

Where are the Apostles and Prophets?

Andy. Pastor, have you time to help me with another question? It's all about apostles and prophets in today's church.

Pastor. Ah yes. I've been expecting that one ever since our discussion on speaking in tongues. What's your problem?

Andy. Well, the point that was made to me, and it seemed very reasonable at the time, was that in Ephesians 4:11 Paul tells us that God has given certain leadership gifts to his church, and included among these are apostles and prophets. According to the next verse, these gifts, together with evangelists, pastors and teachers, are essential for building up the church. My question is this: If we claim to have the last three, where are the apostles and prophets?

Pastor. That question is very easy to answer Andy. I believe we do not need apostles and prophets in the church today, so they are no longer available to us.

Andy. But there's no hint of that in Ephesians 4, so if you take out apostles and prophets, why don't you dismiss evangelists, pastors and teachers as well? If God says he gives them, who are we to say we don't want them?

Pastor. I didn't say I don't want them, I simply said God doesn't make them available to the church any more.

Andy. Can you prove that?

Pastor. Yes, very easily. All you have to do is read Paul's letter to the Ephesians from the beginning and not start at chapter 4. Paul has already written about apostles and prophets in chapters 2 and 3 and there he tells us who they are.

Andy. So what does he say about them?

Pastor. This letter is written to young believers, and Paul begins by explaining how they became Christians with all the privileges that result from following Christ. In chapter 2 he describes the way of salvation, and by verse 19 he is ready to remind them that now they belong to a new Kingdom, and have become members of a family called 'God's household' which consists of both converted Jews and Gentiles, or non-Jews. Then Paul changes the picture to that of a building and says they form a holy temple, with each individual Christian built in like the stone blocks used in a construction.

Andy. I can see that, but where do the apostles and prophets fit into this building?

Pastor. Ephesians 2:20 gives the answer: 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.' The apostles and prophets fit in like foundation blocks, and Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone. When you put up a building Andy, how many times do you lay the foundation?

Andy. Only once of course.

Pastor. So you no more look for a new foundation than you look for a new cornerstone. God goes on building his 'holy temple', the church, throughout every generation; but the foundation and the cornerstone were laid only once.

Andy. Does that mean that the apostles and prophets in Ephesians 4:11 are the apostles and prophets of the first century church and there are no more?

Pastor. That's certainly the logic of what Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 isn't it? In fact, if you turn to chapter 3, Paul dispels any lingering doubt you may have.

Andy. Ah yes, here are the apostles and prophets in verse five.

Pastor. That's right. But again, don't forget Paul didn't start at verse 5. So let's begin at verse one. In fact, better still, go back to the first verse of Paul's letter. You will notice that Paul introduces himself as 'an apostle of Christ Jesus'. He claims to be an apostle, but because he came on the scene later than the other apostles, some of the churches doubted his claim. So here in chapter 3, Paul supports his claim to be an apostle by reminding his readers in verses 2-3 that he had been given a special revelation to share the gospel with them. He describes the gospel as 'the mystery of Christ'. Paul then claims in verse 5, that this revelation was given by the Spirit 'to God's holy apostles and prophets'.

Andy. So the task of the apostles and prophets was to make sure the church proclaimed the true gospel.

Pastor. Exactly. God chose thirteen apostles, including Paul, and an unknown number of prophets, to keep the infant church pure in its doctrine until the New Testament Scriptures were completed. As a matter of fact, in order to prove whether a particular letter or book should be in the New Testament, the early church asked the most important question of all, 'Has it been written by an apostle or through the influence of an apostle?' In other words, the apostles were the foundation of the church because they gave us our New Testament. Their chief purpose was to give us 'the mysteries of Christ'. By the time all the apostles had died, the foundation had been well and truly laid. If you turn to verse 17 of the short letter written by Jude, perhaps around AD 68, you will get more than a strong hint that the work of 'the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ' was nearly complete. He asks his readers to remember what they 'foretold' and what 'they said'. Both are in the past tense. There is no hint of more apostles or an on-going work.

Andy. That means God's gift to the church was those apostles, who by their gospels and letters are today building up the church. So the evangelists, pastors and teachers, by using the New Testament, are building on the foundation. I can see now that we can't use Ephesians to support any modern-day apostles. But weren't there other men called apostles, besides these thirteen?

Pastor. Let's just stay with the thirteen a moment longer. When Judas hanged himself after betraying Christ, you will remember that the disciples realised they must

choose another apostle in order to fulfil Scripture. You can read about this in Acts 1:15-26. Now tell me, what were the qualifications for becoming an apostle?

Andy. He had to be someone who had accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry right up to the time of his resurrection. In fact, he had to be an eyewitness of the resurrection.

Pastor. Yes. You may also remember that in Mark 3:14, we are told Christ appointed twelve men 'designating them apostles, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.' Their qualification was to have been with Christ. This is why Paul goes to some length to explain in his letter to the church at Galatia that he was a unique apostle. Although he had not lived with Christ and the disciples, he had received a special revelation from God. Also, in 1 Corinthians 15:7-8, Paul links himself with the original apostles by claiming that the risen Christ did in fact appear to him. In other words, he was a special case, and there were no other special cases.

Andy. Is this the way we are to take the apostles and prophets listed in 1 Corinthians 12:28? Are they the same ones?

Pastor. Of course. We understand 1 Corinthians 12:28 in the light of Ephesians 2:20.

Andy. But weren't other people in the New Testament called apostles?

Pastor. Yes they were, but we'll have to see what the word 'apostle' means in the Greek, which is the language our New Testament was written in. One thing is clear, the New Testament writers didn't invent the word. They used a common word that originally referred to a military expedition, especially a naval campaign. The word was eventually used to refer to the admiral of the fleet. It was occasionally used of an ambassador and then of any messenger or delegate. So in the New Testament it can have the special meaning of the apostles chosen and sent out by Christ, of whom Paul was one, and it can also refer to a Christian sent as a messenger from one church to another. In this secondary sense, in Philippians 2:25, Epaphroditus is called 'your messenger', the actual word is apostle, 'whom you sent to take care of my needs.' Epaphroditus wasn't an apostle like Paul and the other twelve, he was just a representative of the church at Philippi, sent to care for Paul. The word is used in exactly the same way in 2 Corinthians 8:23, where Paul speaks of some unnamed brothers who are 'representatives' of the churches.

Andy. Isn't it similar to the word 'deacon' in the New Testament? Sometimes it refers to a special office within the church, as in 1 Timothy 3:8, but the word can also be used of anyone who serves or ministers to others, because that's what the word 'deacon' means. Paul calls himself a 'servant' of the gospel in Colossians 1:23, and he uses this word 'deacon'.

Pastor. That's right, except, of course, the deacon is clearly a continuing ministry in the church, whereas, as we have seen, the apostle was foundational.

Andy. I see that. But there are others in the New Testament who are called apostles in a way that seems to mean more than just a representative or messenger.

Pastor. Like who?

Andy. Paul and Barnabas are called 'apostles' in Acts 14:4 and 14. Doesn't the connection of Barnabas with Paul, who was an apostle in the special sense, seem to make Barnabas an apostle as well? Isn't this confirmed by 1 Corinthians 9:6 where Paul draws attention to the right of himself and Barnabas to be supported in their work like 'the other apostles, and the Lord's brothers and Cephas'?

Pastor. Barnabas is the only person who could possibly be thought of as an official apostle, and you have referred to the only two verses that might lead to this confusion. But if you look at the context of 1 Corinthians 9:6 you will notice that in verse 5 Paul refers to three groups of people. There were 'the apostles', 'the Lord's brothers', who clearly were not apostles, and 'Cephas', which is Peter, who was an apostle! So when in the next verse he refers to himself and Barnabas, we cannot honestly say that Paul thought of Barnabas as an apostle like himself. He doesn't actually call Barnabas an apostle does he? In Acts 14:4, where we are told that some of the people of Iconium sided 'with the apostles', we can quite consistently take the word here, and in verse 14 too, in the sense of messengers from the church at Antioch, from where, in chapter 13, they had been sent out. After all Andy, if Barnabas could slip into apostleship without being either selected by the other Apostles, like Matthias who replaced Judas, or by receiving a revelation like Paul, why did Paul need to make such an issue about his own special calling when he wrote to the Corinthians and Galatians?

Andy. All right, but I have two other verses up my sleeve. The first is Galatians 1:9 where Paul writes, 'I saw none of the other apostles - only James, the Lord's brother'. That looks as though Paul considered James as an apostle, but he wasn't one of the twelve was he?

Pastor. No, he wasn't, and from the verse we were just looking at in 1 Corinthians 9:6, it is clear that Paul knew he wasn't, because he distinguishes 'the apostles' from 'the Lord's brothers'. According to Acts 15, James was an elder, not an apostle. Besides, you can correctly understand Galatians 1:9 like this: 'I saw none of the other apostles, I only saw James, the Lord's brother', and then you have no problem!

Andy. My other verse is Romans 16:7, where Paul writes of two people, Andronicus and Junias and claims, 'They are outstanding among the apostles.'

Pastor. That simply means they had an outstanding reputation among the apostles. It's exactly the way we would talk of someone. Those who actively worked with the apostles were well-known and highly respected by them.

Andy. Are there any more references to apostles in the New Testament?

Pastor. Not unless you count the 'super-apostles' Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 11. But he dismisses them in verse 13 as 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.'

Andy. From what you have said, it seems clear that the New Testament reserved the word 'apostle' to refer to the twelve plus Paul, except for a few occasions when the word is used in its secondary sense of a messenger. It is also clear that the apostles were a foundation gift to the church which could never be relaid.

Pastor. That's a good summary Andy.

Andy. So there can be no apostles today?

Pastor. Not in the New Testament sense. Remember, Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the apostles were a foundation gift to the church.

Andy. Don't you think missionaries are apostles?

Pastor. Now you are opening up the whole issue of how you define a missionary! The simple answer is that if we want to be Bible Christians and use Bible language, the word 'apostle' is limited to the foundation leaders of the church.

Andy. As some people are called apostles today, are you saying they are false leaders?

Pastor. Whether or not they are leaders may not be for me to judge, but Paul says they are certainly not apostles. We can't avoid the plain teaching of Ephesians 2:20 on this.

Andy. Don't some Christian groups use the word 'Apostle' simply to refer to leaders who have oversight of other churches? They are appointed to give advice and encouragement, but without being given any special apostolic authority.

Pastor. If they do it is very confusing, and it is unwise to use Bible terms to describe a function that you don't intend to be understood in a biblical way. In the New Testament, the apostles exercised a definite and powerful spiritual authority. Besides, in 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul talks about 'the things that mark an apostle - signs, wonders and miracles'. I don't see anyone today with the same consistently powerful authority as Paul and Peter, for example.

Andy. Can we go back to the gift of prophets? Are you saying that just as apostles were foundational and unrepeatable, so were prophets?

Pastor. Paul says that in Ephesians 2:20 doesn't he?

Andy. Some people take the phrase there to be the same as 'apostle-prophets'. In other words, the apostles, who were also prophets, were foundational. That leaves open the question of whether prophets, who were not apostles, can still be found in today's church.

Pastor. But it's clear from Ephesians 3:5 and 4:11 that we are meant to see the apostles and prophets as two groups. You see all the apostles were prophets, but not all the prophets were apostles.

Andy. In the list of gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul refers to the gift of prophecy. Are you saying that the gift has gone for ever?

Pastor. No, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that prophets and apostles have gone for ever. Of course God reserves the right to speak in a special way to his people if he wants to.

Andy. That confuses me. First you shut the door, then you open it a little. Are we to expect prophecy in the church today or not?

Pastor. If you put it like that I can easily answer your question - No! We are not to expect it.

Andy. Why not?

Pastor. Firstly, because there are no more prophets, as we have already agreed. Secondly, because since the completion of the New Testament we have all the verbal revelation we need. The Bible is sufficient for all our instruction and encouragement and we do not need any more Bible or any more prophecies from God.

Andy. Can you prove that from the New Testament?

Pastor. Yes I can. Let's look first at the New Testament generally and then we'll look at one specific verse. As you read through your New Testament you will notice that prophecy takes on a less prominent position. For example, if you leave aside references to the Old Testament prophets, the only references to prophets or prophecy are in Paul's letter to the Corinthians chapter 12-14, the three in Ephesians that we started with, and one each in his letters to Rome, to Thessalonica and to Timothy. That's all you find in the entire New Testament. None of the other writers has anything to say about the subject at all. Now the chronological order of Paul writing those letters is: Thessalonians, Corinthians, Romans and Timothy. The first was written around AD 50 and the last some thirteen years later. In fact the single reference in 1 Timothy 4:14 to 'a prophetic message' was to something that happened thirteen years previously. Now, why do you think less and less is said about prophecy as you progress through the New Testament?

Andy. I don't know.

Pastor. I suggest it is because as the New Testament books were complete, the churches relied more upon preaching and teaching to expound the apostolic revelations and less upon prophecies.

Andy. Can you prove that?

Pastor. If you turn to 1 Timothy 4, you have some of Paul's final instructions to Timothy shortly before the great apostle's death. He is urging Timothy to stand firm as a young pastor in Ephesus and then he urges him to pay special attention to three things. You will find them in verse 13: 'the public reading of Scripture, preaching and teaching'. Notice there is no mention of prophecy . . .

Andy. . . . Except in the next verse.

Pastor. Which, as I have said, was a prophetic message when Timothy, in Acts 16:1-3, was set apart for his work, and that was probably in the year AD 49, at least thirteen years earlier. Much of New Testament Scripture had been written during those thirteen years. Incidentally the 'prophetic message' that Paul refers to in 1 Timothy 4:14, was about Timothy's 'gift' which must have been his preaching and teaching, because nothing else is mentioned. As Paul draws closer to his death, he is clearly more and more anxious to establish the importance of preaching and he never encourages prophecy. In 1 Timothy 5:17 he urges double honour to be given to those whose work is preaching the Word and teaching. Almost his last charge to Timothy is found in 2 Timothy 4:2, 'Preach the Word . . . with great patience and careful instruction' - again, not a mention of prophecy.

Andy. What about the apostle Peter? Does he show the same emphasis upon preaching as against prophecy?

Pastor. Certainly. If you turn to 2 Peter 2:1 you will find the apostle warning the young churches of false teachers who will come among them. In order to show them this is nothing new and therefore they need not be surprised by it, Peter reminds them that, in the Old Testament, there were false prophets among the people. Notice that his comparison is not that there will be false prophets among the young churches, but that there will be 'false teachers among you'. The *prophets* in the Old Testament were compared to the *teachers* in the New. Peter wasn't so worried about false prophets because he knew the churches would not be looking for *any* prophets; it was false teachers Peter warned them to be on their guard against.

Andy. On the other hand, in 1 John 4:1, John warns against the many false prophets that have gone out into the world.

Pastor. Yes, Andy, but that is the only reference to false prophets in the whole New Testament, apart from a Jewish sorcerer in Acts 13:6 and the false prophet in the book of Revelation. In the light of what we have already discovered about the foundational work of prophets and the growing emphasis upon preaching and teaching as the New Testament progresses, don't you think John might well be implying that the only prophets around in his time were false ones?

Andy. Recently I've heard of another way of understanding this problem of prophecy today. A friend was telling me about it. I think it's an idea put forward by an American called Wayne Grudem. If I remember correctly, he believes the word 'prophecy' in the New Testament has a different meaning from its use in the Old Testament. He says New Testament prophets were merely giving spiritual insight that did not have special authority as the words of God; therefore they could be

wrong like Agabus was in Acts 21; and, according to 1 Corinthians 14:29, their words were open to being tested by the rest of the church.

Pastor. That's right. Wayne Grudem is a theologian in Chicago. He believes that the apostles are equivalent to the Old Testament prophets in that they gave us Scripture. So they are the apostle-prophets you referred to earlier. On the other hand the prophets who were not apostles did not give authoritative words from God but received a revelation to encourage or instruct the church. Grudem has made a forceful argument that many Christians are tempted to follow in the belief that it solves a problem.

Andy. How do you mean?

Pastor. If prophecy is on two levels: the apostolic prophets whose words were infallible, and the lesser prophets whose prophecies could contain error, then so-called prophecy today must be this lesser prophecy. We are then free to accept it or reject it as we decide best.

Andy. That certainly seems to be a neat solution.

Pastor. If it's right! However, I think Grudem's argument contains a lot of special pleading. You see, he points to the fact that the pagan Greek and Roman religions of the first century also had their prophets, and Grudem claims that they were not thought of as receiving the very words of God. So, he maintains, the word 'prophet' in the New Testament was understood more in terms of the pagan prophets than in an Old Testament sense.

Andy. What's wrong with that?

Pastor. Two things basically. First of all, another American scholar, David Aune, has produced a very detailed study of Greek and Roman religious prophets in the first century, and he concludes that they *were* thought of as speaking 'in place of, or on behalf of the god'. In fact they were seen as a medium between god and man. In his own words, David Aune concludes that the New Testament prophets 'were regarded by themselves and others as inspired spokesmen for the ultimate authority.'

Andy. What's your other main reason for disagreeing with Grudem's theory?

Pastor. There is absolutely no evidence that Paul was using the word 'prophecy' in a different sense than would have been understood by the Jewish converts, and we would surely expect the New Testament writers to make it very clear if they were modifying a well-known Bible word. David Aune is convinced that in early Christianity the use of the word prophet to describe someone who is used as a medium of divine revelation, relies on the Jewish practise of using the Greek word 'prophetes' to describe the Old Testament prophets. In other words, when they used the word 'prophet' the apostles writing the New Testament were not thinking of Greek prophets, but Old Testament prophets as messengers with God's words.

Andy. I suppose it is hard to imagine that the New Testament writers used the words prophet and prophecy one moment to describe the Old Testament prophets with all their divine authority, and the next moment to describe someone who has what they think might be an idea from heaven!

Pastor. That's right. It is nothing new among Christians to claim, 'I believe God is telling me to do this or that', or 'I have an idea that may be from God', or 'It seems that the Lord is showing us . . .' But to call such things prophecy is unbiblical and therefore unwise. On the issue of Agabus' prophecy in Acts 21, I cannot see where he made an error. There is no evidence that his predictions concerning Paul in Jerusalem didn't happen. When, in Acts 21:27, the Jews seized Paul, they would doubtless have bound him, and they were forced to hand him over to the Romans. Agabus was a true prophet and not one who made mistakes!

Andy. If all this means we are not to expect prophetic words today, does the New Testament actually say that the Bible is sufficient and we need no more?

Pastor. Yes it does. I said we would show that prophecy had ceased, first by looking at the New Testament generally and then by arguing specifically. Perhaps you would like to read 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Andy. As you do so, remember that this may have been the last letter Paul ever wrote. His death is close and there is a note of urgency throughout the letter.

Andy. 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'

Pastor. Notice again, that when Paul wants to strengthen Timothy's stand for the faith, he never mentions prophets or prophecy. Instead, he goes straight to Scripture and says that it is 'God-breathed'. That gives it the highest authority. Then notice carefully that it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. There doesn't seem to be much else that we need beyond these does there?

Andy. But I suppose 'useful' could mean useful alongside prophecy.

Pastor. That's a rather weak argument isn't it? There's not the slightest hint of that here, and if you go to the next verse you will see that Paul says the Scriptures will 'thoroughly equip' us. The word 'thoroughly' means completely, perfectly or sufficiently. So the Scriptures are sufficient to equip us for every god work. The picture is that of a soldier kitted-out with *everything* he needs for battle. So you see, Paul actually uses the word 'sufficient' to describe the Bible. Clearly he wasn't just referring to the Old Testament or there would be no need for the New Testament.

Andy. I understand that, but there are some things the Bible can't tell us. It can give us principles but not specifics. For example, it can tell me how to prepare for marriage, but not who to marry; it can tell me how to work, but not what job to go for. Prophecy could help us here, couldn't it?

Pastor. But where do you find that kind of prophecy in the New Testament, Andy? Christians who live by messages of that sort are still in playschool. We have to grow up and think! The very reason why God doesn't give us specific revelations is because he wants us to study the Scriptures in order to learn the principles and then use our brains to apply them. Growing up is all about making decisions on the basis of sound advice. I go back to 2 Timothy 3:17 where Paul says Scripture is sufficient, perfect, and complete. That's the sound advice on which the Christian is expected to make decisions.

Andy. I guess that's true. When I married Jane, it was because she was a Christian girl and I loved her very much. I didn't need a prophet to tell me the rest! But aren't there times when a special word of prophecy, a word from God to encourage his people, would be a great help?

Pastor. That is exactly what God does through the preaching of his Word. It is the application of Scripture to our situation today.

Andy. So, are you suggesting prophecy is the same as preaching?

Pastor. No, I'm not. The two are clearly different in that prophecy has a divine authorship and therefore an infallibility that you cannot claim for preaching. The authority of prophecy was directly from God, whereas the authority of preaching depends upon the extent to which it is faithful to Scripture. However, I do believe that there is an authority in preaching that leads us to say at times: 'God was speaking powerfully in that sermon.'

Andy. Pastor, one other thing that troubles me is that, although I find myself agreeing with all you say from the Bible, Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:20 does warn us not to treat prophecies 'with contempt'. I am just afraid we might be doing that.

Pastor. Of course we're not! We have seen that the major role of the apostles as prophets was to give us the New Testament. You don't treat that with contempt do you? Other prophets were helping the young church through its infancy whilst it was without the New Testament.

Andy. But today? Aren't we limiting God by saying there are no more prophets and we need not expect prophecies now?

Pastor. I don't limit God, but sometimes he limits himself. Ephesians 2:20 is God's limitation, not ours. God said there were apostles and prophets for the foundation of the church, but nowhere in the New Testament does he ever refer to them as an on-going gift in the church. According to 1 Corinthians 12:11, God gives his gifts to the church, 'just as he determines', and we have seen that he clearly planned for preaching to take precedence over prophecy. Of course God may still reveal his mind to his people by his Spirit in a prophetic word, and that may be especially appropriate for a people who do not have the Bible in their own language.

Andy. So even though there are no more prophets, there could still be prophecy today?

Pastor. I would certainly never limit God by ruling it out, but you can see from what I have said, that with a Bible that is complete and sufficient, there can be very little room for something more! If somebody thinks they have a prophecy of something to come, then let them tell us, we can soon check it out. But if they claim to have a 'special message' for the church, well, that's exactly what the Bible is. Our task is to discern what God is saying to us through his Word.

Andy. But there are many claims made today. All over the world Christians are claiming to give prophecies, and there are so-called prophets who are well-known and well respected in some quarters.

Pastor. I know that Andy, but we must never be intimidated by the claims of Christians, however sincere they may be. Our mandate is what the Bible teaches, and on this subject we have seen that it is perfectly clear. Besides, I have to be honest and say that almost all modern day so-called prophecy has fallen to the level of inaccurate forecasting, irrelevant anecdotes, or wishful imagination. One thing troubles me a great deal Andy. In some places there are youth meetings, Christian Unions and even little children who are encouraged to get words of prophecy from God; that is one of the most dangerous things I have heard for a long time. If anyone claims that prophecies are revelation from God, at any level, then they are claiming to speak words from God. To claim a prophecy which is really false is a terrible blasphemy. We should never allow children and young people to expose themselves to that kind of danger. God has spoken to us so clearly, powerfully and relevantly in the Bible that it is a dangerous tragedy to offer additions. If the Bible really is God's sufficient revelation for his people, then what we need to do is not add to it, but preach it.

Andy. One thing seems clear, and that is our need for great and powerful preaching in our nation today. If Christians prayed for preaching as much as some do for prophecy, and if sermons were more effective, fewer Christians would be interested in the 'extras'. I'll be praying more for the preacher in future.

Pastor. Thanks Andy. Everyone who is called to preach would be glad to hear you say that.