

Your Voice #17: 01.02.2024

Women prophesying/proclaiming in the New Testament

By Mark Schubert

I would like to discuss further the topic of women as prophets, raised briefly by Rev Dr Peter Lockwood in his paper, *New Testament support for women pastors*, from the **SDC News**, in **Your Voice**, **Voices #16: 6.9.2023**. (Texts quoted are from the NIV, unless otherwise stated.)

In the New Testament there were men and women prophets, but the importance of these prophets in proclaiming the gospel publicly, and in church leadership, is not always fully recognised today. Although prophets did foretell the future in the New Testament (e.g. Agabus in Acts 11:27-28, and 21:10-11), often when *prophecy* is used then, it refers more to preaching or proclaiming God's Word. The Good News Bible translation, TEV, uses *proclaiming God's message* instead of *prophecy* in these cases, for example in 1 Corinthians 14.

I will use prophecy/proclamation, or prophesy/proclaim there also, following this translation.

The only confessional statement in the LCANZ on women's ordination says, *Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1Cor. 14:34,35, and 1 Tim. 2:11-14 prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom; hereby her rights as a member of the spiritual priesthood are in no wise impaired.* (Theses of Agreement 6:11).

It acknowledges that in the New Testament there were women prophets. I will concentrate on women prophesying/proclaiming, and follow up Peter Lockwood's comments on the 1 Cor. 14 passage about this.

In the New Testament women were prophets. They were chosen, gifted, inspired, authorised and empowered to publicly proclaim God's Word, by the sovereign triune God himself.

We are told that women prophesied/proclaimed at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers, and Jews from all nations heard people speaking in their own language (Acts 2:1-12). Peter explained to the listening, questioning crowd that what was happening was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel,

... *this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:*

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy ... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:16-18)

The apostle Peter says twice in these verses that men and women were prophesying/proclaiming there.

Peter as spokesman, detailed what this prophesying/proclaiming, this *declaring the wonders of God*, was about.

It was about Jesus, the Lord and Messiah, who had lived among them and performed miracles, and was crucified, but raised by God as these people, now prophesying/proclaiming had witnessed. This was the Good News - God's action to bring forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit through baptism, to all who repent. (Acts 2:14-39)

Peter stated that this prophesying/proclaiming was the direct, unequivocal action of the triune God, *Exalted to the right hand of God, he [Jesus] has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.* (Acts 2:33)

We find women publically prophesying/proclaiming God's word in worship, in the Corinthian congregation, *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head.*

But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head ... (1 Cor. 11:4-5)

Clearly all knew and accepted that both men and women prophesied/proclaimed.

And this was in public, since the head covering was stressed, and it wouldn't be an issue in private.

For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. (11:6)

Then in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, there is a discussion on the value of prophecy/proclamation compared to speaking in tongues, in worship assemblies. These two gifts were valued in that congregation. Maybe there was rivalry over which was more important. And there was disorder in worship – it seems that people interrupted and spoke over each other.

We have seen that women prophesied/proclaimed and prayed there. Paul suggests they also spoke in tongues,

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. (14:5).

He argued strongly for the value in worship of prophecy/proclamation over speaking in tongues, as prophecy/proclamation had a clear message that could be understood by all. All would benefit from the gospel proclaimed in it. However, unless it is interpreted, speaking in tongues cannot be understood by those assembled,

But those who prophesy speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. (14:3)

... those who prophesy edify the church. (14:4) ... they use one of the gifts ... that build up the church. (14:12).

The gospel comforts, edifies, builds. The law was also heard in prophecy/proclamation, accusing and convicting,

But if an unbeliever or inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgement by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (14:24-25).

Here proclamation of the Word, law and gospel, came through women and men chosen by God to speak clearly God's message in public worship. It seems this prophesying/proclaiming took the place of a pastor's sermon. Paul does not mention here a pastor/shepherd/overseer/elder, i.e. an 'ordained' role - or indeed the need for one.

Now we come to the 1 Corinthian passage used as one of the two texts in the Theses of Agreement 6:11, to prohibit women from publicly proclaiming the Word.

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (14:34-35).

Which women should remain silent in worship? As we have just seen, some women were speaking God's Word as prophets/proclaimers, and arguably others were speaking in tongues. So this cannot be a command to all women! Verse 35 implies that the ones who should remain silent are questioning wives - *If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home.* It seems these wives were asking some questions aloud in the assembly, interrupting and disturbing worship. They were not *in submission, as the law says*, - not submitting to their husbands? What law says that? Or submitting to the prophecy/proclamation of God's Word, as it was heard by the congregation? Submitting to God's Word, by listening and obeying is basic to all his law.

The speaking, interrupting was disgraceful behaviour. These questioning women/wives should keep silent and listen. A woman prophesying/proclaiming was only disgraceful if her head was uncovered, as Paul insisted earlier (11:5, 6).

Prophecy was widespread as a gift to serve in the early church.

It is included in each of the the five New Testament lists of God-given gifts:

given by *God's grace* (Rom. 12:6), by *the Spirit* (1 Cor. 12:10), as a *part of the body of Christ* (1 Cor. 12:28, and again in 12:29); and then, *prophets*, as a *gift given by Christ* (Eph. 4:11).

Paul says, *Do not scoff at prophecies* (1 Thess. 5:20, NLT).

Prophecies by men and women – known, accepted and respected as coming from God.

Prophets were important in the New Testament.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about the Spirit now telling of God's mystery, his hidden plan.

God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by his Spirit he has revealed it to his holy apostles and prophets. And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus. (3:5-6, NLT)

God's plan that the Good News is for all, he revealed, *now by his Spirit ... to his holy apostles and prophets.*

What was their position in the church? Paul says,

Together, we are his [God's] house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. (2:20, NLT)

We all know of the male apostles, and the apostolic church, but here we are told that there were Spirit inspired prophets sharing this foundational work, knowledge and teaching, with the apostles. Men and women prophets; placed next to the apostles in value, importance and proclamation.

Again, *And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets ...* (1 Cor. 12:28)

We have seen that women were directly chosen and inspired by God through his Spirit, as prophets:

- to publicly preach and teach his Word about Jesus, at Pentecost *to God-fearing Jews from every nation*,
- to proclaim law and gospel within worship assemblies in the Corinthian congregation,
- .-to be accepted and respected as gifted by God to speak, and so serve in Christ's body
- to be sharers in, and proclaimers of, the long-awaited, previously hidden plan of God to unite all believers in Christ. They were foundational, with the apostles, in building the early church.

Not Paul, not the apostles, not the early church, but God himself chose, called, gifted, inspired, empowered and entrusted women to openly proclaim his Word in his church.

Mark Schubert – 'Pilgrim' Magill, 2024