

## Section 2

The Biblical Alternative  
for Church Ministry, or  
When All Else Fails,  
Read the Bible



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# 3

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## Biblical Leadership: Distinct from Ministry of Prophet

The questions raised by Pastors Robert and Jeff in the first two chapters are, as was the case in their first correspondence, all too typical. Their questions are ones written and voiced by the full range of evangelical scholars today—on the question of the proper understanding of church growth and leadership. How is it that the Church is to be understood, and seen to function in our world? What are the characteristics of health, growth or success? And, most strategically, what is the place and relationship of the Church’s leaders in the ongoing life of the Body of Christ?

Robert was struggling with traditions, expectations, and preconceptions. He came to his study of leadership with convictions (which we all do!), and let them distract and dissuade him from an *essentially* objective study of the subject. His immediate concerns for position, performance, and prosperity (which come *naturally* to the mind of anyone in a similar position) caused him to opt for conclusions that supported his traditional training, and maintained the power of the office of the pastor. That does not make him evil. It does make him wrong.

Jeff, on the other hand, was following a different, and better,

track. In his former correspondence and thinking with Dr. Mills, he was still somewhat tradition-bound. He had not worked through the implications of what are the things similar, and the things dissimilar or distinct, about pastors or elders in the New Testament model. But in the intervening six months, and with further study and reflection, Jeff was now tentatively concluding that God's expectation was for a team of elders to shepherd *and* teach each flock called by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. To that end, the remainder of this book, as you read it, is prayerfully dedicated.

### **THE KINGDOM OF GOD— WHO IS IN CHARGE?**

Imagine for a minute yourself back in the age of Camelot, and in the days of courageous knights and damsels-in-distress. You find yourself in this kingdom—a citizen in good standing—ruled and protected by a good king. Every year, once a year, the kingdom celebrates this good king's leadership with a parade. Everyone comes. The color and celebration of the event tell you it, and your king, is significant. But, except for that parade, and an occasional directive from the king posted at the town assembly hall with various laws or instructions from the king, little attention is paid to him. He is the *titular head*. But, except for required deference, the real rulers of the kingdom, as you know it, are the local rulers and regents who are charged with the life of your community. While, theoretically, no one denies the king's leadership, in practice, no one really takes him very seriously either. The interests and will of the local rulers override the authority of the king.

Such a story is not that far removed from the Church scene in America, as was noted in a warning article—written shortly before his death—by A. W. Tozer:

*Let me state the cause of my burden. It is this: Jesus Christ has today almost no authority at all among the groups that*

## Biblical Leadership: Distinct from Ministry of Prophet

*call themselves by His name. By these I mean not the Roman Catholics nor the liberals, nor the various quasi-Christian cults. I do mean Protestant churches generally, and I include those that protest the loudest that they are in spiritual descent from our Lord and His apostles, namely, the evangelicals.*

*The present position of Christ in the gospel churches may be likened to that of a king in a limited, constitutional monarchy. The king is in such a country no more than a traditional rallying point, a pleasant symbol of unity and loyalty much like a flag or a national anthem. He is lauded, feted and supported, but his real authority is small. Nominally he is head over all, but in every crisis someone else makes the decisions. On formal occasions he appears in his royal attire to deliver the tame, colorless speech put into his mouth by the real rulers of the country. The whole thing may be no more than good natured make-believe, but it is rooted in antiquity—it is a lot of fun and no one wants to give it up.<sup>1</sup>*

With the exception of the last observation concerning “it is a lot of fun”, such a description could equally be said, 23 years later, about current evangelicalism. Good-natured make-believe? Rooted in antiquity? Sometimes, the modern expression “get real!” needs to be turned toward the Church.

This is not just *a* problem in the Church; it is *the* problem of the Church. If our relationship to our head is, practically speaking, severed, then what is the status of our body? Obviously, again essentially, there is no life left.

Candidly, do we really think people in the pews are stupid? They aren't. They can read the same texts we teach, and they wonder how we come up with our strange exegetical suggestions, and proof-text mentalities, that reinforce vested interests and sympathies. Now, usually, they let us get away with it. After all, who are they to speak against the Lord's anointed? But every now and then, someone in

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

the crowd, like the small boy in the parable, says, “The king has no clothes on!” Then the jig is up.

In the story of the dishonest tailors, their lie was discovered, and the pride (among other things) of the king was exposed. But in our modern churches, the small boy is usually the teenager or the young adult. He is the inquiring believer who does not yet know that there are certain questions that are just not asked, and certain people that are simply not questioned. He has seen the games, and too-often, the self-serving interpretations of existing leaders, and he simply say, “I’m not going to fight it.” He, and they, leave the church. And we think, as church leaders, that what they need are special attention or programs. While there may be a place for that, what they, and others in the Church, *really* need is honesty, integrity, and a new realization that we all, as the Body of Christ, are together subject to the normal contextual, historical, and grammatical reading of the King’s Instructions. What we need, as Tozer has said, is a *fresh commitment to the authority of the King* more than to His subjects—whatever their rank and title.

A few years ago two Christian leaders were interviewed concerning their views of the Church. The first man, who John and Ken both studied under, noted that the Church was something like a volunteer, small-town orchestra. With volunteer musicians, they organized, practiced, and performed effectively. As their group, and numbers grew, they recognized a need for a conductor for their orchestra—to organize, coordinate, and supervise. Such a man was found, and hired. It went well, and the cooperative skills, talents and music of these musicians went on to broader community service and renown. Such was the Church—to this first Christian leader who was interviewed.

The second Christian leader was silent during this description. After the first brother had finished, the second brother remarked with incredible insight, “Actually, I think that is a beautiful description of the co-labor and cooperative ministries intended by God for the

Church. The only difference is, you and I would disagree on who is the conductor!”

Who is the Conductor? Who is the Head of the Church. Frankly, the affairs of the Church are often conducted in a way that the greatest interest of believers in the assembly is pleasing the undershepherds responsible for leading their church rather than the Chief Shepherd to whom we are all most, and eternally, accountable. If these observations are true, then this is not just *a* problem in the Church, but rather *the* problem of the Church.

### **PROPHETS THEN AND NOW— WHO IS TO KNOW**

This crisis of authority, in the Church, is no secret. It is well known, and documented, by Christian leadership through different generations. As such, various approaches have been suggested, both exegetically and practically, for dealing with it.

Obviously, the alternatives range from stonewalling to pure panic! Yet the most current attempts, and observations, attempt to put God, and His Word, back on the throne. Some of these attempts are good, and right. Two of them are well meaning, but, in our judgment, wrong. They are the subjects of this, and the following, chapter.

A popular, and well-respected, pastor writes, “Many pastors and Bible teachers today have prophetic gifts. Usually men who speak at conferences are speaking as prophets, making the truth clear, shining, and gripping.”<sup>2</sup> The call is for understanding the ministry of the pastor and preaching as the exercise of the prophetic office. Many other writers concur.

Conversely, an equally well-respected Christian leader from Europe contends, “The preacher’s authority is not that of the prophet.”<sup>3</sup> When, this brother says, a pastor serves or speaks, he cannot say, “Thus says the Lord.”

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

Remembering that both positions would equally hold to the need for clear, authoritative biblical ministries, and would equally hold to the need for the authority of the Scriptures in our churches, how are we to understand this question? Does the pastor stand as the modern extension of the ancient prophet? If he does, then a case could be built for unique, and singular authority for this man in his pulpit ministry. If he does not, then his authority, and significance in relation to church elders, must be reconsidered.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET

The principle terms translated “prophet” and “prophecy” in the Old Testament come from the root words which mean “to speak for” or “to announce or inform” for another. Standard definitions, therefore, for one who is a prophet are “one who acts as a spokesman for others” or “one who speaks on God’s behalf.” This usage, and occurrences, appear over 300 times in the Old Testament.

Essentially, biblical scholarship identifies three aspects of the prophetic office: the prophet is (1) God’s spokesman; he is (2) called by God, and his (3) message is based on, or consistent with, prior revelation.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Old Testament prophet, or prophetess, understood that they were a mouthpiece for God, with a holy calling, obligated to give prior or predictive messages to men as God’s representative. It is no wonder that *logically*, at least, this biblical model is used as analogous to the office of pastor.

The Old Testament prophet is a Moses, whose authority is to be understood as the same as God’s (Deut 18:18f), a Samuel, of whom it was said, “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground” (1 Sam 3:19), or many of the named or unnamed servants, of whom it was said, “The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: ‘Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets’” (2 Kings



## Biblical Leadership: Distinct from Ministry of Prophet

17:13). The prophet(ess) was an Abraham, a Miriam, a David, or a Jehoshaphat.

Further, this prophet, or spokesman for God, performed two vital aspects of this mouthpiece-ministry. He was both a foreteller, and a forthteller. That is, he provided both predictive and proclaiming Truth from God to the ears and minds of Israel, and surrounding nations. Some authors seem to see these two aspects as separate, but they are not. The predictive element of the prophet's message was a vital part of, and lead to, the proclaimed, or forthtold, message. He did not speak his words, or words from men, but God's words. As such, they were often, though not always, accompanied by the predictive element, which credentials the message and prophet as from God. The predictive element could have included an aspect of near fulfillment, which the Old Testament calls a "sign" (cf. 1 Sam 2:34, Isaiah 7:10-14), or fulfillments that spanned hundreds, and even thousands of years.

The point is important. The Old Testament prophet, called by God, spoke both predictive, or foretelling, and proclaiming, or forthtelling, messages to men. While both of these elements are not found in every Old Testament reference to prophet, nevertheless, the basic model of ministry is established. The prophet was a spokesman. The sub-points of this model were two: he was one whose message included the twin truths of prediction and proclamation.

Further, understanding the importance of the facts of progressive revelation (cf John 1:17, Heb 1:1-3) and the integrity of the Old and New Testament as equally inspired, profitable and authoritative (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21), it should follow that whatever is said of Old Testament prophets would be expected to apply to New Testament prophets as well. That does not have to be the case, but good Bible study methods would expect it.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT PROPHET

The principle terms in the New Testament, from which we

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

learn more about prophets and prophecy, come from the root words meaning “to say, speak” and “forth” which, when combined, mean “to speak forth, or out.” It was the words, testimony, counsel or message of men and women who, similar to the Old Testament, were God’s spokesmen to persons or situations. It is self-applied to Christ (Luke 4:24), to John the Baptist, to at least some of the apostles (cf. Rev 10:11), and again to a number of named, and unnamed, first century saints forming the foundation of the early Church (cf. 1 Cor 14, 1 Thess 5:20-22, Eph 2:20, 3:5).

The spoken message of these New Testament prophets was again foretelling, and forthtelling:

*The chief importance of prophecy was to foretell the future. The prophet in his lifetime was the messenger of God, exhorting and warning the people...and the main significance of the prophetic writings to Paul and all others of his and succeeding generations was to foretell the future, so that when the event happened it could be recognized as fulfillment.<sup>5</sup>*

While other authors prefer seeing the predictive element as secondary, and non-essential, the regular emphasis seems otherwise:

*Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (1 Peter 1:10-11, cf 1 Cor 14:30, Acts 3:21).*

While no prophets spoke or wrote of their own source or accord (cf 2 Peter 1:20-21), the essential pattern was that they were bringing a message of future hope and salvation. From the predictive perspective, prophets before the cross spoke of Him who was to come, and

## Biblical Leadership: Distinct from Ministry of Prophet

prophets after the cross spoke of the Church, the Body of Christ, the mystery, of which they formed the foundation.

Understanding New Testament prophets as foundational to the Church comes from a number of central texts. Speaking of the people of God, Paul writes,

*Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (Eph 2:20, 4:11).*

Speaking of the mystery of the Church as revelation, Paul further adds,

*Which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets (Eph 3:5).*

Aside from various grammatical debates that group or *dgroup* these apostles and prophets, it is safe to see from the reading of these texts that God, in the first century, was in the business of building His long-awaited Church. It, to be sure, was a building of flesh and blood, not brick and mortar. And its foundation was formed by the *flesh and blood* death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—the Chief Cornerstone. Further, its foundational layers were established by the ministries of Christ's apostles and prophets. The facts of the Church's beginning were both anticipated, from the Old Testament record, and unique, as evidenced by the revelation given to Paul, and the uniqueness of the Person and work of Christ (cf. Rom 1:1-2).

Consequently, *both* the gift and the office of prophecy were foundational for the Church, and, following from those textual observations, would be limited to the first century. Some Christian authors have wondered if the office and gift can be separated—allowing for

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

the cessation of the office, and the continuance of the gift.<sup>6</sup> As such, the pastor's teaching ministry, from the pulpit, has the authority of the prophetic gift. It is arbitrary, and somewhat self-serving, to conclude this without clear biblical evidence that distinguishes the office and the gift. The pattern of the testaments, rather, is that the prophetic person was empowered by the prophetic gift. Either both the office and gift are, together, here today, or they are both, together, foundational, and for the first century. The textual evidence seems to indicate the latter.

Much of the debate over current church practice, as well as the place of pastors as prophets, comes from 1 Cor 14:3:

*Follow the way of love, and eagerly desire spiritual gifts especially the gift of prophecy...everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.*

Prophecy as ministry—as ministries of edification: strengthening, encouragement, and comfort. From these, and related passages (cf. Acts 13:1, 15:32), it is suggested by some that pastors fits this model of prophetic edifiers or encouragers. But the mix and match of this suggestion has happened too quickly, and without enough discernment.

To be sure, the ministry of pastors is edification. And, further, this ministry includes comforting and encouraging the weak, and being patient with all the saints. But that does not mean that these ministries, similarly accomplished by the prophetic office and gift, are one and the same. This is true for two reasons. First, as has already been noted, the New Testament prophet was foundational, and hence unique, to the first century Church. These men and women were given messages from God, usually involving predicting elements, that were designed not only to inform but to credential the rapidly expanded effects of the gospel. In this sense, it is forcing the imagery of this office into an equally substantive 20th century application for the pastor.

## Biblical Leadership: Distinct from Ministry of Prophet

Secondly, if 1 Corinthians 14 is applicable for some of the saints today, namely, pastors, then it is equally applicable to all!<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is not legitimate to pick and choose passages that illustrate ministries resulting from prophecy—make similar observations about comparable ministries resulting from the pastorate—mix them together in the pie of Christian service, and pull out the plum which equates pastors and prophets!

It is also regularly suggested that the prophetic aspect of forth-telling is the biblical model for the modern pastor. As such, the gift of prophecy has issued into the authority of the pulpit, and the forthtelling (or preaching) ministry of the pastor. Again, it is simply too arbitrary to choose half of the prophetic model for today, and disregard the equally essential characteristic of foretelling. Either both are true, or neither are true. Our research indicates we can appreciate the biblically historical contributions of the office and gift of prophecy without having to pull this model into the 20th century in order to shore up the authority of the pastor, or the effectiveness of his teaching ministry.

Rather, the excellent heritage of prophets and prophecy, in the Kingdom of God, is to be seen as the strategic giving of the message of God—the revealing of what was previously unknown—in a way that foretold the Messiah, and founded His Church. It is the rooting and growing of the gospel in the combined Jew and Gentile—the rich and poor—the bond and free—the male and female—under the grace of Christ. As we shall see, pastors do have authority of-a-kind, and it is to be carefully exercised, but just not under the mantle of the ancient prophets of the Testament.

### **CHRIST IS THE ANSWER—BUT PASTORS AS PROPHETS IS THE WRONG QUESTION**

At first glance, it may not seem that we are making rapid progress toward defining the nature of New Testament leadership. But we, in fact, are making progress. The assumption of a number of Christian

## A New Testament Blueprint for Church Leadership

leaders, most often unchallenged, is that the pastor functions with the authority of the prophet. When he writes, counsel, or, most often preaches, he speaks as “Thus says the Lord.” While, indeed, that may be true, if his words, instruction or teaching is clearly biblical, it is not *necessarily* so.

There is a remarkable text in the writings of the apostle Peter:

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. (1 Peter 4:10-11a)*

This Scripture establishes the strategic value, and mission, of every believer, as opportunity and ability allow, to be spokesmen for God. Can you imagine that? As we speak, and act, we are the actual representatives of God. Nothing is said here of the prophetic gift per se. In fact, the issue, contextually, seems to be the more general ministry categories of speaking and serving. But, the point is this: it continues to be a God-ordained practice to, as much as resources and circumstances allow, both speak for and represent God to others! Talk about meaning to life! The Bible knows nothing of needing a clerical collar in order to minister mightily in the name of Christ.

Correspondingly, though, the authority-question is not yet answered. If Tozers, and our, suspicions are correct, we still have a Church who is mistakenly looking, *primarily*, to the wrong authorities for life and godliness. What is the proper place of pastors? Maybe the answer is in the power of the pulpit!