

PROPHECY, TEACHING, and the PREACHING of SERMONS

Throughout our time in 1 Corinthians (2021-22 series) we established that there is something of a distinction between popular views of **prophecy** (*something akin to future-telling*) and what Paul typically means by **prophecy**. **Prophecy** is public speech that takes the revealed word of God¹ and seeks to apply it in the present for the strengthening, encouragement, and comfort of God's people (1 Cor 14:3). Paul has made it clear that this **prophecy** is something that the whole church is urged to value and pursue (1 Cor 14:1).

But this has raised the question in several people's minds as to how exactly **prophecy** might relate to that other ministry of public speech we typically refer to as **teaching**. And how do both **teaching** and **prophecy** relate to the place of **sermons** in our typical Sunday services?

Of course there are all kinds of learning that will occur within church life; in Sunday services, one-on-one, in mid-week Growth Groups and bible studies, in the youth programs, and in kid's church. But it'd be a mistake to imagine that all these diverse forms of speaking, prophecy, and exhortation are to be equated with what Paul and the other New Testament writers typically mean by "**teaching**".

In fact, in contrast to Paul's encouragement for all believers to pursue **prophecy** for each other's strengthening, encouragement, and building, James 3:1 warns...

"...Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

Such **authoritative teaching** is only to be entrusted to some as Overseers/Elders² in order to faithfully preserve Jesus' own teaching as passed on by the apostles. As Paul instructs the overseer/elder Timothy in his second letter...

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim 1:13-14)

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:1-2)

Teaching is that authoritative public speech exercised by tested and appointed Overseers (not simply men in general) with the aim of both guarding and passing on the Apostle's **teaching** (Acts 20:28-31, 1 Tim 6:20, 2 Tim 1:14). Churches are not called upon to "weigh" this **teaching** in the same way they are called upon to "weigh" every newly offered **prophecy**.

Whereas prophecy might be brought by any of God's people as the Spirit enables, and is to be "weighed" so as to establish its alignment with both the truth and loving applicability to the church community, the scriptures call on the church to submit to and obey those who **teach** them (See Hebrews ref over page).

1 - Exactly **HOW** God's word was communicated is not what defines whether or not some speech qualifies as prophetic. It does not matter whether God communicated his word via a vision, in the scriptures, or when he wrote them himself on stone tablets such as with the ten commandments.

2 - We need to be careful not to equate "overseers/elders" with every leadership position exercised in the church. Growth Group leaders, for example, are not "**in authority**" over their groups, nor are group members required to "**submit to**" them in the same way they are to submit to overseers/elders.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. Hebrews 13:17

See also 1 Peter 5:1-5. 1 Timothy 4:11. 1 Cor 16:16

This is why there are very specific standards that someone must meet in order to qualify as a **teaching** overseer/elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Those who **prophecy** are not themselves required to be first tested & appointed in the same kind of stringent way.

This doesn't mean that every word leaving a teacher's mouth is somehow unquestionable. The role of a **teacher** is not to develop their own unique doctrine or teaching, but to pass on that which has been handed on through the apostles. Reformed churches (like the Anglican Church) recognise that the deposit of Jesus' and the apostle's teaching is ultimately contained in scripture, which is the final authority in all matters of faith. But scripture is to not only be read and left for individuals to decide for themselves what it means. The scriptures are to be read AND also taught (1 Tim 4:13). God has clearly established a pattern for how he wishes his church household to be ordered (1 Cor 12:28) and those Overseers who teach will be held to account **by God** for how they lead with their **teaching**.

In the Anglican pattern of church governance it is a *senior*-Overseer (what we term a Bishop) who is responsible for ensuring that what each *local*-Overseer **teaches** is in accord with the truth of the scriptures and the apostle's teaching (1 Timothy 1:3, Titus 1:9).

What then of **sermons**?

In Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed (etc) patterns of worship the "Sunday sermon" is the time that has historically been set aside for the church Overseer to lead/shepherd/pastor through **teaching**. It is true that many sermons may also include **prophecy**; words spoken for the strengthening, encouragement, and comfort of God's people. However, what sets the **sermon** apart from other various forms of public spoken ministry is that it establishes the apostle's teaching in a way that becomes the foundation for the whole church's **prophetic** ministry to one another. In the Book of Common Prayer (the standard pattern for ordering Anglican services) either the Presbyter/Overseer will preach, or a Deacon may read one of the approved Homilies.³ We might say that this **teaching** provides the foundational content that the practice of **prophecy** constantly redeploys for the good of one another. We certainly have room to include more **prophetic** speech by women and men who are not overseers/elders in our church gatherings. However, without **teaching**, our **prophetic** speech is likely to increasingly take on the character of "opinion pieces".

This paper is far from addressing every question one might have about public speech in the church. However, I hope it offers a little further clarity about what we mean when we distinguish between the terms prophecy, teaching, and sermons. Increasingly it is my intention that along with the overseer's/elder's **teaching (and prophecy)** delivered typically in a sermon⁴ others will also have the opportunity to **prophecy** for everyone's strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.

Your Brother in Christ,
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3. <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/>

4. Teaching may sometimes also be presented in seminars or training that the Overseer/Elder presents in sermons, or seminars, to parish council in meetings, in videos etc.