

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Agabus And The Gift Of Prophecy

April 23rd, 2023

Acts 11:27-30

Acts 21:8-14

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 11:27-30; that’s on page 920 in your pew Bibles. As you look that up, let me remind you of where we are in terms of the flow of this story. Last Sunday Pastor Rob walked us through the AFTERMATH of Peter’s evangelistic visit to the household of Cornelius – who was a Gentile. It took the church a while to figure out the shape, breadth and parameters of the NEW Covenant. When you are used to the shape, breadth and parameters of the OLD Covenant, certain changes are going to feel ALIEN and possibly even unwelcome. Jesus warned us about this. He said:

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. ³⁸ But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. (Luke 5:37–38 ESV)

The gift of the Holy Spirit is an absolute GAME CHANGER – so YES – certain things are going to be different on the other side. There is a reason they call it the New Covenant, right? Thanks be to God!

We talked about the NEXT story in Acts 11 back when we discussed the Hidden Years of the Apostle Paul – we talked about him bursting onto the scene in Jerusalem and then being sent for further seasoning in Tarsus before being recalled to pastor alongside of Barnabas in the church at Antioch. That brings us here to this somewhat controversial story about the prophet Agabus at the end of Acts 11. I'll begin reading at verse 27. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:27–30 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As you can see for yourself, this passage raises a couple of very interesting questions, which will be easier to answer if we read it alongside of the OTHER story about Agabus in Acts 21:7-14; so keep a finger or a bookmark here in Acts 11 and turn forward in your Bibles to that passage which you can find on page 930 in your pew Bible.

I told you when we started this series that our goal was very specific. We were combing through these foundational narratives in order to help us think through what the church should look like and how the church should be functioning. Now feels like a good time to “rethink church”. Just like how after your basement floods, it's a good time to pick out new carpet. If you're going to renovate – now is the time! So we're looking BACK in order to plan our way forward – and I think there might be something helpful for us here in this story, so listen again to the Word of the Lord in Acts 21:7-14:

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus

came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:7–14 ESV)

Alright – if you didn't understand why this is controversial after the first reading, I'm guessing now you do. This little snapshot of the early church seems to reveal some assumptions that were common THEN that are no longer common now. In fact, that's one of the MOST interesting aspects of this story – the fact that Luke throws this information out there seeming with no expectation at all that we would need some help in understanding it. It's as though he ASSUMES that – of course we have prophets in our midst who predict socio-economic crises. Of course we have people in our church who have 4 daughters living at home who are widely recognized as prophets. Of course we know when to listen to prophets and when to reject or ignore their counsel. Of course! Of course! We do that sort of thing here all the time!

Except that we don't – and therein lies the controversy.

Why don't we have these kinds of experiences?

Should we be having these kinds of experiences?

And if so, how so?

Getting at those kinds of answers is the ENTIRE POINT of this series, so let's slow down and attempt to organize some of what we've seen so far in the text. Looking at these two stories together, I think the first thing it might be useful for us to notice is that, clearly:

- 1. Women can be prophets**

Now, is that the most PROFOUND point being made in the text? No. But it is transparently there and I think it is important for us to register our affirmation of that. As conservative, Bible believing evangelicals we are constantly being forced to defend our belief that men and women are EQUAL BUT DIFFERENT. That is the traditional Christian and Biblical position. We believe that both men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and are RULING creatures of enormous dignity and worth – BUT we also believe that in the providence of God our leadership will be exercised in slightly different ways and in slightly different contexts – and it is that NUANCE that is currently under assault from the culture – and so we spend most of our time on the defensive. The culture knows what we DENY and therefore it is important for us to be loud and clear about what we AFFIRM.

And we affirm – as Bible readers – that women can be prophets.

We've got 5 prophets specifically identified in this story and 4 of them are women – so I'm not sure how anyone or why anyone would want to argue that point. This reality was anticipated very early on in the Book of Acts. In Acts 2 in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, quoting the prophet Joel:

“in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and **your daughters** shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;
¹⁸ even on my male servants and **female servants** in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.” (Acts 2:17–18 ESV)

So when we meet female prophets in Acts 21 this is not supposed to be surprising to us. God said he was going to do it – God obviously did do it – praise the Lord!

But to be clear, saying that a woman can be a prophet is not the same thing as saying that she can be a pastor – that argument is often made inside the church by our progressive friends, but I don't believe the logic holds.

A prophet is not a pastor.

Just like how in the Old Testament a prophet was not necessarily a priest or a king – in fact, very often in the Old Testament it was the job of the prophet to speak truth to POWER from outside the official hierarchy of the covenant community. We think for example of the time when the prophet Nathan was sent by God to rebuke King David. He said: You are the man!! What is this that you have done!! You stole your neighbour's wife!! You killed your neighbour to cover up your sin!! What in the world were you thinking? Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised the Lord and done this despicable thing – 2 Samuel 12:7-10.

Nathan was a powerful prophet, greatly used by God – but saying that is not to say that Nathan became a priest or a king and likewise to say that Philip had four daughters who prophesied is not to say that they were pastors or elders.

The argument doesn't follow.

Listen, the bottom line is this: I think there are many gifted prophetesses in the church right now speaking truth to power – they're saying things that the people in charge need to hear – but that doesn't make them pastors and elders. We don't have to be THE SAME to have equal dignity and worth. What we need to do is listen to each other, appreciate each other and devote ourselves to the tasks and spheres to which we have been assigned.

We'll talk more about this in a few weeks. We're going to do an Excursus Sermon on The Eldership: What it is, what it isn't and who should be a part of it, but for now, I just want to make the points that are clearly and obviously arising out of the text and given what we've encountered so far in the Book of Acts I think it is necessary and helpful for us to affirm that women can be prophets; thanks be to God!

The second thing that needs to be said here, on the basis of what we've read so far is that prophecy must be discerned.

2. Prophecy must be discerned

I think that's one of the most remarkable features of this story! In Acts 11 Agabus gives a word of prophecy that is received by the church and acted upon but then in Acts 21 he's got another word and this time his word is weighed, discerned and largely rejected. Look again at Acts 21:12-15. Luke says that Agabus shared his prophet word – he acted out a prophetic drama, then he says:

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” ¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:12–15 ESV)

What in the world is going on there, because that is not something you would expect to find anywhere in the Old Testament. Wayne Grudem remarks upon that, he says:

“It is significant because Paul simply disobeyed their words, something he would not have done if he had thought that they were speaking the very words of God”.¹

In this story it very much appears as if Paul is taking their prophetic words seriously but not authoritatively, which is exactly how Paul instructed others to respond to the words of prophecy that they received as well. He said in 1 Thessalonians 5:

“Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 ESV)

Which is exactly what Paul does here.

Remember in Acts 2 we were told that in the New Testament era prophecy would in some sense be generalized. Old people, young people, men, women, rich, poor. God will pour out his Spirit

¹ Wayne Grudem, The Gift Of Prophecy In The New Testament And Today (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 75.

upon them and they shall prophesy – but clearly not all with equal giftedness, equal accuracy and equal authority.

Some people are going to be more sensitive to the Spirit than others. Some people are going to be more self-aware than others – they are going to be better at sorting out their own voice from the voice of the Spirit. Some people are going to be more biblically literate than others and therefore better able to sort out when a spiritual sense is likely from God and when it is more likely from the devil, and therefore given this wide spectrum of ability, obviously we cannot and should not treat all words of prophesy equally.

We're going to have to test them. We're going to have to discern them. We're going to have to keep what is good and get rid of the rest – as we see the Apostle Paul doing in this story.

The third thing we need to say, based on the texts we have read is that:

3. Prophecy is not ultimate

As we've just mentioned, the Apostle Paul felt free to disregard the prophetic word delivered by Agabus. Agabus spoke as he believed the Spirit was leading him to speak but the Apostle Paul had a clearer and more authoritative understanding of his purpose and mission. This is the intended order of things in the Christian church. Paul makes that abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 14:

“If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.” (1 Corinthians 14:37–38 ESV)

The prophets in Corinth were required to acknowledge Paul's superior authority as an Apostle. If they did not acknowledge his authority then they were not to be recognized in the church. This is not all that different to how things operated under the Old Covenant. In the Old Testament, the revelation given by God through Moses was foundational, and any subsequent prophet who did not align with the revelation given through Moses was not to be recognized.

So here.

The revelation given by God through the Apostles is foundational. It is normative and controlling and therefore any “small p” prophet who diverges from that authoritative foundation is not to be recognized.

I would argue that it has been the failure of the church to enforce this guideline that has led to so much confusion and malpractice with respect to the gift of prophecy.

And yet.

The abuse of a thing is not the negation of a thing.

We acknowledge this basic truth in other areas, don't we?

Let me ask you a question: has the ministry of the pulpit ever been abused in the church?

Of course it has!! There is a reason we sometimes refer to this as “the bully pulpit” because it is so easy for a person to stand in this authoritative box and to become ENGORGED with a sense of power and importance. And it is so easy to begin passing off personal opinions and convictions AS IF THEY ARE THE VERY WORD OF GOD.

That has happened countless times over the course of Christian history.

So what do we do?

Do we outlaw preaching?

Or do we insist that it be done RIGHT and that it be DONE within certain binding parameters?

Well – might I suggest – as with preaching, so with prophecy.

So what would that actually look like?

Let me leave you today with 3 simple guidelines for exercising the gift of prophecy within the Christian church.

3 Guidelines For Exercising The Gift Of Prophecy Within The Church:

1. Never use prophecy to do what the Word and Wisdom have been given to do

A hammer is a wonderful tool, but if you try to use your hammer to open a can of tuna you're going to make a mess in the kitchen. So it is with the gift of prophecy. Some people fall in love with it and then to try to use it in situations where it has no business being used.

If there is a member of the church sleeping with his father's new wife – what should the Board of Elders do? Should they pray for a vision or a dream or a Word of knowledge?

No!

They should open their Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5 or Leviticus 18 and conduct themselves accordingly.

Suppose someone asks you: "Should I co-sign my neighbour's loan application?"

Well again, why would you ask for a word of prophecy on that when the wisdom of the Holy Spirit has already been given to you? Proverbs 17:18 says:

"One who lacks sense gives a pledge and puts up security in the presence of his neighbor." (Proverbs 17:18 ESV)

There is a whole section of the Bible providing guidance on how to make financial decisions, how to make relational decisions and how to make social decisions. The gift of prophecy is not intended to supplant or replace what has already been given.

The OVERUSE of this tool – just like the TOTAL NEGLECT of this tool – can get the church into trouble.

We want to use it the right way, in the right situation.

Now, in the Preaching Workshop this week, the fellas suggested that I give an example of what that would look like and I think that is probably a good idea. Listen, I understand that all of us are going to approach this story through the lens of our own experience. If we have seen the gift of prophecy abused then we're going to hear all kinds of things that AREN'T BEING SAID. I'm going to get emails this week, I guarantee you, from people who are hearing things I'm not saying.

“Pastor, are you saying that people can just write whole new books of the Bible based on dreams they had after eating expired yogurt?”

No. I'm definitely not saying that. So maybe an example would be useful.

Several years ago we became aware that the property to the northwest of us was coming up for sale. We talked about it briefly one night at Elder Prayer, which we use to host in my office, and after the meeting, one of the elders, I believe it was Bob – suggested that we walk over and pray over the building. We didn't know whether God wanted us to buy it. There was no verse in the Bible that we could appeal to. There was no principle of wisdom that would warn us against it – we were in a good financial position – but an argument could have been made that the money we had should have been spent on missions.

So what should we do?

We didn't know so we went over and we huddled up together and we prayed. And afterward we all had a strong sense from the Lord that he wanted us to purchase the building. Which we did. It is now what we refer to as "The Leadership Centre."

Is that weird? Is that charismatic? Or is that just the sort of guidance we should expect and treasure in the New Covenant church?

Listen, friends, if we're going to make our way in a dark and fallen world, we're going to need something alongside of the principles and precepts that are given to us in the Word. That isn't to disparage the Word – because it is having the Word that allows us to discern and apply the Guidance we are given.

That leads us to the second guideline I want to highlight here. We need to use this gift cautiously and appropriately and of course we need to:

2. Test everything

Paul listened to what Agabus and the others were saying. He didn't rebuke them for speaking out of turn. He didn't accuse them of being led astray by the devil. But neither did he receive their guidance unquestioningly. He understood that prophecy of this sort involves hearing and interpretation.

Agabus may have discerned in the Spirit that hardship and suffering lay ahead for the Apostle Paul – but then Agabus had to interpret what the Spirit was saying AND what the Spirit intended for him to DO with what he was saying – and in at least one of those places, Agabus clearly got it wrong.

What if the Spirit was showing Agabus these things, NOT so that he could warn Paul away from

the suffering that lay ahead in his path but so that he could pray for Paul as he endured it?

Agabus appears to have ASSUMED that suffering was something Paul should make every attempt to avoid – but Paul knew very well that it was the will of God for the Messiah to suffer. That was the essence and substance of the Gospel he preached. Every time he was given the opportunity he opened his mouth and declared:

“that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:23 ESV)

Paul understood that the path of the Gospel went DOWN and then UP and he was bound and determined to walk on that same path – “so thank you, brother Agabus, for that message of warning and concern – please use it to motivate your prayers and intercessions on my behalf.”

Do you see that?

He TESTED the word of prophecy against the authoritative outline of the Apostolic Gospel. He kept what was in alignment and he rejected that which had been distorted by empathy, ignorance and misinterpretation.

And if we are to make proper use of the gift of prophecy in the church again in the future, we must be prepared to do the same.

Test everything.

Yes.

And then also – and I’ve put this one last, because I think it is the one that we need to hear the most – do not despise prophecies.

3. Do not despise prophecies

The Apostle Paul said both. He said to the Thessalonians:

“Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 ESV)

If I were preaching this sermon in a Pentecostal church I think I would reverse of order of my application. I would start here so that I could build up to TEST EVERYTHING and DON'T OVERUSE.

But that's not what most us need to hear, is it?

Not many of us in here are in danger of OVER RELYING on this particular gift. Not many of us in here are regularly finding ourselves in situations where we need to TEST EVERYTHING – because our general habit is to ADMIT NOTHING.

Which is why we need to hear this:

“Do not despise prophecies” (1 Thessalonians 5:20 ESV)

We can't pat ourselves on the back for taking the Bible seriously if we aren't willing to do that here. We love to talk about how we are taking the Bible seriously when it comes to sexuality and gender – but what about here? Are we going to take this passage in the Bible seriously?

This passage seems to be saying that the gift of prophecy is something Jesus purchased for the church through his death and resurrection.

So it's a good gift!

It's a precious gift!

Despite the fact that it can be abused.

Despite the fact that some people are going to overuse it – they’re going to mess up our house trying to open cans of tuna with a hammer.

Even still. It is a good and precious gift. Therefore:

“Do not despise prophecies” (1 Thessalonians 5:20 ESV)

Listen, friends, I don’t know what tomorrow holds, but I will tell you this, on principle, it makes me very nervous heading into the future having rejected a tool that Jesus believed we would need.

So I say we bring it back!

Carefully. Cautiously. Recognizing and celebrating all the parameters and structures of the Apostolic Gospel – yes, yes, yes!

But also affirming that properly understood, properly discerned, properly constrained and properly applied – the gift of prophecy IS a blessing and a kindness to the church – thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.