

If All Were Prophets

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Text: Numbers 11:23-30; Joel 2:28-29;
Acts 2:14-18

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. It was from this moment, fifty days after the Resurrection, that the people of Jesus Christ, called Christians, were empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the words of Christ, and to fulfill the Great Commission. It was on this day, fifty days after the Resurrection, that people from around the world, the Jews of the Diaspora, gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Shavuot. This observance is also known as the Feast of Weeks, as it occurs seven weeks after Passover. It is also known as First Fruits, for it celebrates the first harvest of grapes, figs, pomegranates, wheat, barley, and honey. It is also known as the Feast of the Giving of the Law. On this day, Jews celebrate God giving them the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. The book of Ruth is read and the meals consist of cheese, honeycakes, and milk, to remember the Land of Promise was described as a “land of milk and honey.” Milk and honey are remembered as symbols of Torah, because the sages considered the Torah sweet as honey and nourishing as milk.^{1, 2}

At Mt. Sinai, God gave Israel the Law. They lived by that law, or tried to, through the times of the judges and kings. That they often failed is somewhat beside the point, because whether or not they succeeded in keeping the law, it was the law that formed the basis of their society. Obedient or not, the foundation of Jewish society and life was the Torah. It was the Torah that formed and informed their lives. But they did find it hard to keep. So God, through Jeremiah, promised “*The days are coming,*” declares the Lord, “*when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts*” (Jer 33:31-34). And through Ezekiel, God promised, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ez 36:26-27). At Mt. Sinai, God wrote his law on tablets of stone and gave them a book. At Pentecost, God wrote his law on hearts of flesh and gave them His Spirit.

But something else happened on that day, and I must give Don credit for pointing this out to me. From time to time, the question of women in ministry, or women pastors, arises. Someone will ask me - my brother did - or I will see it on social media - why our church allows women to be pastors. Before I go on, though, I need to give you a quick definition:

¹ Ben M. Edidin, *Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1941), pp 164-65

² Philip Goodman, *The Shavuot Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992)

Ephesians 4 lists four principle forms of ministry - *Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service* (Eph 4:11-12). The last word in that is διακονίας (diakonias), meaning deacons - for the works of ministry, the works of deacons, the works of service to the cause of Christ. And that word *prophet* is a troublesome word. What is a prophet? Well, if you look back at the four major prophets and the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament, you will see a mixed bag of messages. A small portion of their message is foretelling the future, as Isaiah predicting the Messiah (7:14; 9:6-7; 40:1-5; 52:13-53:11) and judgment on the surrounding nations. Most of the words of the prophets are what we call forth-telling, proclaiming God's word to kings and people. Prophets are revelatory. That is, they reveal God, God's word, God's purposes, and God's plans, and warn of God's judgment. Those sixteen, whose writings we possess, were preachers of God's word. So prophets and preachers are the same thing. Prophecy isn't only about the future; it is also about God's word for us today, here and now. That is, prophet are proclaimers, and prophecy is proclamation.

Now, we need to go back to Numbers 11. Moses is considered the first and greatest prophet of Israel. In Deuteronomy 18, God promised that he would raise up from among the people another prophet just like Moses who would speak the words of God (Dt. 18:17-19). The people, frightened by the thunder and lightning from Mt. Horeb, had begged Moses to ask God not to speak to them directly, but only through Moses. What would they do when Moses was gone? God would eventually raise up another such mouthpiece of God. In the meantime, Moses had to deal with the grumbling and complaining of the people. They fussed about water; they fretted about bread; they cried because they had no meat; they were tired; their feet were sore; "we're all going to die." They weren't even weeks in to their escape from slavery before they were begging to go back to the security of slavery.

In the midst of all of that, Moses had just had all he could take. So, he took his complaint to the Lord. Who else? Moses brought the seventy elders to convey God's message to the people. As the seventy elders gathered with Moses, *the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied* (Nu. 11:25). Interestingly, two elders, who should have gone out with Moses, stayed in the camp. But the Spirit rested on them too, and they prophesied in the camp (Nu 11:26). Have you noticed, when God does something we don't expect, somebody complains? That's not the way we do it? Who said he could do that? And somebody complained that these two, Eldad and Medad, were prophesying in the camp. Isn't that against the rules? Even Joshua called on Moses to put a stop to the unauthorized prophesying. You need to do something!

Moses' tired reply: I see him just sigh so deeply, as he says, *"I wish that all God's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"* (Nu 11:29). I wish that all God's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them.

Jump ahead about 1500 years to the prophet Joel. His small book is mostly concerned with a plague of locusts that he sees as judgment on Israel's sin. But after the judgment is complete, Joel hears God's promise: *"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days"* (Joel 2:28-29). Joel

looks forward to the day when God's Holy Spirit will indeed rest upon all of God's people. In that day, in answer to Moses' wish, all of God's people would be prophets – including, I see, your daughters, the women of God. Your sons and *your daughters* will prophesy. The Spirit would be poured out on both men *and women*. It would not be just a few, but all of God's people. It would not be just the aged and experienced, but also on the young. It would not be just the men, but even women would be included.

Now we need to move forward in time another six or seven hundred years. Jesus' resurrection is past and he has ascended into heaven. In obedience, the disciples have been waiting and praying in Jerusalem. Peter has become something of a leader and recalls that the Twelve is diminished by one since Judas' suicide. He thinks a replacement is in order. I only point this out to show you that women were among the 120 praying in the upper room. One of my reservations about the NIV is their consistent translation of "brothers" ἄδελφοί (adelphoi) as "brothers and sisters." But, to be clear, we have used "brethren" or "brothers" in the church for hundreds of years in reference to all believers, for the simple reason that Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia that *there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28). In the Church, then, brothers is generic and refers to all of us. But more than that, when Peter begins to speak, he addresses them as "men and brothers" (Greek ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί), meaning that the gathered believers are not just men but that there are women among them. So the NIV renders Peter's opening as *Brothers and sisters ...* And so, a few days later, when the Day of Pentecost comes, the Holy Spirit anoints them, and they begin to speak, we must know that women were among those who were speaking.

And Peter quotes Joel's prophecy as a response to the criticism. No, we aren't drunk. It's too early in the morning for that. What you are seeing is this: This is the very thing that Joel prophesied when he said, "*In the last days, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons **and daughters** will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men **and women**, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and **they** will prophesy'*" (Acts 2:17-18). In the Church, in the Body of Christ, Moses' wish that all God's people would be prophets is realized. Not all God's men, but all God's people, both sons and daughters, both men and women. And they, all of them, will proclaim the word of Christ. They will speak out the promises of God.

Now, the controversy centers on two New Testament verses, one in 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul tells the women to be silent in the church. The problem with that is that just a couple chapters earlier, in chapter 11, Paul wrote this: *every women who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered ...* (1 Cor 11:5). There's more in that than we have time for this morning, but it is important to note that Paul was giving instructions to women who prayed or prophesied in the worship service. He is giving instructions to women preachers.

The second one is in 1 Timothy 2:12, where he tells the young pastor, *A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.* And here, context is crucial. This was in Ephesus, where the cult of Artemis, the fertility goddess, was worshiped, and where all those who served in the temple of

Artemis were female. Females were the religious leaders in Ephesus, and Paul was concerned about the influence of the female convert bringing her old habits into the church, usurping the authority of their pastor - Timothy, and trying to disrupt the teaching of the gospel. They were, instead, to be students in the same way the males were, listening and learning quietly and submissively to their teacher. The point we need to understand here is that Ephesus and Corinth were special situations.

But the answer to the question lies in a broader view of the Scripture. In the Old Testament, we read of women prophets: Miriam, the sister of Moses; the judge Deborah; Jael, who drove a stake through the head of the enemy general, is sometimes considered a prophet; Huldah, the wife of Shallum, who was consulted by the high priest Hilkiah and his associates in 2 Kings 22:14 and 2 Chronicles 34:22; the wife of Isaiah, whom he refers to as “the prophetess” (Is 8:3). Talitha pointed me to Psalm 68:11 - *The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throne*. God used women in the Old Testament to proclaim his word. My question, then, is this: Was God disappointed with those women, the mighty throng who proclaimed his word? Did God decide in the interim that women are unreliable witnesses? The answer must be no, for women were the first witnesses to the resurrection, the first to see the empty tomb, the first to hear, “He is risen!”, the first to see the Risen Christ, and the first to tell the other disciples the good news. Women were, in fact, the first preachers of the gospel.

And then we have Paul commending women in ministry in Rome, sending a woman, Phoebe, with that letter and naming her a deacon of the church; Priscilla who taught the way more perfectly to the eloquent preacher Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Adronicus and his sister Junia, Paul called *outstanding among the apostles* (Ro 16:7), and three women, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis, who have *worked hard in the Lord* (Ro 16:12). Just as Timothy is called a co-worker (Ro 16:21) so are the two women at odds with each other in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). Paul notes that *they have contended at my side ..., along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers*. The New Testament is brimming over with women in ministry, given the same status, called *deacons*, along with Timothy, Clement, and Epaphras.

There are a couple other scriptures used to object to women in ministry. I don’t have time, but they are just as easily dealt with. I will close with this: God has called people, both men and women, to his divine service, as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers. If God has called, who are we to say, no, because you are a woman you we won’t let you follow God’s call. Who are we to stand in God’s way? “I wish that all God’s people were prophets.” And so, God poured out his Holy Spirit on the whole church, empowering your sons and your daughters, anointing both men and women to preach and to proclaim the word of Christ. If God has called, and he calls both men and women, we must obey.