

The Office of Prophetess in the New Testament

By Pastor Rolf Preus

I have been asked to address the topic, “The Office of Prophetess in the New Testament.” The letter of invitation explained that this was in “response to President Kieschnick’s invitation to study this topic.” In his acceptance speech to the 2001 Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, President Gerald Kieschnick said,

I do not believe in the ordination of women to the pastoral office. I do believe that women should have the privileges of voting in the church and serving in any and every capacity except pastor and elder. I also believe that our Synod should explore the clearly acceptable biblical role of prophetess and its implications for women in the church in the 21st century.

Whether or not the so-called “biblical role of prophetess” is “clearly acceptable” I will leave for you to judge. It certainly is not clearly defined. Is every woman who prophesies a prophetess? Philip the Evangelist had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9), but Luke does not call them prophetesses. Should we?^[1] Is there a difference between the office of prophetess in the Old Testament and the office of prophetess in the New Testament? The only prophetess mentioned in the New Testament is Anna. But does she belong to the New Testament? Or should she and Simeon be put into the category of those straddling the two Testaments? They saw the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Incarnation, but they did not live to witness the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost when the New Testament gift of prophecy was given. Is all prophecy in the New Testament identified as prophecy? Does Mary’s Magnificat qualify as prophecy? It sounds like prophecy, but Mary is not called a prophetess nor are her words called prophecy. What about the testimony of the Samaritan woman to whom Jesus spoke at Jacob’s Well (St. John 4:39), whose words led many of the Samaritans to believe in Christ? Or consider the clear confession of Martha (St. John 11:21-17) where she confesses the doctrine of the Apostles Creed even before the apostles understood it. Does this kind of theological discourse constitute prophecy?

What does the word “prophecy” mean? The standard Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament gives as the first definition of the Greek word *propheeteuoo* “proclaim a divine revelation” followed by “prophetically reveal what is hidden”

and “foretell the future.”^[2] Any of these standard definitions would suggest that it requires a special revelation from God for one to prophesy. This is implied in 1 Corinthians 14:30 where St. Paul speaks of something being revealed to one of the prophets. On the other hand, Bible Bill Beck translates *propheeteuoo* as “speak God’s word” in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 and renders the noun *propheetees* of Ephesians 4:11 as a verb: “to speak the Word.” This need not require any special revelation. Beck translates this same noun in 1 Corinthians 12:28 as “preachers.” It appears that Beck is in these instances trying his best to make Paul talk American, as the name of the translation suggests. It is certainly true that the prophets of 1 Corinthians 12:28 were preachers and that the men and women who prophesied as related in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 were speaking God’s word. David Kuske, of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, in an exegetical treatment of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, defines “prophesy” as “sharing God’s word with others to strengthen, encourage, or comfort them.” He bases his definition on 1 Corinthians 14:3 which reads, “But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.”^[3]

The word “prophetess” occurs only two times in the New Testament, in Luke 2:36 and in Revelation 2:20. In the first instance, St. Luke identifies Anna as a prophetess. In the second instance, Jezebel identifies herself as a prophetess.

Little is said about Anna. She was a devout elderly widow who spent all her time in the temple, fasting and praying. She came into the temple as Simeon was speaking and she heard him say the Nunc Dimittis. She proceeded to tell others about Jesus. Specifically, she talked about the Lord “to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38) While Simeon did not make explicit reference to the atonement, Anna did. Perhaps she understood Simeon’s words to Mary, “yes, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also,” as a reference to Christ’s suffering. The salvation that Simeon saw would not be without a scandal or price. Yet it would redeem sinners. This is what was revealed to Anna, the prophetess. This was the substance of her prophecy.

The only other occurrence of the word “prophetess” in the New Testament is in Revelation 2:20 where St. John quotes Jesus as saying, “You allow that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and beguile my servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat things sacrificed to idols.” Not only does Jesus say that he will punish her, he also threatens to kill her children as well unless they repent.

In addition to these two instances in which the word “prophetess” is used, there are three references to women prophesying. St. Peter quotes from Joel 2:28-29 in his Pentecost sermon. We read in Acts 2:17-18, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy . . . on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.” The second

reference to women prophesying occurs in Acts 21:9, where we read that Philip the Evangelist had four virgin daughters who prophesied. The third reference is in 1 Corinthians 11:5, where St. Paul teaches that every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.

The Holy Spirit has seen fit to record for us what Anna the true prophetess spoke. He has also preserved a record of the false teaching of Jezebel the false prophetess. He has not chosen to place into the Holy Scriptures the words of the women who prophesied, as recorded in Acts 2, Acts 21, and 1 Corinthians 11. St. Luke appears to be content with recording for us the simple fact that women did prophesy, as God, through the prophet Joel, said they would. St. Paul does not address what the women in Corinth were saying when they prophesied, but that they were dishonoring their heads when they prophesied without a head covering.

St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:5 tell us very little about what the women were actually doing. Opinions vary. Of course, the various interpretations must also deal with the apostolic prohibition against women speaking in church that Paul delivers 1 Corinthians 14:34. How can women prophesy without speaking?

Kenneth Bailey, who received his Th D from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1972, is a Presbyterian scholar serving as Canon Theologian for the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh. He says that the women described in chapter 11:5 were leading the public worship along with the men.^[4] He makes the following argument:

In 11:4-5, the men *and the women* are prophesying. Thus the reader knows that the prophets who interrupt one another in chapter 14 are comprised of *both* men and women. So when the women in 14:34-35 are told to be silent and listen to the prophets, it is clear that *some of those prophets are women*.^[5]

Bailey explains St. Paul's intent by saying,

Do not be upset if I urge you to cover your heads when you lead in worship (i.e. pray and prophesy). Do not for a moment see this as a put down. Quite the opposite, let this be a sign of your authority (v.11) to exercise your prophetic gifts in leadership along with the men. Do it "Because of the angels." Let them applaud the wondrous fact of your restored status in the new creation and let the image of God that is within you shine forth.^[6]

Gregory Lockwood, in his recently published commentary on First Corinthians, takes a different view. He suggests that there was good reason why St. Paul did not forbid the women from prophesying in chapter eleven while he clearly

forbade them to speak in chapter 14. He points out that the Apostle was providing pastoral care to the congregation. This required him to deal with the people as he found them, carefully laying a foundation from which he could build.^[7] Lockwood does not argue that the prophesying of 11:5 did not take place in the church service and he does not argue that this prophesying could occur without the women taking part in the prohibited speaking of 14:34. These are the standard arguments often proposed by traditionalists. He rather makes the case that St. Paul approaches the abuses in the congregation in a deliberate and pastoral manner that becomes more firm as it becomes more clear. It is, in my opinion, a very persuasive argument that avoids creating further exegetical difficulties in the effort to solve an apparent conflict.

President Kieschnick would like the Missouri Synod to “explore the clearly acceptable biblical role of prophetess and its implications for women in the church in the 21st century.” There are very important implications for women and men in the church of the 21st century in the fact that women in the New Testament prophesied. I intend to explore some of these implications this morning. This is not to say that we may rightly speak of a New Testament office of prophetess. I have been unable to find such an office. Anna did not hold a New Testament office. Surely no one would argue that Jezebel did! Yet the only two uses of the word “prophetess” in the New Testament apply to these women. The fact that women prophesied does not require the conclusion that these women were regarded as prophetesses. In Acts 21:9 we read that Philip “had four virgin daughters who prophesied.” They are not identified as prophetesses in the New Testament.^[8] Yet in the following verse we read of “a certain prophet named Agabus.” The New Testament does not teach an office of prophetess. It names no woman as holding such an office. As we shall see, it is impossible for the church to establish such an office today.

The words that the women prophesied are not recorded for us in the Bible. Neither are their names. Was their every prophecy directly and supernaturally revealed by God? Or did their prophesying sometimes refer to a more general activity, somewhat like a theological conversation with a specific purpose of providing comfort, encouragement, and so forth? I would like to suggest that these questions need not even be addressed, to say nothing of being answered, in order for us to understand the implications of the fact that women prophesied after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The most important implication of the fact that women prophesied after Pentecost is that the ministry of the word and sacraments belongs to women as much as it belongs to men. The Holy Spirit has bound Himself to the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. As Lutherans confess in Augsburg Confession, Article V:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.[\[9\]](#)

Justifying faith, the ministry of the word, and the Holy Spirit go together. Anyone who has any one of these has all of these. If Jesus belongs to you, the Spirit of truth whom he sends from the Father (John 15:26) also belongs to you and has come to you. If a woman prophesies, she has the Holy Spirit. If she has the Holy Spirit, she has the ministry of the Holy Spirit. If she doesn't have the ministry of the Holy Spirit, she doesn't have the Holy Spirit. If she doesn't have the Holy Spirit, she doesn't have Jesus and she is not justified by faith. The denial that the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments belongs to all Christian women is a denial of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

This is why Jesus ordained the original preachers, not by laying his hands on them, but by breathing on them and giving them the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22-23) Had Jesus ordained the first ministers in the same way that ministers were afterwards ordained, namely by the laying on of the hands, the office would belong solely to the office holders. But Jesus chose to ordain the first preachers by breathing the Holy Spirit on them instead and in this way to teach us that whoever has the Holy Spirit has the ministry of the word. Preaching on the words of Jesus, "Receive the Holy Spirit, whosoever sins you forgive are forgiven and whosoever sins you retained are retained," Luther said in a sermon he delivered on the Sunday after Easter in 1522:

This power is here given to all Christians, although some have appropriated it to themselves alone, like the pope, bishops, priests and monks have done: they declare publicly and arrogantly that this power was given to them alone and not to the laity. But Christ here speaks neither of priests nor of monks, but says: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit," Whosoever has the Holy Spirit, power is given to him, that is, to every one that is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He that believes. Whoever believes has the Holy Spirit. Therefore every Christian has the power, which the pope, bishops, priests and monks have in this case, to forgive sins or to retain them.[\[10\]](#)

The ministry belongs immediately to the church, not only collectively, but also specifically to every individual member of the church. Whoever has the Holy Spirit has the ministry. Every single believer has the Holy Spirit and so every single believe has the power to forgive sins or to retain sins. As Luther wrote to the Christians in Prague,

Here we take our stand: There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose.[\[11\]](#)

The doctrine of justification by faith alone requires that the means by which faith is obtained must belong to every believer. This is why the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments must belong to every individual Christian, male and female. This office does not belong to individual Christians only insofar as they delegate it to others. It belongs to individual Christians precisely because they are Christians. It will always belong to each Christian individually because this office cannot be taken away from any Christian so long as he or she is a Christian. It is inside of them, where the Holy Spirit dwells. Listen to a portion of another sermon Luther preached on the Gospel Lesson for next Sunday. Commenting on the words, "as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you," Luther said:

And here you notice Christ begins and institutes the office of the ministry of the external Word in every Christian; for he himself came with this office and the external Word. Let us lay hold of this, for we must admit it was spoken to us.[\[12\]](#)

It was to the apostles that Jesus said, "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:5) Jesus did not merely predict this event. He promised it. He caused it to happen. Jesus can send the Holy Spirit from the Father because the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Jesus would have no business sending the Holy Spirit if the Holy Spirit did not proceed from him. He does. So Jesus did. Did Jesus give to the apostles the Holy Spirit when he breathed on them? He surely did. Did Jesus pour out the Holy Spirit on them "not many days" after his Ascension? Yes he did. And not only on them, but on all flesh, that is, on all believers. As St. Peter preached:

But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,

That I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
You old men shall dream dreams.
And on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days;
And they shall prophesy.
I will show wonders in heaven above
And signs in the earth beneath;
Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the coming of the great and notable day of the LORD.
And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD
shall be saved. (Acts 2:16-21)

The Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, not just on the apostles. The prophecy, visions, and dreams are clear evidence that Jesus' promise is now being fulfilled. Twice the gift of prophesying is mentioned and both times men and women are included. The office belongs equally to both men and women because both men and women are equally heirs of the promise, as St. Paul teaches in Galatians 3:26-29:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

St. Peter concludes his citation from the prophet Joel with these words:
"Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." These words are

echoed by St. Paul in Romans 10, after which he proceeds to lay down the need for a call into this office if one is publicly to carry out its duties.

There is no ministry instituted by Jesus that does not belong immediately to the whole church and to every individual member of the church, that is, to those who believe and are baptized. The office of preaching must belong to those whose faith is obtained by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. This is so because whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, but they cannot call on him in whom they have not believed and yet this faith comes from the preaching of the preacher whom God sends.

There are two things we may conclude from this. First, every single Christian may and should speak the word of God. The Christian father is called by God to teach God's word to his children. The Christian mother is called by God to teach the word to her children. Every Christian is called in baptism to speak God's word for the benefit of his neighbor. In cases of need, every Christian may rightly do everything on which faith depends. This includes baptizing, preaching, absolving, comforting, rebuking, and so forth.[\[13\]](#)

Second, we may conclude that the mediate call into the preaching office that comes through the church is a call from God. Since God has given the ministry to the church, the call from the church is divine. This was Luther's argument. He writes, "Since a Christian congregation neither should nor could exist without God's word, it clearly follows . . . that it nevertheless must have teachers and preachers who administer the word."[\[14\]](#)

There are two things we may not conclude from this. First, the fact that the office of preaching belongs to every Christian does not mean that every Christian may publicly preach. "How shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:15) "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call." (AC XIV)

Second, the fact that the office belongs to the church immediately does not mean that the church may do with this office as she pleases. God gave it to her. God did not authorize her to change it from what he instituted it to be. Just as the church may not change the gospel that is preached or the sacraments that are administered, neither may she change the office to which God has entrusted the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Just as the church appeals to the Words of Institution when teaching and defending the truth concerning the Lord's Supper, she should also rely on the instituting words of Jesus when teaching and defending the truth about the office of preaching.

This is what the Lutheran Confessions do. The Lutheran Confessions ground the office in the calling of the apostles by Jesus.[\[15\]](#) The words of Jesus that he

spoke to his first ministers after he rose from the dead as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16, and John 20:21-23 are the foundation for the office in the Lutheran Confessions. Adolf Hoenecke, the great Wisconsin Synod theologian, speaks from within the confessional Lutheran dogmatic tradition when he asserts that “The ordinary preaching office is the continuation of the extraordinary apostolic office, a continuation God himself wants. It is of divine institution in and with the apostolic office.”^[16] C. F. W. Walther taught the same thing. Under the second of his theses on the ministry, Walther writes: “The divine institution of the holy ministry is evident from the call of the holy apostles into the ministry of the Word by the Son of God . . .”^[17] As Scripture proof, Walther lists, among other texts, Matthew 28, Mark 16, John 20, and John 21.

Both Hoenecke and Walther taught that the office belonged immediately to all Christians. To teach that the office belongs to the church is not to teach that the office derives from the church. Baptism does not come from the baptized. The Lord’s Supper doesn’t come from those who eat and drink. The gospel and the sacraments as well as the office instituted to distribute these treasures come from Christ, not from the church. As Luther writes, “This office is a service or ministry proceeding from Christ to us, and not from us to Christ.”^[18] He goes on to establish the office of preaching firmly in the apostolate:

He [St. Paul] terms his office “service or ministry of Christ” and himself “minister of Christ,” because he was ordained of God to the office of preaching. So all apostles and bishops are ministers of Christ; that is preachers, messengers, officers of Christ, sent to the people with this message.^[19]

The office comes from Christ and is given to the church. It does not come from the church. In order to secure the christological foundation of the office as it exists in the church today it is necessary to ground it firmly in the apostolate, that is, in the instituting words of Jesus in calling the preachers into the office.

The generation of theologians that followed Walther in the Missouri Synod and Hoenecke in the Wisconsin Synod neglected this important foundation. Nowhere in his treatment of the ministry in his *Christian Dogmatics* does Francis Pieper refer to Mark 16:15-16 or John 20:21-23^[20]. He begins his discussion of the ministry by asserting that only a congregation can establish it,^[21] and from that point onward he treats the office, not as it exists by virtue of its institution by Jesus, but as it exists by virtue of its establishment by the Christian congregation. To be sure, he stresses the divine institution of the office in opposition to Hoefling,^[22] but he does not appeal to Christ’s instituting words in calling the apostles as the first ministers of the church.

Similarly, among the so-called Wauwatosa theologians, there was a retreat from Hoenecke's bold affirmation that the preaching office was the continuation of the apostolic office. John Schaller wrote in his very influential essay, "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry": "Here we now at once need to understand that there can be no talk about a *transmission* of the apostolic office."[\[23\]](#)

As Walther's theology evolved into the two schools identified today by the names of two Midwestern American states, neither school was willing to ground the office in Christ's calling of the apostles into the office. They argued primarily over whether or not the local congregation was the only divinely established form of the church. The doctrine of the ministry during this decades-long debate was subordinated to the argument about what kind of gathering was or was not church. Both sides affirmed that the ministry of the word belongs immediately to the church. Both sides agreed that the call from God was the call through the church. The assumption appeared to be that if you can rightly identify the church you will have rightly identified the ministry of the church. The debate between Missouri and Wisconsin was not so much "What is the office?" as it was "Who's got the office?"

By neglecting the apostolic foundation of the ministry, the unity of the office was broken. It was broken during the first half of the 20th century but nobody noticed until the second half when a proliferation of ministries bubbled up from among the baptized. With the invasion of feminism and the Charismatic Movement (which combined to form the Church Growth movement), churches that grounded the ministry in baptism were unable to keep the ministry from dissolving into innumerable constituent parts to be distributed evenly and fairly among gifted Christians, both male and female.

What we need to do in response to this is to return to the office that Jesus gave us on the day he rose from the dead. While the ministry comes to us from God through the church, it doesn't come from the church. It comes from Jesus. Go back to that first Easter and Pentecost and look at what happened in space/time history. Jesus institutes the ministry on Easter Sunday. He sends the Holy Spirit who establishes the church on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit testifies of Christ by giving his gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, healings, and so forth to those who receive *the apostolic* word. By testifying to *the apostolic* word, the Holy Spirit testifies to Christ. By sending the Holy Spirit with his gifts when Christ's preachers begin to preach Christ shows he is giving this apostolic ministry to the whole church. Thus, Jesus establishes the ministry for the church. The Holy Spirit creates the church through the ministry. Jesus gives the office to the church, but it remains his office.

The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:20) The church is not built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, but on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The apostles have primacy. Whenever apostles and prophets are mentioned together, the apostles are always mentioned first. In Ephesians 4:11, the ascended Lord Jesus gives apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. St. Paul explicitly teaches the primacy of the apostles in 1 Corinthians 12:28, "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." There are four reasons for asserting the primacy of the apostolic office.

First, the apostles were personally taught by Jesus and were eyewitnesses of his miracles and his resurrection. The *sine qua non* of being an apostle was to have been with Jesus from his baptism until his ascension and to have been a witness of his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

Second, Jesus personally sent the apostles, instituting their office by giving to them their specific duties. These duties are clearly stated in Matthew 28, Mark 16, and John 20. These duties are summarized in Articles V, XIV, and XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession as preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, that is, the duties of the pastoral office. No one but the eleven are present when Jesus calls them into the apostolic office. In St. Luke's Gospel, others besides the eleven are present. In that account, Jesus does not directly tell the apostles what to do but uses the passive voice, saying, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47)

Third, the apostles' words are recorded for us in the New Testament and serve as the norm for all the doctrine of the church until the end of time. It was specifically to the apostles that Jesus promised the Spirit of truth who would guide them into all truth (John 16:13).

Finally, the apostolic office was given here on earth for the purpose of being transmitted to others here on earth. While every single Christian can and should take comfort in Christ's promise to remain with his church until the end of the world, in the first instance this promise of Matthew 28:20 refers to the apostles and their successors in the office. In Acts 1:20 we read, concerning Judas, "let another take his office." The Greek word is *episkopeen*, that is, the office of bishop or pastor. The apostles identified themselves as bishops and elders, the office that we today usually call pastor. St. John, who was an apostle, an evangelist, and a prophet, called himself, "the elder" or "the pastor" as he introduced himself in his second and third epistles. In 2 Timothy 2:2, St. Paul

writes, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

None of these features of the apostolic office can be said to describe the New Testament office of prophet. The prophets did not necessarily need to have seen Jesus. They were neither taught nor sent by Jesus. They wrote no Scriptures to serve as the norm for the church. And, most importantly in connection with our topic for this morning, the prophetic office was only immediately bestowed and could not be transmitted mediately, whether by the prophets themselves or by the church.

Speaking of the Old Testament prophets, John Schaller writes:

Such a prophet was, rather, each time a separate gift of God to the church; he came with a specific commission, preached his revelation, and left behind no successor who by virtue of his office took over his special work . . . The special work of a prophet, that is, his specific office, ceased with his death. It could not, of course be inherited or passed on since it consisted in proclaiming new revelations.[\[24\]](#)

And so the New Testament prophetic office also disappeared. It had to give way and be subsumed under the ongoing apostolic ministry entrusted to the pastors. Once the normative Scriptures were written and the apostolic office had been entrusted to the called and ordained pastors, the need for the prophetic office diminished until it was no more. The refusal to subordinate the prophetic office to the apostolic office may represent a desire to separate the Holy Spirit from Christ's atoning sacrifice for sinners. Herman Sasse writes:

The greatest danger that threatened Christian prophecy was that the Spirit-revelation that proceeded through the prophet in the present time claimed precedence over the Christ-revelation which had come to pass in the past. In the Montanist movement the ancient church's prophetic movement actually succumbed to this danger. Then the word was forgotten through which the Paraclete's message is indissolubly bound to, and at the same time subordinated to the Gospel about the Incarnate Word: "He shall glorify me, for he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you" (Jn 16:14f.). The binding of prophecy to the Christ-revelation which happened once in history, this humble subordination of prophecy underneath the apostolic message is what distinguishes New Testament prophecy from Old Testament prophecy.[\[25\]](#)

This is why the prophetic office of the New Testament that came from heaven had to give way to the office that Jesus instituted here on earth for the care of sinners. The work of the bishops/presbyters/pastors described in such texts as

Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-4 does have a prophetic feature, to be sure. But these men are also to be physicians of the soul. This requires the continual giving out of the forgiveness of sins through the full gospel ministry of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. No one may assume the duties of this office unless God calls him through the church, that is, through a mediate call.

The office of prophet (and if there were the office of prophetess) in the New Testament can only be given immediately. The church could receive such prophetesses as gifts from God. The church could regulate their activity. But the church could not serve as the means of placing a woman into such an office. Prophets and prophetesses do not receive mediate calls.

This is not to say that God could not send prophetesses today. He surely could. If he did, we would expect him to do so immediately, for this is how God sends prophets. He wouldn't send the Holy Spirit to assemble a call committee that would then determine the parameters of the office and the scope of the duties of said prophetess, perhaps setting a term limit of her service that could, should her performance be acceptable, be renewed every five years, calling on a synodical or district office to provide names of suitable candidates. No, he would just do it. Here she is! Her name is Eunice Dissen! Now listen up!

Bo Giertz, known for his popular novel, Hammer of God, has a valuable contribution to make in this regard. In an article published in the Springfielder in 1970, Giertz says:

But we must count on the recurrence of prophecy where and when God pleases. Something of the gift of prophecy can appear also in the Christian witness in daily life. When good, courageous women stand up and speak a clear Christian word as the individual situations may give opportunity . . . then this can be on the same level as that to which the Bible refers as prophecy.[\[26\]](#)

Giertz also notes that "prophecy is not an office in the sense of being a commission entrusted through the church nor does a person possess prophecy as an ever on-going opportunity to serve."[\[27\]](#)

God reserves the right to call prophetesses to prophesy. He has not given this to the church to do. This is essentially Luther's point when he addresses the matter of women prophesying in the Scriptures.[\[28\]](#) He mentions women who spoke God's word with authority when God called them to do so. These women included Sarah, Miriam, Huldah, Deborah, Mary, and Anna. God sent these women. But God does not authorize the church to place women into the public preaching office. He clearly and emphatically forbids it. God forbids it when St.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that a woman may not speak in church. God forbids it when St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12 that a woman may not teach. God forbids it when he chooses to call only men as the original preachers.

God reserves the right to do what he forbids us to do and we have no business arguing with God. Instead, we should listen to the women he sends to speak to us. They have more of a right to be heard than do men who send themselves and push their way into where God has not sent them. We should listen to the Mother of God who prophesied when she sang her Magnificat. Elisabeth spoke the authoritative word of God to which every faithful Christian heart willingly submits when she said, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed in the fruit of thy womb!" (Luke 1:42) Mary also spoke the dogmatically binding truth when she said:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Savior.

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things

And holy is his name. (Luke 1:46-49)

To what is Mary referring when she preaches to us about God graciously regarding her, blessing her, and doing great things to her? She is talking about having a Baby. Her first parents were made in the image of God and fell from grace, bringing the whole world with them. Now, in her virginal womb was the Image of God made flesh. Listen to the prophecy of this woman! God did not see fit to record for us the words spoken by Philip the Evangelist's daughters, or the women who prophesied in Corinth, or any other prophetic utterance spoken by the women who prophesied after Pentecost. But the Holy Spirit has preserved for us these words.

He chose them specifically for our generation, you know. We have seen the fulfillment of the secular prophet's dire prediction made over eighty years ago:

On the first Feminian Sandstones we were promised the Fuller Life

(Which started by loving our neighbor, and ended by loving his wife)

Till our women had no more children and the men lost reason and faith,

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "The Wages of Sin is Death."[\[29\]](#)

We have seen the bitter fruit of feminist ideology wreak havoc on the home for generations. Can we hear in Mary's song the voice of God? Of what use is a prophetess if we shut our ears to her prophecy? Is not Mary preaching to us that the blessing that God first pronounced on those made in his image is now to be reaffirmed in every Christian mother's womb? For the original blessing in the very beginning was a fruitful womb. "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" (Genesis 1:28) That blessing was marred and obscured by the pain of childbirth and the heartbreak that sin brings to every mother's heart.

But in Mary's womb Christian motherhood finds its redemption and sanctification. In the Virgin's womb is our God and brother, Jesus. Mary is truly *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, and so are her daughters in the faith, who by teaching God's word to their children bring the Lord Jesus Christ to them and place him into their hearts. If every generation shall call Mary blessed, should not our generation bless the vocation of Christian motherhood as a higher calling than anything that the church could form out of her own devises? When the Holy Spirit put these words into the mouth of the Mother of God, was he not also teaching our generation that the fruitful womb is still God's reward (Psalm 127:3)? And is it not also true that the Christian mother, who faces possible death whenever life is conceived in her womb, has by that conception of life the proper call from God to bring the words of life to the children God gives her?

The highest office that God gives to his daughters is not and cannot be given by the call of the church. When our generation of Christian men and women learns this and takes it to heart, we will have begun to understand the implications of the gift of prophesy that God gives to Christian women.

Pastor Rolf Preus

April 6, 2002

[\[1\]](#) Lenski argues against it. See [The Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles](#), by R. C. H. Lenski, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1961, page 866.

[2] A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, page 730.

[3] David Kuske, "Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16," ESSAYS-ON-LINE, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1999.

[4] "The Women Prophets of Corinth: A study of aspects of I Cor 11:2-16" by Kenneth E. Bailey, published in Theology Matters, A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Volume 6, No 1, page 11.

[5] "Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View" by Kenneth E. Bailey, published in Theology Matters, A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Volume 6, No 1, page 6.

[6] "The Women Prophets of Corinth" page 14.

[7] Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture: 1 Corinthians, by Gregory J. Lockwood, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 2000, pages 527-534, especially pages 533-534.

[8] They are called "prophets" by Miltiades, an anti-Montanist polemicist quoted by Eusebius. However, Miltiades is specifically refuting the Montanist claim that their "prophetesses" spoke from God, and is not seeking to establish an office of prophetess in the New Testament. See: Eusebius, The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine, Translated by G. A. Williamson, Dorset Press, 1965, page 222.

[9] The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000, page 40.

[10] Sermons of Martin Luther, Edited by John Nicholas Lenker, Volume 2, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988, pages 375-376.

[11] Luther's Works, American Edition. General Editors, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1958, Volume 40, pages 34-35

[12] Lenker, Volume 2, page 359.

[13] The meaning of "need" in this regard was addressed by the old Norwegian Synod in the following theses on lay-preaching that were adopted in 1862.

Grace for Grace: Brief History of the Norwegian Synod, S. C. Ylvisaker, Editor, Lutheran Synod Book Company, Mankato, Minnesota, 1943, page 139

1. God has instituted the public ministerial office for the public edification of the Christians unto salvation by the Word of God.
2. God has not instituted any other office for the public edification of the Christians to be used along-side of the public ministerial office.
3. When a man assumes the direction of the public edification of the Christians by the Word, he thereby assumes and exercises the public ministerial office.
4. It is a sin when a person assumes this (office) without a call or without need.
5. It is both a right and a duty in case of actual need for anyone who is capable of doing so to exercise the public ministerial office in a Christian and orderly manner.
6. The only correct definition of “need” is that there exists a need when a pastor is not at hand and cannot be secured; or when, if there is a pastor, he either does not serve the people properly but teaches false doctrine, or cannot serve them adequately but only so rarely that the people cannot thereby be brought to faith or be kept in it and be defended against errors, so that the Christian must faint for lack of care.
7. When such need exists, efforts should be made to relieve it by definite and proper arrangements according as circumstances will permit.

[14] AE, 39, page 309.

[15] See, for example, AC XXVIII, paragraphs 5-6; Treatise, paragraphs 7-9, 30-31.

[16] Adolf Hoenecke, Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume IV, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1999, page 192.

[17] C. F. W. Walther, Church and Ministry, Translated by J. T. Mueller, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1987, page 177.

[18] Lenker, Volume 6, page 66.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Volume III, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1953, pages 439-469.

[21] Pieper, page 439 “Only a congregation can establish the public ministry.”

[22] Pieper, pages 444-449.

[23] John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume III, Curtis Jahn, Editor, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1997, page 88. (emphasis in the original)

[24] Schaller, page 88.

[25] “Apostles, Prophets, Teachers: Concerning the Early History of the Office of the Ministry” by Hermann Sasse in Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Herman Sasse, Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn, Editors, Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, Number 2, 1995, pages 22-23.

[26] “Twenty-Three Theses On The Holy Scriptures, The Woman, And The Office Of The Ministry,” by Bo Giertz, The Springfielder, volume XXXIII, no. 4, March, 1970 page 20.

[27] Giertz, pages 20-21.

[28] Here is his argument in his letter on the Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers:

But I am astonished that in their spiritual wisdom they haven't learned to adduce examples of how women have prophesied and thereby attained rule over men, land, and people. There was Deborah (Judg. 4 [:1f]), who cause the death of King Jabin and Sisera and ruled Israel. There was the wise woman in Abel, in David's days of whom we read in II Sam. 20[:13ff.], and the prophetess Huldah, in the days of Josiah (II Kings 22 [:14ff.]). Long before, there was Sarah, who directed her husband and lord, Abraham, to cast out Ishmael and his mother Hagar, and God commanded Abraham to obey her. Furthermore, the widow Hannah (Luke 2 [:36ff.]), and the Virgin Mary (Luke 1 [:46ff.]). Here they might deck themselves out and find authority for women to preach in the churches. How much greater the reason for men to preach, where and when they please.

We shall for the present not be concerned about the right of these women of the Old Testament to teach and to rule. But surely they did not act as the infiltrators do, unauthorized, and out of superior piety and wisdom. For then God would not have confirmed their ministry and worked by miracles and great deeds. But in the New Testament the Holy Spirit, speaking through St. Paul, ordained that women should be silent in the churches and assemblies [I Cor. 14:34], and said that this is the Lord's commandment. Yet he knew that previously Joel [2:28f.] had proclaimed that God would pour out his Spirit also on handmaidens. Furthermore, the four daughters of Philip prophesied (Acts 21 [:9]). But in the congregations or churches where there is a ministry women are to be silent and not preach [1 Tim. 2:12]. Otherwise they may pray, sing, praise, and say "Amen," and read at home, teach each other, exhort, comfort, and interpret the Scriptures as best they can. (AC, 40, pages 390-391)

Likewise, Luther argues in *From the Misuse of the Mass* 1521

Now, however, the papists quote to us the saying of Paul (I Cor. 14[:34]): "The women should keep silence in the church; it is not becoming for a woman to preach. A woman is not permitted to preach, but she should be subordinate and obedient." They argue from this that preaching cannot be common to all Christians because women are excluded. My answer to this is that one also does not permit the dumb to preach, or those who are otherwise handicapped or incompetent. Although everyone has the right to preach, one should not use any person for this task, nor should anyone undertake it, unless he is better fitted than the others. To him the rest should yield and give place, so that the proper respect, discipline, and order may be maintained. Thus Paul charges Timothy to entrust the preaching of the Word of God to those who are fitted for it and who will be able to teach and instruct others [II Tim. 2:2]. The person who wishes to preach needs to have a good voice, good eloquence, a good memory and other natural gifts; whoever does not have these should properly keep still and let somebody else speak. Thus Paul forbids women to preach in the congregation where men are present who are skilled in speaking, so that respect and discipline may be maintained; because it is much more fitting and proper for a man to speak, a man is also more skilled at it.

Paul did not forbid this out of his own devices, but appealed to the law, which says that women are to be subject [Gen. 3:16]. From the law Paul was certain that the Spirit was not contradicting Himself by now elevating

the women above the men after He had formerly subjected them to the men; but rather, being mindful of His former institution, He was arousing the men to preach, as long as there is no lack of men. How could Paul otherwise have singlehandedly resisted the Holy Spirit, who promised in Joel [2:28]: "And your daughters shall prophesy." Moreover, we read in Acts 4 [21:8-9]: "Philip had four unmarried daughters, who all prophesied." "And Miriam the sister of Moses was also a prophetess" [Exod. 15:20]. And Huldah the prophetess gave advice to pious King Josiah [II Kings 22:14-20], and Deborah did the same to Duke Barak [Judg. 4:4-7]; and finally, the song of the Virgin Mary [Luke 1:46-55] is praised throughout the world. Paul himself in I Cor. 11[:5] instructs the women to pray and prophesy with covered heads. Therefore order, discipline, and respect demand that women keep silent when men speak; but if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach.

[\[29\]](#) [The Works of Rudyard Kipling](#), The Wordsworth Poetry Library, Cumberland House, Ware, Hertfordshire, England, 1994, page 794. (From the Gods of the Copybook Headings, by Rudyard Kipling, 1919)
