

THE ROLE OF PROPHECY TODAY

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Jeff Louie

Western Seminary San Jose

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

BLS 502XS, Old Testament III: Isaiah to Micah

By

Brian LePort, Box 032

October 16, 2008

There is no one in the New Testament church that mirrors the role of the prophet to the people of Israel prior to the arrival of Messiah. First, the people of God, at this juncture in history, are not represented by national Israel. Therefore the audience and the era are so drastically different that it makes no sense to speak of anyone resembling a Hebrew prophet. Second, the covenant that the Hebrew prophets pointed toward has been replaced by a new covenant that the prophets foresaw. Therefore the foundation on which the Hebrew prophet stood is no longer capable of sustaining the people of God in relation to God.

There may be a day when a prophet like the Hebrew prophets emerges. The Book of Revelation appears to indicate that it will be that type of prophetic role that will emerge near the end of days (Revelation 11:1-13). It may even be said that in some sense the Apostles played a role similar to the Hebrew prophets in that the Apostles served as oracles sent by God and also that the Apostles often wrote Spirit-inspired authoritative letters. This does not change the fact that most of the New Testament era has been void of a prophet like the Hebrew prophets.

This though does not mean that there are not prophets in the New Testament era. It simply means that the role of the prophet is similar, yet different, from the role of the Hebrew prophet. To best understand the role of the New Testament prophet one should probably examine (1) the Prophet Agabus who is mentioned in the Book of Acts and (2) the gift of prophecy mentioned in First Corinthians.

The Prophet Agabus appears in Acts 11:28 and 21:10. In both of these accounts Agabus is given foresight into *events in the very near future*. In 11:28 Agabus is lead by the Spirit to declare a coming famine. In 21:10 Agabus is called a prophet and the narrative credits him with foreseeing the arrest of the Apostle Paul by Roman authorities.

While the daughters of Philip are noted to be prophetesses, there is no description of what that may consist of or what actions may verify that claim. Agabus on the other hand is seen as someone led by the Holy Spirit who has insight into events that may soon impact the Church. Unlike the Hebrew prophets it does not appear that the nature of his office has much to do with eschatological predictions or international politics. Also, it is obvious that Agabus functions within the Church, and not Israel.

This differs from the prophets of Israel. The Hebrew prophets were called to proclaim covenantal promises and curses. The prophets would proclaim exile, but then remind Israel/Judah of the promises given to King David. The prophets would give guidance, but it was directed toward the health of the nation, not the purpose of a proclamation movement. And the prophets foresaw the future, but often it was the much more distant future than what Agabus is depicted as seeing.

In the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he mentions prophets and the gift of prophecy. The prophet is the second mentioned in a list of offices given to the church (12:27), but the role of the office is not described. Unlike the role of the Pastor/Bishop there is nothing like 1 and 2 Timothy or Titus that clarifies what is expected out of a New Testament prophet. It simply says that they exist, or existed.

In 11:4-8 Paul writes about men and women prophesying in the Church gathering. It appears to be a formal action (hence, the mention of gender distinction and cultural garb), and an act of proclamation, but that is where the details cease. In 14:1-5 prophecy appears to be a common place expression in Church gatherings and is actually preferred over speaking in tongues. It is described as something that builds the church, encourages, and brings consolation. But that is the extent of the matter. Paul does not say what actually happens when someone

prophesies. We may gather from this text that it is a speech act, somewhat like 'preaching' today, but distinct from teaching the Scriptures since the role of teacher, and teaching, are not merged with the prophet or prophecy.

Whether or not there are prophets in the church today is debated. As regards Scripture there is nothing in the New Testament that hints at any cessation of these offices or gifts. On the other hand we do see in Church history periods without recorded expressions of these gifts (except amongst some sects), and we do see offices submerge (like Apostle) while other emerge (Pastor/Bishop) to take their place.

It is likely that there are legitimate prophets in the Church today, but it may be that the North American Church is less familiar with them because (1) the Church is more established and therefore may not need that office and/or (2) the worldview of most North Americans is not compatible with the type of actions that surround a prophet. But whatever form a prophet may take, and the New Testament only gives us a glimpse, it is much different that the prophets that proclaimed faithfulness to YHWH to Israel.