

REDISCOVERING THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF WOMEN

Dr. Stanley M Horton



Were there women prophets in the Bible? Yes, there were, in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew word for prophet, *navi'*, [feminine, *navi'a*] comes from an old word for speaker and came to mean a speaker or spokesperson for God. We can see how the term is used by comparing Exodus 7:1: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet,'"* with Exodus 4:16: "He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him."

The prophet or prophetess declared God's message. This did not necessarily include any prediction of the future, although the future could be brought in to help the people understand God's will for the present. Miriam, Moses' sister, is the first prophetess mentioned in the Bible. Part of her ministry was leading the women in singing and dancing (Exodus 15:20). The women sang responsively with the men, and the Holy Spirit inspired the words of her song.

Deborah (Judges 4:4) was a prophetess who led the people of Israel. She was married, but her husband must have supported her ministry. "She held court under the Palm of Deborah...in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided" (Judges 4:5). They came because they recognized she did not decide on the basis of her own wisdom, but she would give them a word from God. Later she gave Barak words from the Lord that enabled him to lead Israel to victory.

In another critical time, when Josiah was repairing the temple that Manasseh had closed, a copy of the Book of the Law was discovered. Josiah wanted to inquire of the Lord about what was written in the Book, so he sent Hilkiah to Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22). He recognized that in the midst of all the neglect of God's Word, she remained faithful and was a true spokesperson for the Lord.

Isaiah's wife is also called the prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). Some commentators suppose she is called this out of politeness because she was the wife of a prophet. However, Hebrew culture had no such custom. She wrote no books, but she must have had a ministry.

The Greek word for prophet *prophetes*, [fem. prophetis], means a proclaimer of divine revelation. Anna, the elderly woman of the northern tribe of Asher, was a prophetess who served the Lord in the temple and met Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. She thanked God and told others about Jesus.

Other godly women spoke for God as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus had a prophetic ministry even though the word prophetess was not used of them. Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was filled with the Spirit and spoke by the Spirit of Mary and the Baby in her womb (Luke 1:41–45). Mary herself must have been inspired of the Holy Spirit, as her own spirit rejoiced in God her Savior (Luke 1:46–56). When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, he stopped at Caesarea where the four daughters of the evangelist Philip prophesied. This must have brought him much encouragement, for the gift of prophecy brings “strengthening [that builds up spiritually and develops or confirms faith], encouragement [that awakens, challenging to move ahead in faithfulness and love] and comfort [that cheers, revives, and stirs hope and expectation]” (1 Corinthians 14:3).

As I point out in my book, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, “The principles of 1 Corinthians 12 show the importance of the gift of prophecy. There it was emphasized that the Holy Spirit wanted to use the individual to bless and build up the whole Body. He wants us to grow up into Christ, for only as the whole Body is fitted together and united, with every part receiving a supply from the Head, does the Body grow to the upbuilding of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15,16). The love of 1 Corinthians 13 will also lead us to strive for prophecy above other spiritual gifts because it does more to edify the Church.” The gift is “available to any member of the congregation.... In fact, because of the edification of the Church through this gift all are encouraged to seek it.”

Some have misinterpreted 1 Corinthians 14:34, “Women should remain silent in the churches,” to mean that women should not minister in the vocal gifts. However, Paul had already said in verse 31, “you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.” In the context Paul was

also speaking about interruptions and disorder. Paul “suggests that another type of interruption should be avoided. Women (who were usually uneducated in that day) were asking questions in an improper manner and thus contributing to the confusion. They were told to hold their questions and ask their husbands at home. This should be applied to both men and women in matters that custom considers unbecoming. But Paul is in no sense trying to hinder women from prophesying, speaking in tongues, singing, or otherwise contributing to the worship. He expected women to pray and prophesy if the Spirit gave them a ministry (11:5). The Bible makes no difference in spiritual manifestations between men and women.” The context makes it clear that Paul means public manifestation of the gifts in the congregation.

To encourage women to rediscover their prophetic role, we need to emphasize further 1 Corinthians 12:11, “All these [spiritual gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.” Clearly, the Holy Spirit is sovereign in distributing the gifts. We need to look to Him and be open to Him, for He knows what gifts will meet the need and He knows who He wants to use to minister the gifts. The gifts remain under His power and remain His gifts. He is the source, no matter who is being used.

First Corinthians 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” That includes the women as well as the men. Paul challenged believers to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (14:1). This makes it clear that though the Spirit distributes the gifts as He determines, He looks for those who have an eager desire to prophesy to the edification of the church. He will not force a gift on a person who does not have an earnest desire. It also lets us know that we do not have the gifts automatically just because we have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Further steps of faith are needed, and chapter 13 indicates that God’s love that He pours out into our hearts by His Spirit (Romans 5:5) is an important motivating factor in the ministry of spiritual gifts. So let Spirit-filled women take courage and in faith, with love for God and His people, eagerly desire to prophesy to the edification of the Body.

ENDNOTES

1. Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, (Springfield, Mo. Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 225-26.
2. *Ibid.*, 276.
3. *Ibid.*, 235.

REDISCOVERING THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF WOMEN by Dr. Stanley M. Horton
Enrichment Journal, A Journal for Pentecostal Ministry (Spring 2001, Volume 6, Number 2. General Council of the Assemblies of God), pg 80-81.

*Scripture references are from the New International Version. Stanley Horton, Th.D., is project coordinator for the Pentecostal Textbook Project and professor emeritus at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri.