to repeated construction of new foundations in every generation.

A Ministry During Transition

- Acts presents a period in which Israel's kingdom hope, the Jerusalem apostles, Gentile inclusion, Pauline revelation, and sign gifts appear together.
- Prophets served during this transition by revealing divine direction, warning of coming events, and strengthening assemblies before the New Testament revelation was complete and unified.
- Paul explains that prophecies would fail and special knowledge would vanish when the partial condition gave way to maturity (1 Cor. 13:8–12).
- Ephesians likewise describes apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers as gifts connected with movement toward unity and maturity (Eph. 4:11–13).

Prophecy Is Not the Same as Scripture

- Not every prophecy was preserved in writing: Scripture records that Philip's daughters prophesied without recording their words.
- Every biblical writing is inspired, but not every spoken revelation was intended to become part of the biblical canon.
- The prophetic gift and the writing of Scripture overlap in some people, but they are not identical activities.

V. True and False Prophecy

Prophecy Was to Be Tested

- Believers were not to despise prophesyings, but they were commanded to "prove all things" and hold fast what was good (1 Thess. 5:20–21).
- Prophetic claims were therefore neither to be dismissed automatically nor accepted gullibly.

False Prophets Remain a Danger

- John warned that many false prophets had gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).
- Peter warned that false teachers would arise among believers just as false prophets had arisen among Israel (2 Pet. 2:1).
- A claim to revelation was never self-authenticating; it had to withstand doctrinal and apostolic judgment.