

The significance of prophetic ministry in the postmodern situation

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By

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Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to all brothers and sisters
who are longing to see the Church emerge as the perfect Bride of Christ,
beautiful, spotless, fully mature and
relevant for the world in which it is placed,
for which purpose the Lord Jesus Christ has given
prophetic ministry to His followers throughout the ages.*

*And to my parents, who set me apart
for the Lord when I was born
and have raised me with love to serve Him
with heart, soul and mind, which resulted
in the total dedication of my life to follow Jesus.*

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Preface

A small beginning of an interesting journey in the world of prophetic ministry. That is how I look back at studying prophetic ministry in the Old and New Testament and its significance for the postmodern situation. The vastness of the topic formed an enormous challenge for my restricted, yet growing knowledge. Sometimes I felt like drowning in the great amount of material and the huge variety of subtopics. As a student of theology I had of course the joy and privilege of studying Biblical theology and the main outlines of the books of the Bible. However, this had to be stretched very far to meet the needs for this thesis research.

Prophetic ministry is a part of Christian ministry that I am very much interested in. I have experienced its usefulness and possibilities in my own life and situations around me, together with its potential dangers when it is corrupted. It is my desire that this ministry will be restored in our churches and function at its full, healthy potential. But studying this topic for a thesis confronted me with my limitations.

Now, at the end of the process of thesis writing, I am looking back with mixed feelings. The result is not as good as I hoped it would be. It reflects more the staggering road towards an answer for the thesis statement, while wrestling with the many aspects that I am not mastering yet. It is the reflection of one moment in a work in progress. However, I have on the other hand learned many things in a great variety of areas, which I consider to be very precious and useful for my future studies and ministry. The areas in which I want to improve and study more in depth are clearly before me, which provides a challenge for the future. I hope to be able to continue this journey throughout my life, gaining wisdom and knowledge, so that I can pick up this thesis one day to revise it into a work that is based on more mature knowledge and life experience.

Johan Verhoef
Chennai, April 25, 2005

Introduction

Statement and Elaboration of the Problem

We are living in a time in which generally a new interest has grown towards the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general and prophecy as one among them. At the same time many examples are known of false prophecies and false prophets that have a disturbing and confusing effect on the Church. Claims about a certain prophetic ministry have for many Christians a negative connotation, not without reason.

Many churches are becoming weak in the changing world. The society at large is more and more influenced by postmodernism, together with the modernist way of thinking that already brought much challenges to the Church that were hard for it to handle. Western Christianity is, when seen from the outside, on the decline, hollowed out by false teachings and adjusting to the postmodern world around it, losing its ability to be the salt of the society and to bring justice and righteousness to this world. Great parts of Christianity are struggling to reinvent their relevance for the society they are living in. Moreover, the struggle is often inside the churches, since so many Christians are confused and distracted from living according to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

Yet, on the other hand we can read Paul's encouragement to eagerly desire the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). It was Moses who wished that all people would be prophets (Num 11:29). Those words can create the wish and desire to see this gift well functioning in the midst of the people of God. And as will be argued later in this thesis, this gift has not ceased after the early period of the Church. Therefore it can and will still be relevant for our time and the postmodern situation we find ourselves in. The prophetic aspect of ministry in the Church and from the Church outward ascertains to her God's plan for humanity and reveals His will without fear or favouritism. The Church is in need of a strong guidance to become relevant for its postmodern situation. Prophetic ministry can give this answer, since it is God proclaiming His will and plans who works through it, reshaping the

Church into an entity that is alive and returning to its energetic task of ministering to the world with this same fearlessness and without favouritism. The Church is in need of reinventing its role in this world, but it is absolutely not in a hopeless situation. Still it is the task and possibility of the Church to bring a message of hope to the world around, the postmodern society that God placed it in. It is this observation that led to the title of this thesis, *The significance of prophetic ministry in the postmodern situation*.

This title has been formed into a central statement that is the basis for the research done in this work. It leaves out several areas of research, since the topic is very vast and not everything can be covered in one work. The said research is carried out on the following premises:

“Although the Church is placed in a chaotic situation due to the postmodern development, she can reinvent her role in the changing world by resorting to prophetic ministry.”

The thesis has mainly four areas of research. For each one, a little more extended elaboration of questions is taken to provide some guidelines for the content and focus of the research. They form at the same time the first four chapters of this thesis.

Prophetic ministry in the Old Testament is the first area. Central are the questions about what prophecy in the Old Testament is, including the relation between foretelling and forthtelling; what characterises the prophets in general, if such a generalisation can be made; what their function and ministry was and how false prophets could be discerned.

The area of *Prophetic ministry in the New Testament* is concerned with the relation of this prophetic ministry with the Old Testament prophets; the gift of prophecy and office of a prophet; the ministry of prophecy in and to the early church and the question if prophecy has ceased or not.

The contemporary postmodern context, thirdly, questions what postmodernism is and what characterises its thought. It looks at the impact of postmodernism on the Church.

The final area involved in the thesis statement is *Prophetic ministry in the postmodern situation*. What is the theological importance of prophecy in the postmodern situation? What will be the task and message of prophetic ministry in this time, seen from

the New Testament prophetic ministry and its relation with the Old Testament, and the situation and needs of this time? How should it function now if it is still relevant and in what way is it really useful or giving extra value in the postmodern situation in which the Church is placed? It is difficult for people to live a holy life and to show what God's will is for this world: knowing Him and justice and shalom in all the earth, reigned by Himself. How can prophetic ministry as given by the Holy Spirit have significance for this situation? And how can it function in a good way, without all the excesses that made many Christians afraid of it? Why is it especially relevant (next to that it is biblical) to have prophetic ministry in this culture?

Importance and Relevance of the Study

God has given the Church a prophetic task in this world: making known the revelation of God and living according to it. Often not that much is happening. There is distraction and disturbance, while still so many millions are not reached with the Good News of Jesus. The study of prophetic ministry for the contemporary situation is therefore a relevant and important enterprise, since it can open our eyes for the necessity and relevance of this ministry and how it can have its place in the Church. If it is functioning well, it will surely be of great importance for the Church and the world in which it lives. Even more, the Church is in need of prophetic ministry. The hope and longing that has inspired the writing of this thesis is therefore that it may have its contribution in opening our eyes for the significance of prophetic ministry for our situation. Prophetic ministry should not only be the topic of theological discussion, but most of all be the daily practice of the Body of Christ. The practical input given in chapter four hopes to contribute valuable suggestions for the significance of its functioning.

We should ask ourselves the question: "Will there be anything new under the sun?" So much material is available about prophecy. The conviction of postmodernism that rearranging and reshaping of well-known material can lead to new insights provides us a justification for the attempt of this thesis. Maybe nothing in itself will really be totally unique, but it can give new light or insights on certain aspects of prophetic ministry in the postmodern context that can be useful for individual believers and the Church as a whole.

Related Studies

One study is especially worth mentioning. It is the thorough work of Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.¹ He made an in-depth study of the aspects of prophecy in the New Testament and applied it to the situation 'today'. There are four main distinctions in approach between his book and this study.

First, he does not give much attention to aspects of Old Testament prophecy that are still valuable for today. His focus is on prophecy in the New Testament, which explains his short eight-page sketch of only a few aspects of Old Testament prophets.

Second, Grudem is focusing mainly on the *gift* of prophecy in the New Testament and today. This leaves out the broader range of prophetic ministry in the Bible and for the situation in our time.

Third, he is not concerned with defining the contemporary postmodern situation but gives directly applications for 'today'. At the same time, his study is now seventeen years old, which means a lot for the understanding of the development of our postmodern cultures. This study tries to define the postmodern situation of the church and how prophetic ministry can be relevant to this, which is distinct to Grudem's approach.

Fourth, he states that the function of a prophet is not separate from the gift of prophecy, an opinion that differs from the researcher's point of view. In his work he elaborates the position that the New Testament apostles were like the Old Testament prophets, although they did not receive the same title, due to the connotations of the word 'prophet'.² There is according to him less evidence that a group of prophets was functioning in the early church.

Those four differences make his approach rather different from the attempt that this thesis makes. He proposes many valuable materials, coming from a thorough knowledge of New Testament theology and the gift of prophecy in the New Testament. Those may be useful for this thesis, but are not at all the same. Therefore, as far as the knowledge of the researcher is concerned, no other studies have been written about the same topic from the same point of view. We hope that this study will be relevant as a further investigation in the previous mentioned areas from a particular point of view.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *The gift of prophecy in the New Testament and today* (Eastbourne, Kingsway publications, 1988).

² See chapter 2.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of this thesis is Biblical prophetic ministry as defined under the 'explanation of terms'. It is therefore not concerned about ministry based on the prophetic message of the Bible for our time only, but includes the actual guidance of the Holy Spirit through the gift of prophecy. It is possible to go into detail in the foretelling aspect of prophecy, the gift that is a foundation for prophetic ministry. However, a choice has been made to highlight mainly the forthtelling aspect of prophecy, since it is more directly applicable in everyday life and less subject to confusion, without wiping out its intermingled relation with foretelling in prophetic ministry.

The focus will be on the usefulness of prophetic ministry for the church and its environment, with some general ideas for its place and relevance in this situation. The gift of prophecy is therefore not at the centre. However, it needs to be explained well, since it is the core of prophetic ministry and determining its outlook. Many aspects that are passing by in the study of the gift of prophecy have their influence on how prophetic ministry in our time can function. It is in continuation, but also different from old covenant prophecy.

The vastness of the research topic brings with it that it is impossible to do an in depth study of specific elements of prophetic ministry in the Old and New Testament, the postmodern situation and the significance of prophetic ministry for today. Due to this, now and then the outcome of the research had to be general in its presentation.

The research for this study has been done by making use of literature that is related to the topics, as well as commentaries and relevant internet sources.

The topic has been researched in the four previously mentioned areas, which are presented in the first four chapters. This research has been done according to the questions that are given above under the 'Statement and elaboration of the problem'.

The first chapter explores prophetic ministry in the Old Testament. The aim of this chapter is to give a picture of the foundation and outlook of prophetic ministry as it was given by the Lord to His people. Therefore the role and function of the prophets, the characteristics of their ministries and lives and the way they received and delivered their messages will be explored, followed by an examination of the differences between true and false prophets. At the end some questions will be asked whether that mode of prophecy is still relevant in the New Testament situation.

The second chapter is the logical follow-up for the first. It starts with researching the relation between prophecy in the Old and New Testament. This relation needs to be clear in order to understand the significance of prophetic ministry and how it can function today, since the Church that we are now a part of came into existence in this period. The ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus will also be considered in the light of the transition from old covenant to new covenant prophetic ministry. The gift of prophecy is studied to see how it, as a part of prophetic ministry, was functioning in the early Church. Following on this the function of a new covenant prophet is elaborated. This is especially important to avoid confusion in the churches today, for the gift of prophecy and the function of a prophet is surrounded by controversy that needs to be faced before it is ever possible to see the relevance of prophetic ministry for the contemporary Church. The position of prophetic ministry and its testing, which follows the previous topics, is studied for the same reasons. Prophetic ministry has too often been neglected because of the lack of knowledge or willing abuses that have led to mistakes and excesses in the ‘prophetic’ part of it. ‘Prophetic’ does not always point at great mysterious revelations, but can be very normal and healthy, based on the Scriptures and in dependence on God.

The previous study has hopefully provided enough background for the exploration of the functions of New Testament prophetic ministry. It is this part that can add important insights to our understanding of prophetic ministry as it has been formed in the New Testament era. The duration of prophetic ministry is the next focus of the argumentation, since this also is a controversial theme that needs to be addressed. If prophetic ministry was restricted to the early Church, then it is useless to try to apply it in our time. We hope to establish the point that it is given by Jesus through the Spirit to function in the Church until He comes, and that it even has become more important for the Church when the *parousia* was delayed.

The third chapter has the contemporary postmodern context as its focus. Several features are observed, together with the ways in which this worldview is affecting the Church’s witness to the world. Challenges and opportunities will be made more precise, in order to paint a picture of the situation that the Church is faced with nowadays.

In the fourth chapter we will attempt to highlight the situation of the Church and argue that it needs to be revived in its vision, witness and life. Then the question how this can be possible and the statement that prophetic ministry is needed will be discussed. Finally an overview of how prophetic ministry can be significant in the postmodern situation will be given according to the four areas that have been mentioned in chapter 2.

This will hopefully give more insight in how prophetic ministry possibly can be relevant for the daily life of the Church.

In the conclusion we shall try to bring the outcomes of the research together. Some proposals will be added how the Church can embrace prophetic ministry and what the challenges are of resorting to prophetic ministry.

Explanation of Terms

Some terms need to be explained for the sake of clarity, since several of them are now and then used with diverse meanings.

Prophecy is God's words and will made known through humans. God gives revelations through all kinds of ways to human beings. Those become a prophecy when they are spoken for the situation they are intended for. Prophecy is therefore also referring to a given message from God, spoken by one of His servants.

Different words are used to indicate a prophet and prophecy. The four respective nouns used for prophets in the Old Testament will be taken into consideration in the first chapter. The meaning of prophecy as a noun is mainly given by the root word *nābî*, which has the meaning 'to call, to proclaim'. The Septuagint did not translate the word, but rendered it consistently as *prophētēs*, the same Greek word that is used for prophets in the New Testament. This word is an equivalent for *nābî*.³ Its meaning can be 'foretelling' (of future events), 'forth telling' (speaking what is given by a sender or what is already written or spoken before, often for the current situation), 'one who speaks for another' or 'interpreter'⁴. The prophets functioned as the mouthpiece of God (Deut 18:18).

The given meanings for prophecy show three things: there is a higher being, which speaks or reveals himself to a human being. God reveals Himself to a prophet, who is His mouthpiece, to speak to other people in this world. A clear example of this is 1 Sam 3:7: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord; the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." The last verse of 1 Sam 3 says, "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word." "It was not the product of

³ Bruce Vawter, "Introduction to prophetic literature", *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004), 186.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

intellectual attainment or rational debate. Neither was it deduced through the processes of logical deduction. Prophecy was *revealed truth* that came *directly from God*. It was the word of God delivered by God to man. Thus prophecy was ‘received’ rather than produced by the human mind.”⁵ It also had relation with the present situation, about which prophecy revealed God’s ‘now’ word.

To *prophesy* is the activity itself of speaking those prophecies, the revelations or thoughts that have been given.

Prophet or *office of a prophet* is used in the New Testament context for those who are appointed or set apart by God to function in a specific prophetic ministry for the Church, according to Eph 4:11 ff and 1 Cor 12:28.

The term ‘office of a prophet’ will be used together with ‘function of a prophet’ throughout this manuscript without using ‘ministry of a prophet’ to avoid confusion with the term that is the main topic of this thesis, prophetic ministry.

Prophetic ministry is used in this thesis for the ministry by the prophets, prophetic gifted or prophetic inspired people to their environment. It can also mean to minister according to given prophecies, e.g. the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets. This thesis does not restrict prophetic ministry to the second part, but extends it to ministering directly inspired by the Holy Spirit through Scripture and direct revelation. This direct revelation is always subordinate to and in line with the absolute authority of the Bible.

The meaning of *Postmodernism* is in this thesis based on the definition given by the *Wikipedia Internet Encyclopedia*: “Postmodernism is a term applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature, religion, and culture, which are generally characterized as either emerging from, in reaction to, or superseding, modernism.”⁶ It is difficult to give a more detailed specification, since postmodernism functions as a term that involves many aspects. The third chapter includes therefore an elaboration on the content of the postmodern worldview.⁷

⁵ Clifford Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present: An Exploration of the Prophetic Ministry in the Bible and the Church Today* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 1995²), 13.

⁶ Wikipedia, *Postmodernism*, as published on: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>, no page. Last visited: March 16, 2005.

⁷ See paragraph 3.1 ff.

Chapter 1 Prophetic Ministry in the Old Testament

1.1 *Defining Prophecy and the Prophetic Role*

In this chapter prophetic ministry as it is found in the Old Testament is the focal point of view. In the introduction prophecy has already been introduced. Lindblom describes prophets as people who are not just in the first place a poet, politician or something else, but “the prophet belongs entirely to his God; his paramount task is to listen to and obey his God. In every respect he has given himself up to his God and stands unreservedly at His disposal.”¹

In the following paragraphs, more of the meaning of prophecy and prophets in the Old Testament and its similarities and differences with prophecy in the surrounding areas of Israel will be examined, after which we move on to exploring their prophetic ministry.

1.1.1 Titles Ascribed to the Old Testament Prophets

Different words are used for the prophets of the Old Testament, which will be discussed below. Apart from the so called ‘sons of the prophets’ and groups of prophets mainly four terms occur that are in use to indicate the individual prophets: *nābî*, prophet; *hōzeh* and *ro’eh*, seer or visionary; and *’îs ha’elohîm*, ‘man of God’ or ‘holy man’. All the individual OT prophets, except Jahaziel, are indicated with one of those four titles.²

Scholars disagree about the different names and roles of Old Testament prophets. Some say the different words show a total different type of prophets. Most maintain the position that the difference is not *who* the prophets were, but *what* they did. All of them

¹ J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 1.

² P. A. Verhoef, “Prophecy”, in *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol 4. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 1071.

had the same task of being intermediaries between the human and the divine world and that binds them together.³ The given names indicate further in what way they received this revelation.

***Nābî*, Prophet**

Nābî was the principal word used for the prophets. It was generally used and therefore well known in Israel. As Aalders states in his book, the study of the meaning of the word already shows much of the task and role of a prophet. Therefore he assumes that Israel did not have much confusion about the office of a prophet. For everyone it was clear that a prophet should be a spokesperson for God and that, if he was a true prophet, his words had to be taken serious.⁴

However, for the study of the prophetic office in the Old Testament, for us in this time not everything is so clear. We have lost the connotations of the word and need to discover its original meaning. Scholars have not reached a consensus about the meaning of the root *nābî*, since its etymological background is not totally clear.⁵

The first five books of the Old Testament do not often write about prophets. Apart from the 15 time that it is written in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 the word *nābî* occurs only 5 times in other passages of the Pentateuch. In the same way the other words used for the prophets are not very often mentioned. This shows not the rarity of the prophets, but the shortcomings of a simplistic lexical approach.⁶ The other books of the Old Testament use the word *nābî* very regularly. The meaning of the word, as is given above, shows the office of a prophet as being communicator between God and man. He receives Gods message and delivers it to the people. One aspect of the etymology of the word that has not been

³ Cf. H. B. Huffmon, "Prophecy, Ancient Near Eastern prophecy", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 482; David L. Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, *et al.*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 4; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 43-44; Edward J. Young, *My servants the prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 65-66.

⁴ G. Ch. Aalders, *De Profeten des Ouden Verbonds* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1918), 21.

⁵ Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 4.

⁶ B. Buller, "Prophets, prophecy", *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 662.

mentioned before is the connection of the root of *nb'* with the root *nb'*, 'to bubble forth'.⁷ This shows the aspect of gushing out or speaking by inspiration the words of God. It bubbles out of him.

***Ro'eh* and *hōzeh*, Seer or Visionary**

Those two words both are derived from words that have the meaning 'to see'.⁸ *Hōzeh* means an individual who receives and reports visions. Its meaning is in addition to the ordinary way of seeing with your eyes more strong loaded with the notion of seeing visions and receiving revelations than the noun *ro'eh*.⁹ *Ro'eh* is associated primarily with Samuel, who is often called 'the seer'. He himself also acknowledges this title (1 Sam 9:19).¹⁰ In the same chapter it is written that the *nābî* previously used to be called by the name *ro'eh* (1 Sam 9:9). Gad was called both *nābî* and *hōzeh* (2 Sam 24:11).¹¹ It seems that the two are practical synonyms. "Both stress the method of receiving revelation, namely, seeing. At the same time, the function of those who are designated by these terms is that of declaring the word of God."¹² "Etymologically, the seer would have been a visionary rather than an ecstatic, but it is not precluded that his visions would have been received as the result of ecstatic experience."¹³ The New Interpreters Bible translates *ro'eh* as 'diviner', because according to them Samuel acts rather like a diviner.¹⁴ This seems to be unjust, even with the given explanation of the meaning of the usage of the English term 'diviner'. The root words of the seers are closely related to the words used for the diviners in Palestine and the nations surrounding Israel. However, in this receiving of visions, the seers are never given the name 'diviner' in the Bible.¹⁵

⁷ V. Ezekiah Francis, *Where are the Prophets* (Chennai: Berachah Prophetic Ministries, 2000), 19; Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 56.

⁸ Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 4.

⁹ Cf. Jackie A. Naudé, "Hōzeh", *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 2 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 56-61; Jackie A. Naudé, "R'h", *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 1007-1015.

¹⁰ Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 4.

¹¹ Naudé, "Hōzeh", 60.

¹² Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 66.

¹³ Vawter, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 189.

¹⁴ Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 4.

¹⁵ Vawter, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 189.

'Îs ha'elohîm, Man of God

This title is especially prominent in the accounts of the lives of Elijah and Elisha. Instead of 'man of God' it is also appropriate to use 'holy man', since the man belongs totally to the Lord and is therefore 'set apart', holy. This title stresses the personification of Gods power in the midst of this world in the person of the particular prophet. He is a man who possesses the power of the holy One and that makes that people respect and fear him. Both in the lives of Elijah and Elisha we see those powers at work: fire comes down from heaven, the mantle of Elijah makes the Jordan river to split and an axe head to float, boars come out of the forest and devour a group of young man, and so on.

Other Titles of a Prophet

The *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* mentions several other titles of a prophet. 'ebed yhwh, 'servant of Yahweh', and mal'āk yhwh, 'messenger of Yahweh', are two titles that are sometimes used for the prophets. Two other titles, *mesappeh* and *somer*, signify the prophet as a watchman.¹⁶ The last one is the normal word for a guard, watchman or prison guard.¹⁷ The first one, *mesappeh*, has the implicit meaning of looking out, alert and active watching rather than simply gazing, for the safety of others depended on it.¹⁸ Those titles add also to the meaning of the role of the prophets.

Groups of Prophets and the Sons of the Prophets.

Separated from the individual prophets are the groups of prophets that occur regularly in the Old Testament. "They can be divided into two segments: the group of prophets in the interim period between the Judges and the kingship in Israel, and those in the days of Elijah and Elisha."¹⁹ It is not very clear in what way those prophets lived together and prophesied, but some characteristics can be found. The first type is described as making music and prophesying in some kind of ecstatic behaviour. Saul joined with them

¹⁶ Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1068.

¹⁷ Keith N. Schoville, "šmr", *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 4 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 182.

¹⁸ Keith N. Schoville, "sph", *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 831.

¹⁹ Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1072.

and Samuel also is once pictured as leading those prophets (1 Sam 10:10; 19:19-24). They had their own living quarters.

The second type, the *bene hannebi'im*, 'sons of the prophets', appears first in 1 Kings 18. Their power and authority is not the same as that of Elijah, but they serve the same Lord. Young explains the term 'sons of the prophets' in a way of relationship or discipleship. Those prophets were not literally sons of prophets, but in a close relationship to great prophets like Elijah and Elisha.²⁰ This is seen in 2 Kings 4:38 and 6:1 where a meeting with Elisha is recorded. The prophets complained that the place where they usually met with Elisha had become too small. That shows that they were used to be meeting Elisha when he visited them.²¹

1.1.2 Prophecy in the Ancient Near East

Throughout the history of mankind prophets and prophetic utterances can be found in very different contexts. When most people speak of prophecy, they think about Biblical prophecy. In the history of Israel and after that in Christianity prophecy it has an important place, but their history and reality is not the only one which tells about prophecy. "Prophets are found in many provinces of the world of religion, in modern as well as in ancient times."²² The usage of the word *prophētēs* as an equivalent term in the Septuagint shows that the word already had a meaning in the history of the non-Jewish world of that time. Although Israelite prophecy was something special, we should on the other end also admit that stood in relation to the cultures surrounding Israel.²³ In the ancient Near East prophecy was widespread. It is good to consider the question if prophecy in Israel was in any degree dependent on the practises of these seers and diviners. A second reason for investigating prophecy in the ancient Near East is that it has many connections with all kinds of postmodern spiritual expressions. Therefore it is at the same time relevant for the significance of Christian prophetic ministry in our time.

²⁰ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 93.

²¹ Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1073.

²² Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 1.

²³ Vawter, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 186.

In the Greek world the word *prophētēs* is used in many connections. Everyone who had something to announce publicly was a prophet. Therefore the poets were called prophets of the Muses, the philosophers prophets of nature and so on. But the Greek were also familiar with people who received so called ‘divine inspiration’, whether they were called prophets or not. Those people could generally be divided in two groups. There were the soothsayers, who obtained their knowledge by means of signs and omens.²⁴ Clearly distinguished from those were the ecstasies, like the Sibyls and the oracle of the Pythia in Delphi. “Their task was to impart, in an ecstatic state of mind, divine messages or oracles.”²⁵ Afterwards the priests expressed them in a suitable form. This ecstasy was called ‘divine madness’, a kind of possession, which also was experienced by some poets. Plato writes in the *Phaedrus* about ecstasy and mentions that the oracles were able to predict future events.

Egypt’s history has given much material about its religious history and worship of several gods. It shows in all this material not much evidence for an ecstatic kind of prophecy. The high priest and some other priests were given the title prophet and their sayings were written down as prophecies, but it has not the meaning of inspired speaking of divine oracles.

In the Syria-Palestine area some archaeological evidence is found for prophetic activity, though it is not in all places convincingly put under the label ‘prophetic’. The texts from North-Syria and Ugarit contain some of those questioned messages. Phoenician and Aramaic texts show more clear traces of ecstatic prophets. “The Bible has many references to prophets of the Phoenician god Baal (and even of Asherah), using for them the same Hebrew term, *nābî’*, used for Israelite prophets. The Baal prophets share ecstatic behaviour with the Israelite prophets, but they are not identified as giving oracles.”²⁶ The case of Balaam son of Beor is particularly interesting. He is mentioned both in Numbers 22-24 as well as in a plaster inscription found at Tell Deir ‘Alla in 1967.²⁷ He was a diviner with international reputation. The records that are found of his prophecies show that he

²⁴ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 27.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Huffmon, “Prophecy, Ancient Near Eastern prophecy”, 477.

²⁷ Ibid.; International Bible Society, *The Compact NIV Study Bible* (London, Sydney, Auckland: 1998), 220; Petersen, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 9-10.

saw visions or spoke directly inspired words. Even though he was not a prophet from Israel, yet he does the same sort of things that one would expect from an Israelite prophet.²⁸

Another important area in the ancient Near East is Mesopotamia, including Babylonia, Assyria and the city of Mari at the upper Euphrates river. This last place has become very famous because of an ancient library that was discovered by archaeologists. It dates before the eighteenth century B.C. and contained economic, political and prophetic works. The clay tablets revealed that the many references to prophetic activity showed some eighteen prophets by name and more than a dozen deities that are involved in their prophetic activities. The records are usually short and sometimes fragmentary and show a wide variety of prophetic offices. Some were prophets with a title, associated with a certain deity. A few of those are referred to as *nabû*, which parallels the Hebrew *nābî'*, but little is known of the function. Others did not have such a title. But they had much in common. Often their oracles were the result of the enquiry of a deity due to a crisis situation. The revelation came usually in a temple by means of a dream or ecstasy.²⁹

In Babylonia prophecy used to happen in the temples, according to a given system. Prophets usually delivered a message to their clients by liver divination. This is also mentioned in Eze 21:26 as being specifically Babylonian.³⁰

Assyria had a reputation of being interested in all kinds of communication with supernatural beings. Especially in some periods, as during the reign of the kings Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.) and Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.), much attention was given to those practices. Some of the people involved were seen as prophets. All oracles were confirming political activities of the king and written down in official annals of the king. Very often they contained the phrase 'fear not', a common phrase in many other oracles in the Ancient Near East.³¹

One of the things that characterises the prophecy in Israel is that the Lord gave His personal revelation to them. He led them into His way of wisdom to fulfil His promises. VanGemeren shows in his work that this was an important distinction with the other nations around Israel. They were religious and desired also guidance, fulfilling of promises

²⁸ Petersen, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 10.

²⁹ Huffmon, "Prophecy, Ancient Near Eastern prophecy", 480-481.

³⁰ Ibid., 478; Vawter, "Introduction to prophetic literature", 187.

³¹ Huffman, "Prophecy, Ancient Near Eastern prophecy", 480-481.

and peace. But religion is a system that is developed by human beings. Therefore it begins and ends with man and has a manipulative content: man tries to shape its environment, including its god(s).³² The following figure from his book shows the difference clearly.³³

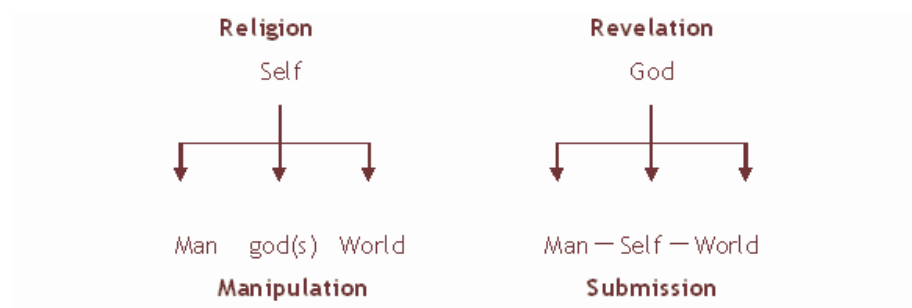


Figure 1. Religion and Revelation

After surveying prophecy in the cultures that surrounded and inhabited the area where Israel and the patriarchs lived, some conclusions can be drawn. It is clear that prophets were active both inside Israel and throughout the larger Near East cultural context. “These prophets engaged in similar forms of activity, including reporting visions and uttering oracles. As a result, prophetic literature appears both in Israelite and other cultures.³⁴ A main distinction is that the Israelite prophetic literature has a very high quality and also contains whole books. The other prophecies cannot compare with this. Usually they are short, with a less broad vision and less literary complexity.

The Near Eastern pattern also makes less distinction between prophets and priest, while usually this is clearer in Israel. However, the priestly and prophetic functions are also in Israel not easy to separate. If we see the life of Samuel then it becomes clear that he had some sacrificial functions. In 1 Sam 19:18-24 we see that he was leading a band of ecstatic prophets. Those things show that the prophet was performing some cultic function.³⁵

A third important difference is the difference between revelation by God or the religious systems that the other prophets were a part of. This also means that Israel’s

³² VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 20.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Petersen, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 10.

³⁵ Vawter, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 187-188.

prophets were only listening to the Lord, while others sought many other ways of receiving guidance. Many were also given the name prophet if they were poets or wise people, without receiving direct oracles or visions.

The above references lead to the conclusion that there are many similarities in the prophecy of the ancient Near East and in Israel. “The recognition of this common pattern does not detract from, but instead enhances, the unique qualities of biblical prophecy”³⁶, like the personal revelation of the Lord to Israel and the literary books that were written by the Hebrew prophets.

1.1.3 Prophets in the Old Testament

We have been looking at the different titles of the prophets without considering their appearance in the Old Testament in more detail. This is the aim of this paragraph. The Old Testament is in its total a collection of books that are full of accounts of prophets and prophecy. Not only is much written about them, but the Hebrew prophets were also responsible for writing main parts of the Old Testament. Prophecy is not merely a revelation of God’s will, but of God Himself, and therefore with a depth beyond the prophets understanding. It is for this reason that in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, not only the four ‘major prophets’ and the twelve ‘minor prophets’ are seen as the books of the prophets. Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are also reckoned as prophetic books. The books are written to show that the history of Israel was in itself an account of what God did in and through Israel. That makes them books of revelation of who God is.³⁷ There are also probably written by prophets, who were often the historians of Israel.

The Bible as a whole shows that many people in the Old Testament were considered to be prophets. From the beginning of humanity God revealed Himself to and through people. Adam before the fall can be considered as being prophetic, since he clearly heard and received the word of God in his life. Like Jesus, he was without sin and communicated without hindrance with the Lord. After him, Abel is mentioned as one belonging to the prophets whose blood was shed since the beginning of the world (Lk 11:51). Enoch

³⁶ Vawter, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 188.

³⁷ H. L. Ellison, *Men Spake From God: Studies in the Hebrew Prophets* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 15.

prophesied against the sinners of his time (Jude 14). Noah acted according to Gods revelation and warned his contemporaries about the coming flood, while building the ark (Heb 11:7). God said to King Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet who would intercede for him (Gen 20:7). Ps 105:12-15 speaks about Abraham and his descendants as Gods anointed ones, His prophets. Isaac, Jacob and Joseph each received revelations from God and spoke prophetic words when they blessed their sons (Gen 27:27-29; 39-40; 48:1-49: 28; 50:24,25).

After this period of the patriarchs Israel became a nation, first living in Egypt, and then moving out towards Canaan. In this time God appointed Moses as prophet. He became the model of the prophetic office.³⁸ His brother Aaron was the mouthpiece of God and Moses (Exo 7:1; cf. 4:16). Moses' sister Miriam is named a prophetess because of the song she sung when crossing the Red Sea (Exo 15:20). In the desert Eldad, Medad and the seventy elders acted once as prophets without being prophets themselves, as did king Saul in later times (Num 11:25; 1 Sam 10:6; 19:23).³⁹

When Israel settled in Canaan a long period followed in which Judges ruled the nation. Only once an account is found of an unknown prophet send by the Lord (Judg 6:7-10). The word of God was rare in those days (1 Sam 3:1). Samuel was mentioned by the Apostle Peter as the first of the Israelite prophets (Acts 3:24). He anointed Saul as first king. From that moment a new task and relationship of the prophets developed with the ruling kings. In that time also the first groups of so-called ecstatic prophets were found, as is seen in 1 Sam 10 and 19. Once Saul also joined them and prophesied (1 Sam 10:6; 19:23). Even David and Solomon acted on occasion as prophets, as did Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun (cf. 1Chron 25:1).⁴⁰

During the monarchy many prophets were send by God to bring His message. The most well-known are Nathan the prophet, Gad the seer, Micaiah son of Imlah, Elijah and Elisha, of whom we know something from the historical books of the Old Testament. In their time other prophets also lived together in groups, who were often given the name 'sons of the prophets' (1 Kings 18:4; 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3,5,7,15, etc.). In later times God

³⁸ Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1070.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

started to warn the people of Israel more severely. As the years went by, His judgment over the Northern kingdom of the divided nation was unchangeable and spoken over them by His prophets, of which Amos and Hosea were coming from the kingdom of Israel and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel from Judah. In the same period He told the Southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin first that there was still a change to repent after seeing what would happen to Israel. But when Judah did not repent His judgment was irreversible. The prophets had to prophecy to the Southern tribes that most of them would die or be taken in exile and only a small remnant should return after seventy years. Especially Jeremiah was the prophet who was in much agony prophesying this irreversible punishment, but also Obadiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel were important channels for the Lord.

In the exilic period, which was a time of transition, God had His special servant, Daniel, who served the Lord from twenty years before Jerusalem's fall until after Babylon's fall.⁴¹

God kept His promises and brought Israel back into the Promised Land. From that moment on some prophets appeared to bring the good news of God's love in renewing His covenants. They challenged Israel to stay close to the Lord and His commands, to rebuild the temple and to offer Him the best they had. Those prophets were Zechariah and Malachi, and probably Joel, depending on which time he will be dated.⁴² After them it became quiet. For four hundred years, until the birth of John the Baptist, no prophets were found in Israel. Like in the time of Eli and Samuel, the word of God was rare in the land. The religious leadership of the country developed into the groups of the scribes, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

When looking at this comprehensive overview another distinction becomes clear in the prophets of the Old Testament. Clearly it is seen that on the one hand individual prophets were having an important role in the history of Israel from the very beginning. Both man and women are mentioned as prophets. The Jewish tradition even distinguishes 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses, of which the latter are Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah,

⁴¹ VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 56.

⁴² Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Book of Joel", *The New Interpreters Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 301-303; International Bible Society, *The Compact NIV Study Bible*, 1317.

Abigail, Huldah and Esther.⁴³ On the other hand record is made of groups of prophets, living together as communities, like the ones with whom Saul and Samuel are joining with and the ‘sons of the prophets’ in the time of Elijah and Elisha.

The Institution of the Office of a Prophet

Although several people from the beginning of mankind acted as prophets, it was officially only at the institution of Israel as covenant people of God at Sinai that the office of a prophet was installed by the Lord Himself.⁴⁴ Therefore the particular passage in Deuteronomy 18:9-22 will give a better insight in God’s view of His prophets. The contexts of the passage are the regulations that God is giving to His people of Israel, who had just entered into a covenant with Him at Mount Sinai. The nation had not yet entered the land which the Lord was about to give her. Before that God wants to warn them for the false religions of the country and tell them how He will enable them to avoid these abominations.⁴⁵ Previously regulations for judges, kings and priests had been given. Especially the priest and Levites were the ones to teach Israel to keep the Law. Now Moses moves on to speak about all the detestable ways that are followed by the nations in Canaan. Verse 9-13 show the wide variety of means by which the surrounding nations sought to find out what would happen in the future and tried to appease their ‘gods’. Those practises are the reason why God will drive out those nations before them. He wants Israel to be blameless, undefiled by these things (Deut 18:12,13). They are a chosen people, different from the Canaanites, with a God who reveals Himself.

However, at mount Horeb the people had asked the Lord: “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die” (Ex 20:19; Deut 5:23-27) and God approved.⁴⁶ The Lord knew that Israel would go astray. The Law, the institutions for the nation that they had received through Moses, would not be enough to keep sinful people close to Him.⁴⁷ That made it even more necessary to institute the office of the prophets. Verse 15 gives the assurance that God will go on to speak to Israel,

⁴³ Verhoef, “Prophecy”, 1070.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 20.

⁴⁶ J. Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy, Bible Students Commentary*, translated by Ed M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 207.

⁴⁷ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 20.

through prophets. “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” In this verse, ‘prophet’ is written in singular. According to Peter and Stephen (Acts 3:22-23; 7:37) this is fulfilled in Christ. “But this does not eliminate the possibility that this verse refers in the first instance to “common” human prophets. Three considerations argue in favour of this view. First, the contrast between verse 15 and verses 9:14: Israel must not seek help from diviners, etc., for the Lord will make sure that there will be a prophet when needed; second, the larger context of this section deals with other functionaries (judges, priests, kings); and third, what is said in verses 20-22 about the false prophet and the way in which Israel may discern between the true and the false prophet.”⁴⁸ Therefore this passage can be seen as the official institution of the office of the prophet in Israel. It is clearly visible that God choose this way to reveal Himself in addition to the Law to His people, whom He also had chosen. It is God who raised the prophet from among the Israelites when it was necessary.

The life of Moses and this institution of the prophetic office form the beginning of one continuous stream of prophets from Moses to John the Baptist. Several prophets had a special place in this movement. According to VanGemeren, Moses was the fountainhead of the prophets, through whom God established this office.⁴⁹ Since him no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses (Deut 34:10-12). After Moses Samuel became the prophetic role model as the guardian of the theocracy, a task that continued after he had anointed Saul and David as kings.⁵⁰ Then Elijah follows. “Though he left no prophetic book, Elijah has a special place next to Moses.”⁵¹ He was the one who shaped the course of the classical prophets. Israel was in a different situation. Moses interceded for the nation, but Elijah had to accuse the Israelites of not serving the Lord according to His will. He longed for a people that would be loyal to the Lord, through purification and restoration. All the other prophets, including John the Baptist, were prophets in the spirit of Elijah (Mal 4:5; Mt 11:14; 17:10-13).⁵² Finally, Jesus Himself came as the perfect spokesperson for God, at the end of the line of the prophets of the old covenant and as the initiator of a new era with a new, better covenant.

⁴⁸ Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy*, 206

⁴⁹ VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 38

1.1.4 Receiving the Message

“The task of the prophets was to know the will of God so that they could convey it to the nation. Their ministry consisted in handling revelation, *i.e.* the knowledge that God revealed to them.”⁵³ Much is written about how they received those messages. Especially when they heard divinely uttered words, did they hear them with their physical ears? Or did God impose His words directly in their minds?⁵⁴ In the given context of this research, it goes too far to examine this question in depth. This paragraph will be restricted to an overview of the different ways of receiving the word of God by the Old Testament prophets.

The revelation of God to the Israelite prophets has to be distinguished from the ways in which the prophets and oracles of the surrounding cultures sought divine guidance. Lindblom mentions two types of contact with the ‘divine world’. The first is possession, the divine substance or deity penetrates man and takes him over. He acts and speaks in him. The human *ego* is (temporarily) pushed out.⁵⁵ The second category is ‘inspiration proper’ or personal inspiration. “Typical of the other category is that there a distinction between the self and the divinity. The divinity does not enter the human *ego*, but stands outside it.”⁵⁶ God or the gods appear or speak to the prophet, affect him with his powers, influence him, have fellowship with him, but never take him over as a personality. It is clear that the Lord of Israel never uses possession, but always speaks through inspiration. He respects the human individuality that He himself had created.⁵⁷

The revelation of God is not mechanical, but organically. God is not just using the prophet in the way that a flute player uses his flute for bringing forth his music.⁵⁸ It is a personal and direct contact between God and the prophet which has an analogy in the way

⁵³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 31.

⁵⁴ See for a short, clear discussion: Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 176-177.

⁵⁵ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 180-181.

⁵⁸ Aalders, *de Profeten des Ouden Verbonds*, 64.

two human persons can have contact through the spoken word.⁵⁹ The prophets had to learn sometimes that it was God who was speaking to them, like Samuel. “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord; the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (1 Sam 3:7).⁶⁰ If God had used him like a mechanical instrument to channel His words, then the writing of this account would have been irrelevant.

Aalders gives a number of arguments that support this view of organic revelation. First, the prophets did often not just give the words of God to the people, but seemed regularly to agree with it. It seems that often the message of the Lord had become one with the thoughts of the prophet himself. According to Aalders, this is so very clear from the reading of many of the books of the prophets that giving examples is not necessary. Second, often we see in the prophecies elements that have come into the prophet through another way than direct revelation, like knowledge of Israel’s history. Third and last, the prophets have each a style of their own in speaking, acting, examples that are given, usage of language and so on.⁶¹ The revelation of God to His prophets is not strange to them and their own concepts and knowledge. It could somehow be received and placed by their perceptions and through them be spoken to the people.⁶²

The prophets received their messages when the power of God came upon them. The Hebrew term *ruach* is used for this description of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it made it possible for the prophets to do extraordinary things.⁶³ The *ruach* is closely connected with the word of God.⁶⁴ It never made the mind of the prophet passive, he actively received the message God wanted to make clear to him.

The books of the twelve canonical prophets illustrate two principal ways of receiving the word of God. Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel were prophets who mainly saw visions, while Jeremiah and Hosea primarily heard the word of God. This does not mean that Isaiah, Ezekiel or Daniel never heard any sound in the visions or Jeremiah and Hosea saw no pictures, but it was not their main way of receiving the message.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Aalders, *de Profeten des Ouden Verbonds*, 66.

⁶⁰ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 12.

⁶¹ Aalders, *de Profeten des Ouden Verbonds*, 62-63.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-39

The prophets received their inspiration in advance or on the spot.⁶⁶ This seems also to be suggested by the root of the word *nābî*, that probably also has the meaning of the ‘bubbling forth’ of a message from a prophet. When God spoke to and through them, it can sometimes have been like an instantaneous message flowing out of the prophet.⁶⁷

God also used specific situations in the daily life of the prophets to give them His word. One well known example is Jer 18, where is written that God ordered Jeremiah to go to the potter’s house. He arrived there and watched how a pot was spoiled in the process of making and reshaped into another pot. Only then the word of the Lord came again to him.

Lindblom discerns another form of receiving the word of God: the literary visions. According to him, some parts of the prophetic books that are written down are not really visions, but have very imaginary language. He sees them as ‘pseudo-visions’.⁶⁸ The Lord describes in those messages through the words a picture of how the future will be, in very vivid expressions.⁶⁹

Some prophets describe the word of the Lord as a burden that they received. Isaiah and Habakkuk use this expression regularly (Isa 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; Hab 1:1). The prophets were often hurt by the messages they had to bring to their people.⁷⁰

There is one way of revelation that needs to be examined a little more. This is receiving the word of God through ‘ecstasy’. The groups of prophets that were singing and dancing in the time of Samuel and Saul are often named as ecstatic prophets. Some scholars compare this way of acting with the priests of Baal, who went into a kind of trance to obtain divine knowledge, like is seen during the confrontation with Elijah on mount Carmel. Ellison sees the attitude of these bands of Hebrew prophets as partly influenced by the Canaanite religions and points out that they were condemned by the written prophets as being false prophets.⁷¹ The dance and music which lead to ecstatic

⁶⁶ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 19.

⁶⁷ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 56; Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 19.

⁶⁸ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 141.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁰ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 15-16.

⁷¹ Ellison, *Men Spake From God*, 15.

experience led to a climate for prophecy.⁷² Clearly the outward expression was very strong, if we look 1 Sam 19:24, where is described how Saul stripped of his clothes while prophesying and laid down that way for a day and a night. But the word ‘ecstasy’ to describe those prophets must be used carefully. It is clear that it was the Spirit of the Lord who came from those prophets upon Saul (1 Sam 10:10, 19:23). Through this Spirit Saul begun to prophesy.⁷³ There is a state of ecstasy in it, but it is different from the pagan ecstasy. It contrasts strong with the auto mutilation of the Baal priests or the agony of Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, who was in ‘divine madness’ when she received messages.⁷⁴ The way several the verbs in 1 Sam 10:11 and 19:20 are translated in some bible versions seems to be semantically overloaded. Those prophets just acted as (very expressive) prophets, according to VanGemeren.⁷⁵

1.1.5 Modes of Prophecy

As is seen in the previous paragraph, the prophets received their messages mainly through hearing or seeing. It could happen at a given time before they had to give it or instantly. The Old Testament gives many examples of how those messages were brought to the people of Israel or other recipients. Several modes of prophecy can be discerned.

Speaking

Often the prophets were sent to certain people to deliver a message. Samuel was sent to Saul; Gad was sent to king David, Elijah to king Ahab. Others had to go to the temple entrance or other places of meeting for the people of Israel. Jonah even was sent to the pagan city of Nineveh.

It could happen that God gave the message first and then sent them away. Other times it came only on the spot, it bubbled forth from the prophet and was spoken directly to the people that were present.

⁷² Vawter, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 188.

⁷³ Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 86.

⁷⁴ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 27-28.

⁷⁵ Verhoef, “Prophecy”, 1073.

Writing

Some Old Testament prophets are very well known by the number of high-quality books they have left us. The style was often very poetic and expressive. In some cases were the writings the means of spreading the message God had given them to their original recipients. This was the case with Jeremiah who gave his prophecies, written on a scroll, to king Jehoiakim (Jer 36). After the king destroyed them in the fire he ordered his scribe Baruch to write them down again. That shows the second reason for their writing: preserving the word of God for the generations to come. And as we see in the case of Daniel, they were certainly read and could serve as a means for intercession in much later times (Dan 9).

Symbolic Acting

One mode of prophecy that was also common for many of the prophets was acting symbolically. They not only had to interpret symbols given by God, but were sometimes asked to use them as a means to communicate their message to the people. Ezekiel one astonishing example. God ordered him to behave like a refugee going into exile (Eze 12) or to build a scale model of Jerusalem and lie in front of it as if he was laying siege to it (Eze 4). Elijah was going naked for a while. Hosea had to marry an adulterous wife. Jeremiah had to put a linen belt between some rocks and pick it up again. All these symbolic actions and symbols gave a strong message to the people.

However, it was not only the message of the symbols that was important. Eze 4 shows that the prophets also could become part of the reality that they were prophesying about. Ezekiel was ordered to represent the bearing of the sins of Israel and Judah by acting in this manner. He was not the one who became the substitute for bearing the sin, but was certainly in a way involved in this situation. He had to identify himself with the sin of his people.

Power Encounter

The so-called 'power encounter' was now and then important in the ministry of some prophets. One example is Elijah who opposed the priests of Baal and queen Jezebel. Through this direct encounter he expected and acted in the power of the Lord. This prophetic act showed the people of Israel who was the real God and made it clear to them that they had to serve Him only. The result was a strong change in attitude for that

moment. Even king Ahab did not attack Elijah, who was so full of the power of the Holy Spirit that he ran the whole rocky road from the mount Carmel to Jezreel. He even reached the city before Ahab, who was driving his chariot at full speed.⁷⁶

1.1.6 Forthtelling and Foretelling

Both the forthtelling and foretelling aspect were present in the ministry of almost all the prophets. Especially the 'great' prophets of the Old Testament like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, spoke not only about their own time, but also about the future. This is also reflected in the Greek word *prophētēs*, used by the Septuagint and in the New Testament. The *pro* in this word can both have the meaning 'before' and 'forth'.

Lindblom and with him many others consider forthtelling to be the most important aspect of the Old Testament prophets. Preaching and speaking for the contemporary people of Israel.⁷⁷ Accordingly "the chief task of the prophets was to bring the word of God to their own generation, rather than to forecast events one thousand or two thousand years hence."⁷⁸ But it should not be restricted to that. Prophecy reveals the will of God, shows His purposes, rebukes errors and strengthens the weak, exposes what is hidden. This is not restricted to any time. It can speak about the present, the future or explain the past.⁷⁹ It will have relevance for a time that God wants it to have relevance.

Hill defines three chronological terms for Old Testament prophecies: contemporary prophecy, the near future and the far future. The first one was their main task for which God had appointed them. The prophets learned to analyse the situation of their time and all the powers that were at work. They brought all these daily-news facts before the Lord and listened to Him what He had to say. The prophecies for the near future grew usually out of the words the prophets were speaking for their own time.⁸⁰ In that way they could be the watchmen of their country, on guard for the events of the near future. Added to this, their messages regularly had some picture of the far distant future. They could not

⁷⁶ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 32.

⁷⁷ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 1.

⁷⁸ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 91.

⁷⁹ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 24-25.

⁸⁰ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 91-92.

always know exactly what it would be like. It was like the fog which can hide the things that are far away, but that are unmistakably coming near.

The forthtelling aspect of prophecy was an important source of information for Israel to know God's will for today, next to the commandments He had given. It helped them to come back to the service of the Lord when they were gone astray, or to see the way God wanted them to live in order to keep His commandments and to please Him. At the same time, often the prophetic words were neglected and ignored, due to confusion about who the real prophet was, or because people were not willing to listen. In that case, God would usually warn them again and again, until He finally send punishment.

This pattern is very clear in the book of Judges. Deborah, the prophetess, was at a certain moment leading Israel (Judg 4:4) that was oppressed by Jabin, a king of Canaan (4:2). The reason for this oppression was that the Israelites had again done evil in the eyes of the Lord, while knowing His perfect law. Then, after twenty years, they cried out to the Lord and He send a word through Deborah to a certain Barak, son of Abinoam (Judg 4:6). This prophecy gave specific details how to act and what God would do: "Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands." (Judg 4:6-7). Barak accepted the responsibility, although he wanted to share it with Deborah. God did what He had promised and Israel was freed again. It was through forth telling, informed trough foretelling, that this victory had come.

This same story also illustrates how prophecy was conditional. If the people did not listen to God's instructions, then the outcome could also be different. Barak was afraid to go without Deborah. This had as result that the battle was still won, as God had told, but that the honour was given to Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who killed Sisera with a tent peg while he was sleeping in her tent (Judg 4:9,21).

Examples of forthtelling are present throughout the whole of the Old Testament. At a certain time, when the Israelites grew impatient in the desert and spoke against God and Moses, venomous snakes came among them and bit the people, which resulted in the death of many. As an answer on Moses' prayer for the people God instructed him to make a bronze model of a snake and to put it on a stake, so that anyone who looked at it would live. Moses did so and all who looked at the bronze snake lived (Num 21:4-9).

A second example is the message the prophet Nathan had to bring to king David, after the king had committed adultery with Bathsheba (Num 12:1-19). He told a parable about a rich and a poor man. The rich one had a large number of sheep and cattle, while the poor one only owned a little lamb that he raised together with his children. It was like a daughter to him. When a traveller came to the rich man, he refrained from taking one of his own sheep, but took the lamb of the poor man, doing great injustice to him. Nathan used this story to let David condemn his own injustice done to both Uriah, whom he caused to die, and his wife Bathsheba, who was like the little lamb in the story. God spoke directly into the situation and it caused David to repent. As a result, God forgave his sins, while the bad results of his mistakes remained. His first child with Bathsheba died and his son Absalom defiled his fathers bed by sleeping with his concubines (vv. 14, 18; vs. 11 and Deut 17:17).

Elijah appears for the first time in the Old Testament writings when he appears before king Ahab. He proclaimed that there would be no dew nor rain in the coming years except at his word (1 Kings 17:2). It happened as he told. Again, after the confrontation with the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel and the resulting defeat of their powers, which exposed the defeat of Baal, the fertility God, he spoke the words of God that a heavy rain was coming, and it came (1 Kings 18:41).

Amos' ministry was at the time of prosperity in the kingdoms of Israel. It was a time of social injustice and a lack of piety for the service of the Lord.⁸¹ The prophet used sharp words to speak God's message to the people, warning them for the coming judgment and urging them to do justice. It speaks of how God gave a famine in the country to turn the people back to him, but they did not return to Him (Amos 4:6) He condemns the indulgent rich women who at the same time oppress the poor and needy (Amos 4:1). The message of God for their situation is clear: if they do not repent, only a small remnant will be left. Hundred out of thousand, ten out of a hundred will survive (Amos 5:3). If they seek God and love what is good, if they maintain justice in the courts, then God will perhaps have mercy on the remnant of the people and they will live (Amos 5:6,14,15).

Hosea was called by God to marry a prostitute, thus symbolising Israel's adultery with other gods. He has to pronounce judgment, but also restoration. God has a charge against Israel, who is led away by a spirit of prostitution (Hos 3:12). He exposes the false intentions behind Israel's thoughts of returning to the Lord, since they seek only His

⁸¹ International Bible Society, *The Compact NIV Study Bible*, 1324.

healing and help without really repenting and turning to steadfast love. It is like the morning mist, the dew that disappears (Hos 6:1-4). “Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth.” (Hos 6:5a,b). Forth telling can be sharp like a razor, cutting right through outward appearances that hide the inner situation.

When Judah was taken captive to Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah sent the exiles a letter with a message from the Lord (Jer 29:1-24). It was addressed to all the elders, priests, prophets and people in that great city, which personified for them all that is evil and against the Lord. The amazing thing is that God spoke right in this situation through the forth telling prophecy of Jeremia, urging them to settle in the city, building houses, planting gardens, marrying and increasing in numbers (vv. 5,6). Instead of waiting for a quick return they had to become ‘at home’ in exile. More than that, they had to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God had carried them into exile, praying for it so that it might prosper as a result of the prospering Jews (vs. 7). No one of the exiles would have expected this message. It shows how clear God opens a new perspective of what He in His wisdom is doing, even blessing a city through them to which He carried them in exile. It gave them direction in how to handle this new, painful situation, offering certainty and the consciousness that nothing is useless when God is in control.

1.2 *Life and Characteristics of a Prophet*

The prophets were ordinary man who could occupy any position in the society. They were one among their fellow humans, living an ordinary life until God’s call came on their life.⁸² Amos for example was a herdsman, a shepherd (Amos 1:1, 7:14). God had chosen them, set them apart. That required a way of life and a character that was moulded to be fitting in the purposes of the Lord. Apart from his task of being a messenger, a mouthpiece for God, other characteristics are important in the life of the prophets. All those aspects are not to be taken separate, but as a whole.

⁸² Willis Judson Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963), 85-86.

1.2.1 Obedience to the Will of God

Since the prophet was sent by God Himself, he had to be totally obedient to everything God wanted him to do. It was sometimes possible to ask the Lord questions or to argue with Him. But if the Lord had decided what He was about to do, then they only could obey. He is the sovereign King whose wisdom and power is so far greater than that of human beings. “When God spoke to him he had to be able to discern what was required of him. Once he was sure of the mission and the message he was under the obligation of absolute obedience to do exactly as he was told.”⁸³ Disobedience could have very serious consequences, as the story of the unknown prophet in Kings 13 shows. His disobedience to the Lord’s instructions caused his death by a lion, although he was misled by another prophet. In the case of Jonah, God was merciful to him and rescued his life through the great fish. Jonah repented and God restored his mission. But even then, God did not change His orders but gave again the same task to him (Jonah 1-4).

This obedience and total commitment was often the hearts desire of the prophets, but also a very serious and difficult task. It could be painful or difficult for a prophet to obey when God compelled them to speak or act. Ezekiel lost all of a sudden his wife, but was not allowed to mourn. In total obedience he did as he had been commanded (Eze 24:15-18). In 20:49 he shows how his obedience was conflicting with his feelings, when people were saying that he was just telling parables, while he knew that it was the truth.

The message that the prophets had to bring was often very unpopular. They were people who were living in two kingdoms. First of all they were obeying the King of Kings, the Lord. If he ordered something, they would usually obey, no matter what the cost. On the other hand they were subjects to the king of Israel or other kings whom they had to obey. This situation of a double passport brought them regularly into a clash with the rulers, as is seen in the history of Elijah and Ahab, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others.

1.2.2 Authority and Direct Revelation

Another important characteristic of a prophet was the direct revelation of God in his life and the divine authority that was connected with that aspect. They were not just speaking something of their own, but the word of the almighty God, directly given to

⁸³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 47.

them,⁸⁴ for which he was sent to deliver.⁸⁵ Sometimes a prophet was receiving a message by means of symbols or situations, but always was it the Lord who made His word clear to them. It never happened that another person was used by God to give the message that the prophets had to spread. Their relation with God was very personal, a privileged situation. They could enter into His presence and hear from the Lord Himself what was on His heart.

Only the prophets had the authority to speak in the name of the Lord. Even the priests, the keepers and interpreters of Gods law, could not do so.⁸⁶ They identified themselves so complete with the words of the Lord that they spoke frequently in the first person when they were speaking Gods words.⁸⁷

1.2.3 Unfailing Faith and Trust in the Living God

The task and position of the prophets needed a strong faith in the living God. If they were not sure that His deeds were right and good, how could they ever represent Him or bring His message? By their own people they were often seen as persons who brought bad news. They were the ones who spoiled their optimistic worldview and seemed to undermine hope for the future. The only way for the prophets was to trust God completely. In many of their writings their struggle is seen to trust the Lord, no matter what He is about to bring over Israel. They needed faith and trust to be obedient in all situations.

Great examples of faith are visible in their lives and writings. Many prophets encountered their kings and spoke unpopular words. Jeremiah could even in the midst of his agony confess: “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. [...] The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.” (Lam 2:21,22,25). Another example is Habakkuk, who had two times a discourse with the Lord. After the Lord had answered he prayed a prayer of faith: “Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I

⁸⁴ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 45.

⁸⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 19.

⁸⁶ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 45

⁸⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 19.

will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength, he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” (Hab 3:17-19). It was this faith, strengthened by the Lord, which kept them always loyal and committed to the Lord and His calling on their lives.

1.2.4 Called to Live a Holy Life

Another essential aspect of the prophets was that they had to live in purity, righteousness and truth. No such sins should be found in their lives. God had to purify them again and again, directly and through the offerings made by priests, for else they would have died. It is impossible for an impure human being to be a channel for the pure, holy and perfect words of God. He has to lead others into a life of holiness, of commitment to the Lord. The more he himself should be holy.⁸⁸

A good example is the commission of Isaiah by the Lord, written down in Isaiah chapter 6. He saw the Lord seated on a throne and seraphs around Him. Then he clearly realised that he was a man of unclean lips, living amidst a people of unclean lips. But the Lord purified his lips by means of a burning coal with which a seraph touched his lips. The seraph said “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” (v. 7). After that he received his calling for the people of Israel. Absolute purity was needed to be appointed by the Lord.

1.2.5 Compassion

The prophets were not just announcing some words of the Lord to their people and then walking away. They were compassionate persons. It touched their hearts to announce judgments over their own people and to see the decay of the country. The ministry of the prophets reveals their understanding of God as merciful, compassionate and overflowing with loving kindness.⁸⁹ Some of them expressed those feelings in the words they used when writing down the messages of God. Isaiah and Habakkuk regularly use the phrase “the burden which..., the burden against...” (Hab 1:1; Is 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1). God’s burden is expressed through their messages and they identify themselves with it.⁹⁰ Their task could

⁸⁸ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 41.

⁸⁹ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 51.

⁹⁰ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 15.

give them great distress. Ezekiel cries out: “Ah Sovereign Lord! Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?” (Eze 9:8; 11:13). Amos uses similar words in his plea for the nation (Amos 7:2). Jeremiah’s Lamentations and passages from his book became proverbial as examples of deep inner pain and trouble. He was struggling with the load that God gave in his life. He did not want to speak anymore, but could not keep silent. God’s word burnt like a fire in him (Jer 20:7-18).

1.2.6 Prayer Life

Prayer was the life-blood, the principal means of communicating with God for the prophets. Their personal relationship with the Lord is the basis of their ministry. They would praise and worship God, but also intercede for the nation. And through prayer they would seek understanding of the messages God gave to them or about how they should live and act. Jer 42 shows such a situation. The prophet prayed to the Lord to ask guidance for the remnant of Israel that was heading for Egypt. They wanted to know what God told them to do. Jeremiah waited and prayed for ten days, and then the Lord answered (Jer 42:7). Guidance was evidently not always a direct effortless revelation.⁹¹

1.2.7 Enduring Hardship

Another important characteristic of the prophets is the enduring of hardship. Regularly they had to face difficult situations as representatives of God. Irritation or open hatred was often their share, since they could not compromise the word of the Lord or speak to the mouth of the people. The message they had to bring was often one of warning and judgment of wrong situations, while most of the people thought to live in peace or did not want to hear what they were doing wrong. The examples of the clashes and struggles that followed are manifold. Jeremiah only was several times offended and imprisoned. Chapter 36-38 are an account of a long list of hardships, including burning the prophecies he had brought to the king, who as leader was responsible for his people, and imprisonment. His fellow Israelites thought he was a traitor and not without reason. He had to tell the people: “whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live.” (Jer 38:2b). Jeremiah was suffering so much that he called out to the Lord for help. He was righteous, yet his sufferings were so much (Jer 15:15-18). Hardship was a part of being a prophet. God even told to Ezekiel that He would make his forehead as the hardest stone, because

⁹¹ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 131.

the Israelites would be unwilling to listen and hard as stone (Eze 3:7-9). But he did not need to be afraid, since God would be with Him.

1.3 *Ministries of the Old Testament Prophets*

Every prophet and every situation in the history of Israel was unique. The way God gave them the message, their own life and character, the recipients, it was never exactly the same. What was the function they had and the ministry for which the Lord appointed them? Is it possible to find certain elements that are binding those ministries together, characterising elements they have in common? Many attempts are made to categorise the function and ministry of the prophets. Often it is done according to the time they were living in or the content of their prophecies and writings. Each choice of categorising has its strengths and weaknesses. For this research a specification into four aspects is chosen which shows the impact of the prophets on their society, preceded by several general comments about the function of the prophets and their areas of influence.

1.3.1 The Function of the Prophets

The prophets, sent and inspired by God to communicate His messages, had an important function in the Israelite society. The names used for the prophets reflect several of their functions.⁹² A prophet had both naturalistic functions in the public life of the nation, as well as supernaturalistic functions through miracles, prediction, the writing of books of the Old Testament and so on.⁹³ The position and function of prophets put them at the forefront of the leadership of Israel, regardless if they were acknowledged as such, like Samuel, or disguised, like Jeremiah.

Naturalistic Functions

The prophets were prominent as the public men of their times, often as religious leaders, statesmen or political leaders. Moses, Samuel, David and Daniel are some examples. It seems to have been true that in times of crisis the leaderships offices were

⁹² See paragraph 1.1.1.

⁹³ Beecher, *The prophets and the Promise*, 88-109.

regularly falling in the hands of a prophet.⁹⁴ Not all prophets taking part in public affairs were statesman, but they were often connected with the kings and rulers.⁹⁵ The prophecies of the individual prophets were directed mainly to the royal house, though the messages and judgments proclaimed often affected all Israel.⁹⁶ Their lives and messages reflect the history of the national affairs of the nation. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, Elijah and Elisha were all active in state affairs.⁹⁷

Prophecy shared several aspects with the priestly tradition, especially the emphasis on divine revelation from God. At the same time there is a difference, since the priests were presenting the traditions of the past and their relevance for the Israelite life, while the prophets respond mainly to particular situations. The priestly tradition is the foundational framework within which the prophet operates.⁹⁸

Apart from political and priestly functions, the prophets were reformers of their times. They were leading in warfare against organized evils and initiating reforms in Israel in the temple worship, divorce, licentiousness, suppression of the poor and so on.⁹⁹

Furthermore, the prophets had a literary function in Israel. Many of them were writers and most books of the Old Testament have names of prophets attached to them.¹⁰⁰ Their poetry and prose was of great importance for the history of Israel.

None of the prophets was same. Some were coming from rural areas, others from the cities. In spite of this, all of them seemed to be concerned with and functioning in both a cosmopolitan perspective and local interests. They were practical, dealing with the

⁹⁴ Beecher, *The prophets and the Promise*, 94.

⁹⁵ B. D. Napier, "Prophet", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 907; John J. Schmitt, "Prophecy, Preexilic Hebrew prophecy", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 484.

⁹⁶ Krämer, Rendtorff, Meyer, "prophētēs", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 802.

⁹⁷ Beecher, *The prophets and the Promise*, 94-96.

⁹⁸ M. J. Buss, "Prophecy in ancient Israel", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Keith Crim, suppl. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 694.

⁹⁹ Beecher, *The prophets and the Promise*, 98-99.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

concerns of their own locality and own generation. Restricting the prophecies to local and temporary meanings is at the same time a mistake, since their messages and writings had regularly a certain universality and general truths for all generations and other situations.¹⁰¹

Supernaturalistic Functions

The Bible prophets claim functions that imply superhuman gifts, functions that differ in kind from the human achievements previously mentioned.¹⁰² They were working miracles, disclosing secrets by God's help, predicting the future and showed in some situations superhuman powers, as is seen in the exemplary lives of Elijah and Elisha. In this way their leadership had a degree or content that was rising above normal human leadership. They were leading according to the theocracy of God, the leadership of the Lord as the supreme authority, even after Israel became a kingdom. This was also the background of their clashes with the kings and leaders when they were going astray from the Lord's will.

Four Major Themes of the Prophetic Message

The whole spectrum of God's revelation is present in the messages of the prophets. A special focus is on four spheres of life: the religious-ethical, the socio-economical, the political (both internal and external), and the eschatological. The prophets announced in all these spheres both God's judgment and salvation.¹⁰³ They are universal, since God is the creator and ruler of the universe. He is the Lord of creation, the Lord of history, the God of mercy, love, holiness, faithfulness and justice.¹⁰⁴ He is the foundation of all areas of life, the measurement for all human behaviour and ways of living.

The function of the prophets becomes more clear through what they communicated. It reveals their influence in all areas of Israel's life and the way they were functioning in their ministry as a prophet.

¹⁰¹ Beecher, *The prophets and the Promise*, 102-103.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰³ Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1076.

¹⁰⁴ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 136-148.

The Religious-Ethical Sphere

The religious-ethical sphere included ritual excesses in Israel. Especially the northern kingdom, but after several decades also increasingly the southern, was involved in all kinds of idolatry. King Jeroboam started a whole sacrificial system as substitute for the temple service. During the time of settling in Canaan Israel learnt also to worship the local gods. The Canaanites and Amorites taught them how to till the soil and how they should worship the (local) gods of rainfall, fertility and control over the land.¹⁰⁵ One prophet who spoke against Israel's attitude was Amos. God told through him that He hated their religious feasts, songs and offerings (Amos 5:21-23).

The Socio-Economical Sphere

The socio-economical situation of Israel was another important area that the prophets approached. There was much injustice, corruption and oppression of the poor people, in spite of the clear guidelines in the law of Moses. God provided a good system to prevent the abuse of fellow Israelites, but the daily situation was not as it should be. The prophets pointed at the wrong areas and used strong languages to condemn wrong deeds. Their task was to restore socio-economical justice in the land of Israel. Again the prophet Amos provides a good example, as he addresses the rich, indulgent women who were oppressing the poor as 'cows of Bashan' (Amos 4:1-3). Instead of this attitude it was needed that the people would again obey the law of Moses and help each other with a cheerful heart, giving freely to the needs of one another.

The Political Sphere

The political sphere was the third area of the message of the prophets. Their focus was both internal, the nation of Israel, and external. They were often found at the courts of the kings and influential as man of God. Samuel anointed the first two kings. Nathan the prophet and Gad the seer visited David regularly (Nathan: 2 Sam 7:2,3; 12:1; 1Kings 1; Gad: 1 Sam 22:5; 2 Sam 24:11-19; 1 Chron 29:29). Elijah and Elisha were directly and boldly speaking to the king. All the books of the prophets have messages for kings and rulers. Their authority was not restricted to Israel. God also used them to speak judgement on all the neighbouring nations, including the great political and economical centres of

¹⁰⁵ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 150.

that time: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Tyre. The content of the words of God reveals that He uses nations to fulfil His judgment or restoration of other nations, including His chosen people of Israel.

The Eschatological Sphere

The fourth sphere is the eschatological one. The messages for their present situation were often leading to words of God about what is to come. Some parts are mainly eschatological, like Dan 7-12. Others are first of all aiming at the time the prophets lived in, but have a second ‘layer’ in meaning that reveals something about the future.

The prophets were announcing coming judgments and disasters God was going to bring over Israel and the nations. This judgment would come at appointed times, that were given the name ‘Day of the Lord’. That would be an awful day in which God would pour out His wrath. However, this ‘day of the Lord’ referred not only to the present situation of judgment. In the far distant future a day will come that the Lord will judge the whole earth, as is revealed more specific in the New Testament. “Every historical coming of this day is always type and promise of its final coming and forms an intrusion of the consummation.”¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, on those days of the Lord salvation would be there for the one’s who would repent and serve the Lord wholeheartedly. Israel would be redeemed from its transgressors and become a free nation again, though only a shadow of what it was. Throughout the time, the prophets began to speak of a great salvation that was to come in the future. The Messiah would come and lead the people out of captivity. He would crush the oppressors and set the captives free. Thus the prophets already foretold the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, who would set the people of Israel and all the earth free.

1.3.2 Communicators of Gods Will, Plans and Purpose for Humanity

The prophets were chosen by the Lord to be the unique vessels through which He communicated with His people. As is exposed before, they received as spokesman of God

¹⁰⁶ Dirk H. Odendaal, *The Eschatological Expectations of Isaiah 40 - 66 with Special Reference to Israel and the Nations* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), 32, cited by VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 45.

direct revelation from Him.¹⁰⁷ They were obliged to deliver the word of God without any additions or changes. This position gave their words and acts absolute authority. What they spoke was directly from the Lord Almighty, King of Israel, and binding for everyone who heard it.

The relation of the Lord with Israel was and is a covenant relationship. It is not only God who promised to take care for those people, they themselves also agreed with the covenant He proposed. All the promises and blessings of the covenant would be theirs if they would keep it, honouring God in that way. JHWH showed Himself to them as the faithful and unchangeable God of the covenant.¹⁰⁸ This unique and privileged relationship provided the basis for the message of the prophets, both in the (future) promises and warnings that were given. It always related in some way to their present situation, even when it was about the far future. God would keep them accountable for their sin, since the covenant made them more responsible. On the other hand would He never stop loving and caring for them. The prophetic message is theocentric, God is the centre of Israel and the world. Humanity needs His full and free salvation.¹⁰⁹ Most of the prophets spoke only to the Israelites, although occasionally they also had to give prophecies on neighbouring countries. It was in this setting that God chose to reveal His will, plans and purposes for humanity.

The prophets appeared often at times of trouble to reveal more of Gods will. The Lord raised them to show His people the way out of the trouble. Often it was a call for repentance and a return to Him only, so that He would again protect the nation and turn all things for good. Repentance was not only a realisation of guilt and shortcomings, but involved also a change in attitude.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Graham Houston, *Prophecy, a Gift for Today?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 29.

¹⁰⁸ Aalders, *De Profeten des Ouden Verbonds*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 45.

¹¹⁰ Huffmon, "Prophecy, Ancient Near Eastern prophecy", 490.

1.3.3 Counsellors and Comforters of the Oppressed

Oppression and troubles have become common since the fall of mankind. Injustice and trouble are found in every area of life. Many prophets seemed to have a special task in counselling and comforting those who were oppressed. The words they use in such cases for the oppressors could be very strong, as the given example of Amos 4:1-3 shows. On the other hand, God speaks through the prophets tenderly towards the oppressed and people in bondage, even if their situation was caused by their own disobedience to Gods laws.¹¹¹

1.3.4 Acting with the Power of God

Another aspect of the prophetic ministry and the authority God had given them was that the Holy Spirit gave them sometimes the power to do extraordinary things. Especially in the lives of Elijah and Elisha were many occasions in which this happened. They were regularly involved in power encounters with the king and queen and the idolatrous priests. On one occasion Elijah prayed and God send His fire and consumed the offering. He prayed a second time and then, after 3,5 years of drought, suddenly a heavy rain came. He ran the whole rocky road from mount Carmel to Jezreel. Soldiers that came to take him captive were consumed by fire (2 Kings 1:10,12). He performed several miracles, including raising a child from the dead (1 Kings 17:22). God's power was strongly present through him in answer of his prayers. Elisha's ministry was even more powerful, seen from this perspective. The miracles and works that he was able to do are many.

The purpose of this acting was showing that God is the king of all, the one who has all power and authority and who is the real keeper of the nation. The prophets were through this power enabled to fight against what was wrong, to help and relieve the people in trouble and to defend themselves when they were in danger. It made their ministry go beyond human possibilities.

1.3.5 Intercession

The prophets were often praising and adoring the Lord, but it was intercessory prayer that was most closely associated with their ministry.¹¹² Out of their compassion rose their intercession for the people they were ministering to. "The initiative of this mediating of

¹¹¹ Cf. Ezek 16: 3-14; Hos 11.

¹¹² Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 118.

the word was sometimes taken by the prophets, inasmuch as they acted in prayer and supplication on behalf of the people, but generally it was taken by the Lord himself.”¹¹³ This confirms again the initiating role of God, who was also the one who appointed them as vessels through which He chose to speak to His people. In their role as intercessors they approached the priestly function very closely, though it was not a combination like the priest-prophets in the surrounding cultures.¹¹⁴

God was looking for people who would be like watchmen on the walls of a city, warning its inhabitants for coming dangers and forming a protection for them. If there would be only one person standing in the gap for Israel, then He would not destroy it (Eze 22:30). The reality of this word is seen in the history of Moses when he was with the Lord on mount Sinai. Aaron, his brother, had made a golden calf to worship, since Moses stayed away a long time. This arose Gods anger again, after many previous occasions in which the Israelites had provoked Him. He told Moses that He would destroy all the people except Moses and make him into a great nation. But Moses did not want this to happen and interceded on behalf of his people. Then the Lord did not bring on His people the disaster he had threatened. He let them live, although they had to bear some other consequences (Ex 32:9-15, ch. 32-33). In the same way other prophets like Amos and Ezekiel cried out to the Lord not to do what He planned to do and the Lord reacted to their prayers (Am 7:2; Eze 9:8; 11:13). Ezekiel was appointed as a watchman. He was responsible for warning the people, while they were responsible for receiving the word and acting according to it (Eze 3:17-21). Habakkuk uses the imagery of a watchman when He was waiting for Gods answers on the questions he had put before Him (Hab 2:1).

Habakkuk’s example shows also the way the prophets often interceded. They used prayer to argue with the Lord, without being disrespectful. They were full of the fear of the Lord and at the same time sought discernment of His will and words, which was necessary for being a true mouthpiece of the Lord.¹¹⁵ Habakkuk asked several questions and then he waited for the answer of the Lord with expectation. The second part of their interceding was to ‘pray into being’ what the Lord had revealed. Revelation and intercession went hand in hand. One striking example is the prayer of Jeremia for the

¹¹³ Verhoef, “Prophecy”, 1075.

¹¹⁴ Vawter, “Introduction to prophetic literature”, 187.

¹¹⁵ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 126.

destruction of the leaders of the country (Jer 12:3,4). He did not pray this because he was very cruel, but because he knew through prayer that else those men would bring great disaster over the sheep of Israel and caused them to be dragged away by Babylon.¹¹⁶

Not always were they allowed to intercede. When Gods judgment was irreversible, a prophetic silence would come over the nation. Jeremiah was three times told to stop praying for the nation (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Nothing was more fearful than this silence, indicating that the fate of that generation was sealed.¹¹⁷

1.4 True and False Prophets

The Old Testament provides in several places information about false prophets. Those were people who claimed to be prophets of the Lord, but were in reality ‘contra-prophets’ in a double sense. First, their source of revelation was not God but their own thoughts or something else; second, they were continuously in a confrontation with the real prophets of the Lord.¹¹⁸ One example is Jer 14:14: “Then the Lord said to me, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own mind.” It is clear that the Old Testament is condemning those who claim to speak in the name of the Lord, but are not. The words of the Lord in Deut 18:20, at the institution of the prophetic office, leave no room for doubt: “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything that I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.”

Deut 13 and 18 give two principles for distinguishing true and false prophecy. In Deut 13:1-5 the given criterion is if the prophet is trying to take the people into following other gods. A prophet should never contradict revelation that has been given by the Lord in earlier times.¹¹⁹ The following verses give an answer to the question how false prophecy can be distinguished from true prophecy. “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.” (Deut 18:22). Although this

¹¹⁶ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 127-128.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

¹¹⁸ Verhoef, “Prophecy”, 1076.

¹¹⁹ J. W. Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie in de Nieuwtestamentische gemeente* (dissertation, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Heverlee, Belgium, 1994), 31-32.

criterion is of great practical value in certain cases, it cannot be applied in every situation.¹²⁰ If the prophecy is not fulfilled, then it is a false prophecy. But this applies mainly to future predictions. Not all things that are prophesied can be verified as true or false.¹²¹ Others can only after long time be verified.

From the people's point of view it was very difficult to distinguish between true and false prophets. VanGemeren gives several reasons worth mentioning.¹²² First, the term 'false prophets' does not occur in the OT, only in the Septuagint and the NT. The false prophets had the same title as the true ones. Second, the roles and functions of the false and true prophets were almost same. The way they spoke and acted as prophets, appealed to God as the source of their revelation, received revelations by visions and dreams, used symbolic acts, and so on. Their promise of a wonder or miracle even could come true (Deut 13:1-5; Eze 13:6).

True prophets also could have moral misbehaviour and both categories could have some kind of ecstatic behaviour. Third, as is said before, it is also not always possible to see the truth by fulfilment of the prophecy, since that cannot always be verified. Fourth, it is a good criterion to compare the prophecies with the Thora, but false prophets could also steal words from it (Jer 23:30). Fifth, the true prophets often seemed to disturb the shalom, the peace of Israel. That made them suspects of delivering false messages, in contrast to the false prophets who were prophesying about peace and prosperity. The true prophets condemned the false ones, but in the eyes of the false ones the true prophets were the dangerous disturbers of the God given peace of Israel.¹²³

The punishment of false prophets, death, is severe. It is the well being of the whole nation of Israel that is in danger. Misleading the people about God the deliverer and provider robs Him from His honour. The Name of the Lord is at stake. The prophet is fully responsible for his message, although his prophecy can be an instrument of God to test the people of Israel (Deut 13:1-5)¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy*, 209.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹²² Verhoef, "Prophecy", 1076-1077.

¹²³ Cf. Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 125.

¹²⁴ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 32.

1.5 Summary

The prophetic ministry in the history of Israel was not unique in its appearance, since the surrounding cultures also knew prophecy, but it differed from its pluralistic and diverse context in several aspects. The Israelite prophets believed that they received revelation from God. The Israelite prophets were the mouthpiece of God, with absolute authority, appointed by Himself at mount Sinai (Deut 18:15-22). Through the ages God raised them to guide and warn the people in difficult times. They were known by several names, which all highlighted a certain aspect of their ministry. They were a mouthpiece of God; received the message through visions; empowered by God; being a watchman for the people of Israel; or as a servant of the Lord. They brought the message of the Lord through speaking, writing, symbolic acting and power encounters. This message was first of all aimed at the present situation, but could also point to the near or far distant future, not yet clear visible but already getting shape in the mist of the future. Therefore it was both forthtelling and foretelling. The forthtelling aspect of prophecy was an important source of information for Israel to know God's will for today, next to the commandments He had given. It helped them to come back to the service of the Lord when they were gone astray, or to see the way God wanted them to live in order to keep His commandments and to please Him. Regularly forthtelling was woven together with foretelling elements in one prophecy.

The prophets shared certain characteristics. All had to be very close to God and had to pray often, were empowered by Him and received direct revelation from Him. They were compassionate for their people and had to suffer hardship regularly.

Their ministry and function was diverse, but had some common aspects. The function of the prophets had both a naturalistic and a supernaturalistic side. They were involved in politics and reforms of the society, as well as concerned both with local and cosmopolitan affairs. At the same time they were equipped with supernaturalistic gifts from God to extend their possibilities, if necessary, and to guide according to God's theocracy. They communicated God's will and plans for humanity. Their messages announced judgment and salvation in all spheres of life, with an accent on the religious-ethical, socio-economical, political and eschatological. They comforted the oppressed, acted sometimes with the power of God to change situations and interceded for the nation, initiated by the Lord Himself.

However, the true prophets also had to encounter the false ones. It was often difficult for the people to discern the difference. Sometimes the true prophets seemed to be traitors or disturbers of a God-given peace for the country. Deuteronomy 13 and 18 give two testing principles. The first is that the prophet should not take the people away to other gods. Second is the outcome of the prophecy, if it does not come true then it is clear that the prophet was not speaking on behalf of the Lord and therefore was a false prophet. But even those principles did not provide answers for all situations. First of all the people should live according to the revelation that was given previously through the law of Moses and prophecies that had proved to be true.

Throughout this chapter the picture has emerged that the prophets did not sustain themselves from everyday life, but were fully involved in both living for the Lord and the present day situation of their people. They lived according to the theocracy of the Lord, the King of Israel and all the earth. Their ministry was diverse and challenging. It asked total commitment and courage to face opposite opinions. God used them to warn Israel and to change many situations that they were living in.

This picture appears to give some light on our statement of the problem. Prophetic ministry in the Old Testament was in its time very relevant. Especially in times of crisis God would raise prophets to lead His people. Regularly the situation in which Israel found itself was very challenging. The threats from different countries and changing political situations asked for an adaptation of the country. Those difficult situations for the nation of Israel, when it was in spiritual decline and far away from God, were usually the times that prophetic ministry was extra needed and extra effective. As is said before, this was challenging for those who had to bring God's message and could even cost them their lives. But it would also bring healing to the nation and lead it back to the worship of God if the people were willing to listen. It was prophetic ministry that revived the vision of Israel and taught it to find its way back in the course of the events, in the course of history. Prophetic ministry was a powerful aspect in the existence of Israel, that it was desperately in need of. If seen like this, it appears to be very useful for a nation and possibly also for the disturbed Church today in a fast changing situation.

However, this leads us also to the question if this ministry is still actual. The prophets of the Old Testament were all prophets in the 'spirit' of Elijah. The last centuries before the New Testament saw a sharp decline of prophetic ministry. Does this mean that the Old Testament prophetic ministry has ceased? Have the prophets of the old covenant become 'outdated' by the coming of the Lord Jesus? Or has the Old Testament prophetic

ministry still kept its relevance for the early Church, as well as for the Church today? What are similarities or differences? Those questions will be an important part in the second chapter, partly by means of its exploration of the gift of prophecy and the function of a prophet.

Chapter 2 Prophetic Ministry in the New Testament

2.1 *Defining Prophecy in the New Testament*

Prophetic ministry is used as a term for the ministry by prophets, prophetic gifted or prophetic inspired people to their environment. It is a common term for all prophetic activities. Therefore it is good to get a bright picture of what prophecy in the New Testament is, before we will have a closer look at its place and ministry in the New Testament. However, in this paragraph general ideas about prophetic ministry, its place and functioning in the early church can of course not be avoided. Many of the important aspects of prophetic ministry that will be taken together in paragraph 2.3 are already present in this attempt to define prophecy in the New Testament.

Prophetic ministry in the New Testament is not just a continuation of the Old Testament prophecy. This period of Jesus' life and ministry and the rise of the early church saw different kinds of prophecy and prophetic ministry.

During a period of several hundred years no prophets had appeared in Israel. This had been a time of turmoil which was marked by the Roman empire ruling over the country. The situation made the expectations of the Jews for the coming Messiah rise up to great heights. They were eagerly waiting for 'Elijah', who would come before this Messiah, to announce his coming.

John the Baptist was equated with this coming of Elijah by Jesus (Mt 7: 9 -13; Mk 9:9-13; Lk 1:17). His ministry was like that of the Old Testament prophets, proclaiming judgment to the self-sufficient and hope to all who long for God's kingdom. John the Baptist can thus be seen as the last in the Old Testament prophetic stream, preparing the way of the Messiah.¹

More examples of prophecy are found around the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke 1: 41- 45 speaks of Elizabeth being filled by the Holy Spirit and prophesying

¹ VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 28; Houston, *Prophecy*, 42.

over Mary, although the word ‘prophecy’ is not used in those verses. Verse 67 and following mention Zechariah whose mouth was reopened and who, also filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied over his own child and the coming Messiah, Jesus the Lord. Simeon predicted the future² of the life of Jesus and Mary (Lk 2:34,35) and Anna, who is described as a prophetess, ‘gave thanks to the Lord and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem’ (Lk 2:36-38).

Jesus himself is the perfect example of a prophet, next to his other functions. He spoke with absolute authority, like the Old Testament prophets. He only spoke what the Father gave him to speak (Jn 14:24; 17:8,14,26) and made the will of the Father known on the earth in a perfect way. He saw himself as a prophet and was recognised by the people as prophet (Mt 13:57; 14:5; 21:11,46; Mk 6:4,15; Lk 4:24; 7:16,39; 13:33; 24:19; Jn 4:19,44; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17).

At the same time was his life and ministry the beginning of a new period. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this Spirit to his church at Pentecost, after his resurrection. A new covenant was given. In the Old Testament Israel was a nation in a covenant relationship with God. That covenant was the basis for prophecy, without it the prophets would have been unable to make an appeal to the people.³ Prophecy was only to the nation of Israel. Even the words that were directed to other nations were delivered in Israel.⁴ In that period only a few persons were chosen as prophets. Moses already said once: ‘I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!’ (Num 11:29). This theme was taken up by other prophets. Especially Joel 2:28-32 speaks about people of all ages, race and gender who will prophesy. Peter refers to Joel in his speech on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21) to prove that this time now had come. The prophecy was not fully fulfilled, but it began to be fulfilled on that day. From now on Jesus had established a new covenant, no longer restricted to Israel. Therefore prophecy would also be to the world as a whole, subject of the new covenant, and to the church as a whole, not a specific nation.⁵ A new time had come in which ‘normal’ people without any specifications except being a follower of Jesus could and would prophesy.

² G F. Hawthorne, “Prophets, prophecy” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel B. Green, Scot Mc Knight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 638-644.

³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 169, 172, 178

After Pentecost, prophecy seemed to be quite common in the life of the church. The apostles themselves functioned as prophets, which is seen in Acts, the letters of Paul and the book of Revelations, which in its entirety is written down by the apostle John as a prophecy. Twice a person named Agabus appears as a prophet in Acts (Acts 11:28; 21:10,11). The four daughters of Philip the evangelist prophesied (Acts 21:9). In his letters Paul writes regularly about prophecy and it shows that in congregations like Corinth and Thessalonica prophecy was a normal part of church life.

It is important to mention a difference in prophecy that was not present in the Old Testament. Previously, it was Yahweh who spoke to a person, sometimes directly or inspired by the Spirit.⁶ Then this prophet spoke those divinely inspired words with authority. In Early Christian prophecy it is the Spirit who lives in believers and inspires them. Prophecy is given as a gift of the Spirit to the church (1 Cor 12:10) which can be received by believers through the Spirit who lives in them, or in some situations the Spirit inspires believers directly, also some who do not have the gift. It is one of the *charismata*, next to other gifts mentioned in the letters of Paul. Those gifts are all given to build up the church in unity, as is seen in 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4. Next to prophecy as a gift also some prophets are found in the early church. The differences and similarities will be discussed in the coming paragraphs.

Most scholars agree that the above mentioned types of early Christian prophecy are divided into three parts.⁷ The three types of prophecy are divided in wandering prophets, local prophets and congregational prophecy. However, Forbes argues that those categories need to be re-examined, due to a lack of proof.⁸ His main contribution is that ‘wandering prophets’ is a category that is too general. Some of them, like the Didachè were wandering around. But others, like Agabus and the brothers visiting Antioch, were going for a special-purpose-travel. John the apostle had authority in the whole of Asia Minor, an area far bigger than a single congregation.⁹

⁶ Gerhard Friedrich, “Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament”, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 849.

⁷ Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody: Hendricksen Publishers, 1997), 241.

⁸ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 242-244.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

Second, some were prophets in a local congregation, without having authority extended beyond this congregation.

The third category contains all the cases of prophecy in the setting of the congregation, like the situation in Corinth or Thessalonians. People could prophesy occasionally or have the gift of prophecy, without being a prophet.

2.1.1 Different Kinds of New Testament Prophecy and its Relation to the Old Testament.

Many opinions have been given about the authority of prophets and prophecy in the New Testament. The variety of appearances show that it is surely not always with the same authority that words were spoken or written down. On the one hand, there is the question of continuation or discontinuation of the Old Testament prophecy. On the other hand an explanation is sought for the seemingly different appearances of prophecy and authority in the New Testament.

Two Strands in New Testament Prophecy?

Grudem, and Brienens and Houston with him, sees two strands in New Testament prophecy, following from the Old Testament situation in which on the one hand the individual prophets can be found, of whom some were the important 'scripture-prophets'. The other strand are the groups of prophets that were prophesying and living together.¹⁰ In the New Testament, the first strand is "a continuation of the great tradition which proclaimed the words of the Lord."¹¹ John the Baptist and Jesus were such prophets. But according to Grudem, none of the so-called prophets in the New Testament had the authority to speak and write books of scripture like the prophets of the Old Testament.¹² In the New Testament only one group of people is found that fits the description: the apostles. They spoke with absolute authority, wrote most of the books of the New Testament and are sometimes connected with the Old Testament prophets (Heb 3:1,2; Pet

¹⁰ J. G. Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren: Het functioneren van de gave van profetie in samenkomsten van gereformeerde signatuur in de 21e eeuw* (Th. D. dissertation, Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, 2000), 33.

¹¹ Houston, *Prophecy*, 52-53.

¹² Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 25.

3:2; Lk 11:49, explained from the context).¹³ But if they were like the prophets, why did Jesus appoint them as apostles and not as prophets? Grudem says that this is because of the different value that has been given to the word 'prophet' throughout the time. In the New Testament and the Judaic context it had become far more broad than only the meaning it had in the Old Testament. The gift of prophecy was also available to many people. "So 'prophet' would have been too broad a term to apply to a special, limited group of men such as the apostles."¹⁴ After more elaboration he concludes that 'prophet' does not automatically imply divine authority.¹⁵

A second argument that the name 'prophet' could better be replaced by another word is that there was much continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but also much difference. Christ may therefore have established a new name to designate the leaders of the New Covenant community: 'apostles of Jesus Christ', instead of 'prophets of Jesus Christ'.¹⁶ The prophets of the New Testament were subject to the message proclaimed by the apostles.¹⁷ When in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 is spoken about apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church should that according to Grudem not be interpreted as the apostles and the Old Testament prophets, nor as the apostles and New Testament prophets, but as *apostle-prophets*. They are the apostles who at this place also are named as prophets.¹⁸ The construction of the sentence allows this possibility and is according to Grudem even more acceptable because of the nearby example of a similar construction in Eph 4:11, which talks about pastor-teachers.¹⁹

Another argument that he gives is that it is more reasonable to see only the apostles as the foundation of the church, since the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:14 also is build on the twelve apostles.²⁰

The other strand in the New Testament can be seen as a continuation of the groups of prophets. It is made up by the persons that had the office of a prophet, but also the

¹³ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 25-26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32-41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Houston, *Prophecy*, 74.

¹⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 41-63; Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 15.

¹⁹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 49-51, 57-59.

²⁰ Ibid., 59.

other Christians that were not seen as prophets.²¹ This is the so-called ‘congregational prophecy’.²² Grudem characterises this type of prophecy as “speaking human words to report something God brings to mind.”²³ This is not a different kind of prophecy, but the type of authority attached to the words spoken in a prophecy is different. “To disbelieve or disobey a prophecy spoken by an *apostle* is to disbelieve or disobey God.”²⁴ But the words of congregational prophecy cannot add or change anything to the scriptures.

This description is attractive in its simplicity, for it will not bring much confusion. Aanen, however, points out some weaknesses in Grudem’s approach. His main argument is that the twelve apostles of Jesus could not automatically be matched with the Old Testament prophets. Probably the congregations recognised that to some of the apostles the office of a prophet was entrusted, which made some of them to be apostle-prophets. He refers to the Old Testament situation of Samuel, who was appointed as judge over Israel (1 Sam 7:15-17), but also was recognised by the people as a prophet of the Lord (1 Sam 3:20). However, not all the judges were prophets and all the prophets judges. In the same way, not all the apostles were prophets and people could be a prophet without being an apostle.²⁵ Furthermore, Paul seems to suggest that his prophesying was imperfect like that of other ‘congregational prophets’ (1 Cor 13:9).²⁶ Aanen adds to this the argument that Eph 4:11 distinguishes apostles clearly from prophets. Furthermore, Eph 2:20 and 3:5 can also be read as ‘apostles and prophets’, as Grudem himself points out.²⁷ He writes extensively about the parallels between those three verses, but not about the clear distinction of apostles and prophets in Eph 4:11. If the apostles and prophets are not one, it still does not bring down anything of the authority of the twelve apostles as foundational for the church.

Another argument is that not all writers of the books of the New Testament were apostles. Mark, Luke and James were neither named as apostles, nor as prophets, but the

²¹ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 33-34.

²² Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 242-244; Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 34.

²³ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 67-112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵ Aanen, *De Toetsing van profetie*, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 57.

authority of their books is not less than that of the twelve apostles and Paul. A circular reasoning occurs if James is said to be an apostle because he was writing with apostolic authority. It is not impossible that James like Barnabas and others is counted with the apostles, but he is never given this title.²⁸ In the case of James, Aanen probably overlooked that Paul writes in Gal 1:19: “I saw none of the other apostles - only James, the Lord’s brother.”, which can imply that James was an apostle, though not one of the Twelve.²⁹ It seems to be reasonable to conclude that Grudem’s theory of two strands of New Testament prophecy is not very plausible.

A Difference in Revelation and Authority

Grudem himself gives a way out of this problem for those who do not accept his solution. If Eph 2:20 and 3:5 refer to New Testament apostles and New Testament prophets, it will not be necessary to conclude that these verses refer to all New Testament prophets. “...the ‘prophets’ mentioned here would be those who share authority similar to the apostles - and they would therefore be *unlike* the ordinary prophets scattered throughout many early Christian congregations who are described in much more detail in other parts of the New Testament.”³⁰

There is some weakness in this argument as explanation for the maintaining of the special position of *all* the apostles as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament prophets. Not only the twelve disciples of Jesus are in the New Testament named as apostles, but others next to them. Paul (Rom 1:1, 1 Cor 1:1), Barnabas (Acts 14:4,14), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7), James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Apollos (1 Cor 4:6-9) and Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thes 1:1 and 2:6) are all indicated by the Greek *apóstolos*. Rom 16:7 even can indicate that more than those were seen as apostles by the early church.³¹ Paul, in spite of his great authority, was not one of the twelve, as is sometimes said, since Acts 6:2 clearly speaks about ‘The Twelve’.³² But

²⁸ Aanen, *De Toetsing van Profetie*, 17.

²⁹ Christopher Patrick Johnson, *The Fulness of Ministry* (Indianapolis: Fishnet Publication, 1977), 28.

³⁰ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 62.

³¹ Cf. Harold Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente: Het Verband tussen Zalving en Positie in de Kerk*, translated by Maria J. Neeteson (Vlissingen: Bread of Life, 2000), 24; Johnson, *The fulness of ministry*, 28.

³² Johnson, *The Fulness of Ministry*, 26.

those other apostles cannot all be part of the foundation of the New Jerusalem. The Twelve apostles who were with Jesus, to whom later Matthias was added (Acts 1:26) will be unique in position. They are the foundation of the New Jerusalem and will sit on thrones judging the tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28; Lk 22: 30). They are separated from the other apostles, who were only called as apostles after Pentecost, including Paul.³³ Did all apostles have the same authority? Does this not signify that not all apostles had the same place and authority? Is another distinction in authority necessary to explain the New Testament situation?

Aanen comes to the conclusion that the distinction of different kinds of New Testament prophecy should be made based on the character of the revelation and not on the thesis that the apostles were like the Old Testament prophets. The last mentioned option given by Grudem, that some prophets had authority to lay the foundations of the church together with the apostles and others not, seems to be very close to this opinion. Revelation can be as the very words of God, directly given to the prophet or apostle. This happened to Paul (Acts 16:9) and to Agabus (Acts 11:28, 21:11). The prophetic messages that Agabus gives are likely to be the result of a word, dream or vision of God and not as the result of a process of growing insight. On the other hand, Paul seems to see his prophesying on the same level as that of the 'congregational prophets' when he says: "For we know in part and we prophesy in part." (1Cor 13:9).³⁴

This distinction in authority explains better how the apostles and prophets were functioning in the New Testament period. The apostles could have tremendous authority, as is seen in the life and letters of Paul, but still they seemed to be open to be directed by revelation through prophecies and the opinions of other Christians. If not, then none of the disciples in Tyre or the prophet Agabus would have spoken to Paul that he should not go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4,9-12). Paul placed his own authority over their explanation of the prophecies, compelled by the Spirit who warned him from city to city for the hardships that were waiting.³⁵ At the same time, some Christians who were not apostles or prophets at all have written two important gospels and at least one letter that are now part of the

³³ Johnson, *The Fulness of Ministry*, 25-27. He made a mistake in saying that the other apostles were only called after the ascension of Christ, since that would include Matthias also. Better is to draw the line after Pentecost.

³⁴ Aanen, *De Toetsing van Profetie*, 17, 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

New Testament. Their writings reflect the foundation of Christ, the apostles and prophets, but have also a personal note that gives their opinion. They needed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to write and at the same time to be accepted as canonical books. This underlines that the real distinction is the question of the level of revelation and authority, given by the Holy Spirit, that a certain person received, and not if he was an apostle or prophet in itself.

This leaves the possibility open that still now apostles and prophets can exist that are building the foundation of the church on a local, regional or worldwide level, depending on how one explains Eph 4:11-16. The important difference with the beginning of the church of Christ is that in that time the Holy Spirit used apostles and other Christians to write the New Testament. However, their writings are not the same as prophecy. Throughout time those scriptures proved to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and were put together as the canon. From the first apostles, the apostles of Jesus Christ, and the first prophets everyone has to submit under the absolute authority of the Bible, the source of tested revelation of God. Nothing can be added or taken from the Scripture. The Holy Spirit has not given any Christian the same authority and inspiration for writing that He gave to the ones Jesus had chosen at the beginning of the church.

Old and New Covenant Prophecy

An interesting addition to this discussion is the opinion of Fee. To him the question of authority “seems controlled by factors that do not interest Paul at all. He never raises the question of “authority” with regard to prophecy.”³⁶ Prophecy was just the fulfilment of Joel 2:28-30 for the eschatological community. Paul had no ‘canonical consciousness’ as the church 1900 years later. “That also means that he undoubtedly saw the “New Testament prophets” as in the succession of the “legitimate” prophets of the Old Testament.”³⁷ But the nature of their prophecy was of a different kind since the time and situation of their prophetic activity was different.

³⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 892.

³⁷ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 892.

Dunn adds that “the functions accorded to early Christian prophecy are within the scope of Old Testament prophecy. Early Christian prophets were acting out of a consciousness of continuity of inspiration with the Old Testament prophets and Jesus.”³⁸

Does this mean that New Testament prophecy, in its diversity, was just like the Old Testament prophecy? No, the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus were the beginning of a new covenant. Prophecy in Israel was under the Old Covenant, in which the prophets were found very near to the kings. In the New Covenant no prophet was seen at the right hand of any secular king or ruler. “The Old Testament pattern is different from the New Testament pattern because the role of the church in relation to the world is not the same as the role of Israel in relation to the world. The church operates under a better covenant and with higher goals (see the Epistle to the Hebrews).”³⁹ The Christian prophet should be seen in the shadow of Christ and in relation to the other ministries God has placed in the church, the apostles, teachers, pastors, teachers and so on.⁴⁰ ‘If we make the Old Testament prophet a pattern for the New Testament prophet, we shall throw the church back into the legalism of the old covenant.’⁴¹

This opinion gives a reasonable explanation for the relation of the Old and New Testament prophecy and the differences between functioning and authority of prophecy in the New Testament. It seems to be reasonable to conclude that the main difference in prophecy in the New Testament is that of ‘Old Covenant prophecy’, of which John the Baptist was the last prophet, and ‘New Covenant prophecy’ after Pentecost. Jesus himself stood in between. He was in His authority like the old covenant prophets and the end of the old covenant, but His aim was the coming of the Kingdom of God, a new relation to the whole world. He was the beginning of the new covenant and the Giver of the Spirit.⁴²

The central idea of the differences of prophecy in the New Testament is that it is given under the new, better covenant of God with the church. The apostles are not the successors of the prophets, although many of their functions seem to be the same.

³⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 172.

³⁹ William J. Kay, *Prophecy!* (Nottingham: Life Stream publications, 1991), 65.

⁴⁰ Kay, *Prophecy!*, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64.

Prophecy in the New Testament compared to the Old Testament prophets is on the one hand not exactly the successor, on the other hand not totally different.

Hypothetically it is possible that prophecy can be hundred percent accurate and thus with total authority, but it is the Holy Spirit who decides to give authority to a person to speak or write the unfailing words of God. The New Testament gives no proof that words of a prophet or prophecies were automatically received as a word by word divine inspired message. Paul has written many New Testament books that have proven to be inspired by the Spirit, but his own words regarding prophecy in 1 Cor 13:9 are that 'we prophecy in part.' If someone spoke a prophecy than he had to be judged by others (1 Cor 14:29), and he could be interrupted by another person who got a revelation (1 Cor 14:30). This implies that they did not always speak with divine authority and with unfailing words.⁴³ Another argument for this is that after Pentecost a false prophecy did not lead anymore to the death of the spokesman as it was under the old covenant. This is a strong indication for a radical difference in New Testament prophecy.⁴⁴ Therefore the conclusion can be that, although the Spirit can still use people to speak the very words of God, one main difference of prophecy of the New Covenant compared to that of the Old is that it always needs to be tested. It does not have the 'authority of actual words', but 'authority of general content'.⁴⁵ Acts 16:10 shows how the vision that Paul received was also considered by the others. All together they concluded that this was the call of God to preach the gospel to the Macedonians. That is a healthy way of considering a message that seems to be a prophecy. The community of believers can come to the conclusion that a prophecy seems to be partly or completely given by God, but even then it should be careful to claim that prophecies are the direct words of God. It is recommendable to add always some words that indicate that the prophecy seems to be given by the Lord.

2.1.2 The Gift of Prophecy

The core of prophetic ministry is the ability to receive revelation from God. The Holy Spirit enabled believers in the New Testament to receive and speak messages of the Lord through the gift of prophecy. This paragraph will deal with prophecy as a gift to some

⁴³ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 15.

⁴⁴ Kay, *Prophecy!*, 64.

⁴⁵ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 36.

more extend, to give a broad view of what it is and how it functioned. That will lead to more insight in prophetic ministry.

Prophecy played an important role in Christianity, both the use of Old Testament prophecies to prove the Messiah-ship of Jesus and His Gospel and after the resurrection as one of the gifts of the Spirit. At least in some congregations it was a normal part of worship (1 Thes 5:20; 1 Cor 12:28-29; 14:26-32).⁴⁶ Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts are inseparably linked with the Gift of the Spirit.⁴⁷ “The former was bestowed on the Church in answer to the prayer of Christ and in fulfilment of the promise of the Father. The latter are bestowed on individual believers as and when the Spirit in His sovereignty pleases.”⁴⁸ Every Christian has at least some spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:7).⁴⁹ The two Greek terms that are used most for the gifts are *pneumatika* and *charismata*. The former emphasizes the spiritual origin of the gifts, the latter, which is used more frequently, emphasizes that they are bestowed as an act of divine grace. *Charis* means grace.⁵⁰ Dunn emphasizes that the *charismata* can only be understood as a particular expression of *charis* and the *pneumatika* as “a number of individual embodiments of *pneuma*.”⁵¹ The gifts that the Spirit gives are always a concrete expression of grace, first of all.⁵² “In distinction from “the fruit of the Spirit,” which all Christians are to manifest without variation (Gal 5:22-23), the gifts of the Spirit are understood to vary from one believer to another (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:4-11; cf. 1 Pet 4:10).”⁵³ The place and function of the gifts and in particular of the gift of prophecy is displayed in a clear way by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Chapters 12 to 14 deal extensively with all the important aspects. Therefore the following paragraphs will focus on Paul’s explanation of prophecy in those chapters.

⁴⁶ Robert R. Wilson, “Prophet”, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2002), 830.

⁴⁷ Stanley E. Wilkes, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit”, *The Holy Spirit’s Ministry*, edited by C. Wade Freeman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 43.

⁴⁸ J. Oswald Sanders, *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts* (n.p.: Zondervan printing, 1977), 108.

⁴⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (New Delhi: The Good News Broadcasting Society, 1973), 38.

⁵⁰ Victor Paul Furnish, “Spiritual Gifts”, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2002), 989-990.

⁵¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 253.

⁵² Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 33.

⁵³ Furnish, “Spiritual Gifts”, 990.

1 Corinthians 12-14: The Gifts of the Spirit

Paul wrote his letter to the young church in Corinth, in that time an important city in the Roman empire. Corinth had a strategic position on several trade routes. It enjoyed the status of colony, a high honour in the empire. All kinds of religions were represented by their respective temples and cults. Corinth had a reputation of being wealthy city with a few rich people oppressing many poor. It also was well known as a ‘city of sin’.⁵⁴ The church, consisting of mainly gentile people from the poorer groups of the society, had the difficult task to live a holy life in this environment. Paul writes his letter to encourage the Corinthians, to answer some of their questions and to set some things right that seemed to go wrong. Paul has been dealing with matters related to worship since chapter 8:1. First he forbade in 8:1-10:22 Christian participation in pagan worship. Then follow three sections that are addressing their own gatherings for worship, of which 1 Cor 12:1-14:40 is the third and longest. The argument of those chapters lead the letter to the final issue of Chapter 15, the bodily resurrection of believers in the future.⁵⁵

Paul agrees with the Corinthians recognition of differences that they experience in their Christian life together, but he urges them to see it in the right perspective, God’s overall purpose.⁵⁶ The emphasis of many of the Corinthians was upon diversity at the expense of unity.⁵⁷ That is not how God intended it to be. The body of Christ is a charismatic community, a relation of Spirit, charisma and community. Those two dynamic concepts may seem to throw each other apart in their dynamic interaction, but it is the living reality of the Pauline churches.⁵⁸ Both the *charismata* and the unity of the community should be honoured in a balanced relation.

The Corinthians probably raised a question about the hierarchy of spiritual gifts, as Paul’s response suggests. “He discerned an egocentric competitiveness that was detrimental to church unity.”⁵⁹ They mistakenly understood speaking in tongues as a sign

⁵⁴ J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians”, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, *et al.*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 773-788.

⁵⁵ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 147.

⁵⁶ Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians”, 940.

⁵⁷ C. M. Robeck, Jr., “Prophecy, Prophesying”, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, edited Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 758.

⁵⁸ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 259.

⁵⁹ Jerome Murphy - O’Connor, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004), 810.

of Spirit possession and their own spirituality. That made them think that this was the most important gift.⁶⁰ Therefore Paul explains the proper functioning of the spiritual gifts.

Verses 4-11 give the basic idea of the gifts of the Spirit. They are all given by the same Spirit but there are different kinds (v. 4). In the same way, different kinds of service and workings are all from the same God (v. 5-6). These verses stress the unity of God that is fundamental for the church and the gifts the believers receive. “Paul’s point seems clear: Diversity, not uniformity, is the essential matter for a healthy church. [...] The one God who is himself characterised by diversity within unity has decreed the same for his church.”⁶¹ Paul also reminds the Corinthians in this way that they should not be proud but humble, since the gifts are gracefully given by God.⁶²

God gives through the Spirit a variety of gifts to the believers and all of them are important (1 Cor 12:7,15,17,21,23,26). This is to each one, so no one needs to be disappointed that he did not receive anything or needs to feel unimportant. God has distributed the gifts as He thought best. No jealousy or grumbling should be there. The people should be content with the gift or gifts they received. On the other hand, although God has given gifts to the church as he wanted (1 Cor 12:28-30), they should not become fatalistic, but continue to seek the greater gifts (1 Cor 12:31). But even the greatest gifts could be misused with the wrong attitude. Therefore Paul shows ‘a more excellent way’, namely to use the gifts in love (1 Cor 13).⁶³

All the believers are members of one body (1 Cor 12:12-26). They should respect each other’s uniqueness and see the need to work and function together. It is not possible that all are the same. God has intended people to be different. He has appointed and given a variety of people and gifts just as a body has a variety of members and purposes. No one can do without the other (1 Cor 12:27-31).

Paul did not intend to give an exhaustive list of gifts in 1 Cor 12:8-10. The gifts he mentioned all were immediately relevant to the Corinthian context. “The variety of terminology and the overlap between different gifts [...] makes it clear that Paul has in

⁶⁰ Robeck, “Prophecy, Prophesying”, 758.

⁶¹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 159.

⁶² Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 67.

⁶³ This overview is given by Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 67-68.

mind a wide range of charismatic phenomena and that these lists are *only a selection* of typical and often not very clearly circumscribed manifestations of grace.”⁶⁴ Paul never gave a perfect and fully worked out list of charismatic phenomena. However, his lists seem to be more detailed than the distinctions made by Luke in Luke-Acts. One example is prophecy. Luke-Acts describes virtually any speech inspired by the Spirit as prophetic, whereas Paul subdivides such speech into several types, of which prophecy is only one. He distinguishes glossolalia and prophecy, words of knowledge and words of wisdom.⁶⁵ Paul differentiates more sharply between glossolalia and prophecy to show the community the higher importance of prophecy compared to glossolalia, as will be elaborated in the next paragraph.⁶⁶

The gifts can be grouped under three headings. Furnish distinguishes them as following: First the gifts of utterance, including prophecy, distinguishing spirits, instruction, speaking in tongues and the ability to interpret speaking in tongues. Second the gifts of practical ministry. Serving, encouraging, contributing, performing acts of mercy and administration are the gifts involved. Third group is that of wonderworking faith, which consists of the gift of faith, healing and performing miracles.⁶⁷

1 Corinthians 12-14: The Gift of Prophecy

Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit. As is pointed out before, that implies that it should be used for the purpose of the unity of the church, not as something on itself. It is meant for the strengthening, encouragement and comfort of others (1 Cor 14:3). The church will be edified by it (1 Cor 14: 4). It is a gift that builds up the church (1 Cor 14:12; Eph 4:12). For this reasons Paul has it in high esteem and says that it is the most desirable gift (1 Cor 14:1).

⁶⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 256.

⁶⁵ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 219-220.

⁶⁶ Friedrich, “Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament”, 852.

⁶⁷ Furnish, “Spiritual Gifts”, 990.

The Purpose of Prophecy

The Corinthians are encouraged by Paul to seek the greater gifts (1 Cor 12:31). What are those? Paul also gives a ranking of ‘first... second... third’ in 1 Cor 12:28. According to Grudem this ranking should not be interpreted as chronologically. If so, tongues would be first as they came at the beginning of the church. It also does not seem to refer to dignity, since Paul’s intention of the letter is to combat spiritual pride. Therefore Grudem sees the answer in 12:31a: ‘the greater gifts’, and 14:5b, where Paul makes his thought explicit by saying that ‘he who prophecies is greater’ because through him the church is edified.⁶⁸ So apostles, prophets and teachers are greater gifts for they are more useful for the edification of the church than some other gifts like speaking in tongues.

The purpose of the gift of prophecy is several times mentioned by Paul. It is for:

- Building up or strengthening, encouragement and comfort or consolation of men (14:3).⁶⁹
- To instruct (14:9).
- A sign for believers (14:22).
- To convince an unbeliever that he is a sinner and to lay bare the secrets of his heart, so that he will fall down and worship God. (14:24-25).
- To instruct and encourage (14:31).

Six times the word *oikodomē*, building up, is used in this chapter (14:4,5,12,17,26), both denoting qualitative and quantitative growth of the church. Brienen suggests therefore to comprehend the given purposes under the single purpose of ‘building up’ the church.⁷⁰ It is true that the growth and strengthening of the church was Paul’s main concern. He knew the importance of prophecy in this function, given that it would be exercised in love and humility (1 Cor 13:2, 14:1).⁷¹

⁶⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 68-69.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 150-151.

⁷⁰ Brienen, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 36-37.

⁷¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 654; Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians, New Testament Commentary*, edited by Simon J. Kistemaker (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 476.

Building up or strengthening others is everything in prophecy that has growth in Christian maturity as result.⁷² The building up of the household of believers is taking place through the communication of the word of God into the fellowship.⁷³

Encouragement can mean comfort from sorrow, encouragement to those who are discouraged, and exhortation or appeal, that is an urging of someone to do something, but less strong than 'command'.⁷⁴ This can also imply that someone probably needs to make some changes in his life.

Consolation is not very sharp distinguished from encouragement. Kay explains consolation as an aspect of prophecy through which God can heal hearts that are broken by the pain and sorrow of life. Encouragement is for him more close related to bringing a message of hope to believers who are facing great obstacles.⁷⁵

Prophecy also had a great effect upon unbelievers, because it can bring a direct word from the Lord into each situation. It can therefore be important in the church's evangelism.⁷⁶ Paul seems to have had in mind those unbelievers who were also uninstructed in the faith, probably an unbelieving spouse accompanying a believer.⁷⁷

Hill adds another aspect, that of interpretation. Paul speaks in chapter 14 about the abuse of the gift of tongues and tries to show how it can be used. He is not forbidding it totally (14:39) but his main concern is that the church will be build up. 'It should be noted that Paul is not looking for a *translation* but an *interpretation*.'⁷⁸ Verse 6 can imply that speaking in tongues could contain a prophecy. The verse says namely first that 'if he would come and speak in tongues' and then says that it would be no good *unless* he would bring some revelation, prophecy and so on. That implies that in that case the tongues would be useful. This connection of words in the verse is only useful if this revelation or prophecy was an interpretation of the message of the tongues.

⁷² Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 229; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 151; W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 272.

⁷³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 213.

⁷⁴ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, p. 151.

⁷⁵ Kay, *Prophecy!*, 57-58.

⁷⁶ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 214.

⁷⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 685.

⁷⁸ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 214.

Forbes states that after all the lexicographical work on those words has been done, still very little is known about the content of the prophecies. The focus of early Christian prophecy is so much on sociological issues that he concludes with Aune that it is very important to see the sociological function of early Christian prophecy.⁷⁹

Who Prophesied?

An often asked question is: ‘Who prophesied?’ The prophets were a limited group in the early church, but the gift of prophecy was available to more believers.⁸⁰ Luke writes in Acts 2: 16-21 that all people of the Lord can prophesy if the Spirit gives it to them, no matter what their status or gender is. Paul seems to suggest that at least a high percentage of the Corinthian congregation can participate in prophecy. He exhorts them to desire most of all prophecy (1 Cor 14:1) and does not exclude anyone from that. Furthermore, verses 24, 25 and 31 speak of ‘all’ who are prophesying or can prophesy in turn. “The nature of this argumentation seems to exclude the option that this gift was limited to a group of authoritative people [...].”⁸¹ “Paul is deliberately emphasising a point. [...] All should seek it, not just those who were known as prophets. Not all would become prophets in any regular or formal sense, but all could occasionally contribute in this way.”⁸² This is the consequence of 1 Cor 12:7,11, where it is written that the gifts are given to each person. Therefore any Christian might possibly receive the gift of prophecy, according to the choice of the Holy Spirit. This does not imply that all have received the gift. Paul wants every Christian in Corinth to seek after prophecy and other useful gifts, but there is no gift that will be possessed by every believer (1 Cor 12:8-10,12,14,17,19-20, 29-30).⁸³

⁷⁹ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 238.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 685.

⁸² Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 255.

⁸³ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 199.

Women and prophecy

Related to this is the confusion about the few lines Paul wrote in 1 Cor 14:33-35, where he orders women to remain silent in the churches. Does this mean that they should not prophesy in the church, or something else? Or should this passage be considered to be added later to the text, as some have - in vain - tried to support from the Greek manuscripts?⁸⁴ The focus of this thesis does not allow us to go into this too much. Therefore a choice is made for a position that seems to be most convincing, with short reference to other explanations. It is not said that this will be the final conclusion for this problem.

Two passages in the New Testament show that women are encouraged to participate fully in giving prophecies. Acts 21:9 speaks about the four daughters of Philip who were prophetesses or prophesying. 1 Cor 11:5 assumes that women both pray and prophesy in the congregation.⁸⁵ This gives a contrast with the verses of 1 Cor 14. Several explanations are given.

A very common argument is that the passage forbids speech by women because they were noisy. But nowhere in the whole New Testament or in any other writing is evidence found that those women were creating disorder in the service. And not only women can be noisy when they are together, the same can be said for the men. In the Greek culture also men would often gather together spending their time, as was the case at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:21). They had nothing else to do and were just all the time talking and discussing.⁸⁶ The words used in verse 33 also do not support this view of noisy women. Thirdly, if this was the problem that Paul addresses than his solution of not speaking at all is not fitting. "Where there are problems of disorder, the apostle simply prescribes order (as with tongues or prophecy in 1 Cor 14:27,29,31, and as with the Lord's supper in 1 Cor 11:33-34). If noise had been the problem in Corinth, he would have explicitly forbidden disorderly speech, not all speech."⁸⁷ Furthermore, he should have addressed the women that were disorderly, not all women.

Another position that has gained most favour in the past decennia is the view that those verses forbid women to speak in tongues in the church service. It is said that the

⁸⁴ Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 511.

⁸⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 215-217, 224-225.

⁸⁶ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 271.

⁸⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 219.

main argument of chapter 14 is the speaking in tongues. But Paul has finished the topic of tongues in verse 28 and was speaking about prophecy in the last five verses. The context does not support this view.

A third position is given by Brienen. He argues that at least some evidence can be found that in the original Greek text verses 34 and 35 were written after verse 40. Some manuscripts have been found in which this was the case.⁸⁸ But even if that is not true, still arguments can be given that Paul was only writing one short thought about this particular problem of order. Brienen explains the verses as following: the ‘women’ are not all women in general, but those whose husband was prophesying. The restriction of Paul would be that they should not criticise their own husband, to whom they should be subjective, but inquire about the prophecy at home. This opinion leaves us with the question why Paul does not say anything of the other women. What if an unmarried girl questioned her prophesying father or one of the elders of the church? Would that be appropriate?

Grudem interprets the passage as speaking about all women who should not judge prophecies in the congregation. It is a matter of authority. A women should not criticise the spoken words of a man in public. The unmarried ladies should ask others in their family circle for an explanation, the married ladies their husbands.⁸⁹

Finally Forbes, after exposing the previous positions, gives his arguments for a fifth explanation. He points at an inconsistency in the assumption that women were not allowed to judge because of the authority of their husbands or all the man. On the other hand, it is clear from the New Testament that it was fully accepted that they could prophesy. Then an arbitrary distinction should be made between the authority to prophesy and to interpret it. It could happen that a women would prophecy something that overrides the authority of her husband. Then on the other hand she should say nothing about his prophesying. Also both prophecy and interpretation can be led by the Holy Spirit, so why should Paul make a difference like this?⁹⁰

Forbes comes therefore with a much more straightforward alternative. Verse 35 shows something about what Paul is prohibiting. It is possible that Paul is talking about the

⁸⁸ Brienen, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 47-48.

⁸⁹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 221-223.

⁹⁰ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 272-273.

evaluation of prophecy, but the text does not require or suggest that interpretation. Paul does not say that the women have to share their contribution later with their husbands. He writes that if they want to learn something they should ask it later. Probably some women were asking other people, including other people's husbands, for answers. This is of course not certain but reasonable. Such a behaviour is shameful in the Graeco-Roman world of that period, that had "a strong prejudice against women speaking in public, and especially against their speaking to other women's husbands."⁹¹ Paul does not deny their right to pray and prophecy (1 Cor 11:5) if they maintain decorum, for they also have the Spirit and may join in prayer, prophecy and interpretation. But if there are matters they do not understand, then they should not ask others, since that is improper. The background for this problem that occurred in Corinth is most likely that "the overwhelming majority of ordinary women in the Hellenistic and Roman world were married early to men considerably older than themselves, and had little or no formal education."⁹² And this education was restricted to their 'natural role': household tasks, crafts, music and such.

Although this position also has its own assumptions and weak points, still it seems to give the best interpretation of what Paul had written. The context allows this explanation very well. It brings us to the conclusion that most probably the women were allowed to participate fully in the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit, if it happened in a decent, orderly way and if they would never act improper by asking others than their husbands' questions, since that was the prevailing culture of the time.

Receiving a Prophecy

Another question is the way a prophecy is received or coming to the one who prophesies. A great variety of forms can be found in the New Testament. Persons received a message of God through dreams, visions or a kind of trance like Peter experienced.⁹³ Other times an appearance of an angel (Acts 27:23-26) or of the Lord (Acts 23:11) is mentioned. Nothing is said in which way it happened. A voice is heard from heaven or the Holy Spirit speaks to the believers. Sometimes natural phenomena accompany or lead to a prophecy, like the sound of the wind and the tongues of fire in Acts 2:3. An important

⁹¹ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 274.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 277.

⁹³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 212-225.

aspect is the often occurring combination of prayer and the receiving of a prophecy (Lk 3:21; 6:12; 23:41-44; Acts 10:9; 13:2).⁹⁴

Important is that, no matter how strong a revelation came to a prophet, he could and should always control it (1 Cor 14:32). The Holy Spirit never takes over a person when he prophesies. God is not a God of disorder, but of peace (1 Cor 14:33).

Brienen mentions two aspects from 1 Cor 11-14. On the one hand is the aspect of God's sovereignty. He decides to whom, when and what He reveals. On the other hand, the believers should desire the gift of prophecy and be eager to prophecy (14:39).⁹⁵

Prophecy Should be Functioning in an Orderly Way

Paul was careful in assuring that prophecy like the speaking in tongues should occur orderly. Only two or three persons should prophecy during a worship service and when a revelation came to someone who was sitting down, the first speaker should stop (1 Cor 14:29,30). This prevented that all people would prophecy at the same moment or that too much time in a meeting was taken for prophecy. It could cause confusion if more people would be allowed to speak.⁹⁶ Probably it also prevented that some believers would come with 'prophecies' that in reality were purely coming out of their own thoughts, since it is quite natural for people to get excited when a number of prophecies is spoken and a strong realisation of the presence of the Lord is present. It is then very easy for a person to think that he also received a revelation.

Prophecy is not just coming when a person wants it to occur. A revelation is needed for a person to prophesy, and this revelation could come quite spontaneously (1 Cor 14:30).⁹⁷ "He or she had to wait until something was revealed by the Holy Spirit."⁹⁸ However, this description of an orderly functioning of prophecy in the worship service does not exclude that prophecies can be received at other moments and places than at the gathering of the community of believers. Verse 26 echoes the concern of chapter 12 that each one should have the opportunity to participate according to his gift in the corporate

⁹⁴ See for a more detailed elaboration Brienen, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 43-44.

⁹⁵ Brienen, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 44.

⁹⁶ Mare, "1 Corinthians", 276.

⁹⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 116.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

ministry of the body, including prophecy.⁹⁹ Verse 29 leaves room for this opinion when it says that ‘two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.’ A prophecy received at another time could be brought into the congregation and spoken to all for the building up of the whole community, while it is judged by the others.¹⁰⁰

Is Prophecy Restricted to Function in the Worship Services?

This brings us to the question if prophecy is restricted to function in the worship services. Forbes has the opinion that “prophecy is public proclamation of a revelatory experience, and predominantly a verbal one at that. Revelations for one person only are not normally called prophecy; prophecy is public. Nor is the telling of a vision described as prophecy, so far as I am aware.”¹⁰¹ Both the setting, the worship service, and the recipient of the proclamation in 1 Cor 12-14 are pointing at the public function of prophecy. It can be focused on an individual, but as member of the community and so indirectly aimed at the group as a whole.¹⁰² “There is no indication that a prophet would prophesy in private for his own personal benefit. If he did, his prophecy would be on the same level as the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:4 [...], and this would not be the kind of prophecy the Corinthians were especially to seek (v.1).”¹⁰³

The statement that prophecy is always aimed at others is very important. However, it does not exclude that it can also function in smaller meetings or some parts of the church.¹⁰⁴ This passage is written by Paul for the meetings of the Corinthian church as a whole but does not speak about occasions in every day life in which prophecy can play a role. It may be possible that when two or more Christians were meeting together God could give a prophesy through one of them for one of the other persons. Paul’s urge to test prophecy by others in the worship meeting suggests that it is wise to speak prophecies in

⁹⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 248.

¹⁰⁰ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 45.

¹⁰¹ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 220; supported by Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 139-140: the reception of a revelation alone would not make a person a prophet. Only when it is proclaimed to others a prophecy is said to occur.

¹⁰² Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 36.

¹⁰³ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 150.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

an environment in which other Christians can judge it. But he is never saying that the Holy Spirit will not speak outside a meeting. Dunn stresses the importance of the fact that prophecy is a *charisma*, grace of God. His grace is not restricted to worship only, but extends to all areas of life. This is also true for the gift of prophecy.¹⁰⁵ It can be useful for the building up of believers and for reaching unbelievers. A Christian can receive or ask for a revelation from the Lord for another person and speak it to him. God can use it to open the heart of the other for the working of the Holy Spirit, in order that he may be encouraged, corrected or, in the case of an unbeliever, be led to Christ. Still it can be wise to ask other members of the community, probably at another time, to judge a prophecy that is given to a certain person outside of the worship meetings, to prevent a wrong use of this precious gift.

Prophecy, Teaching and Preaching

The relation between prophecy and teaching or preaching is an important aspect of the gift that should be considered. Is prophecy inspired preaching or teaching like is said by many Christians, or is it distinct from it? It seems it does not have to be complicated to come to a conclusion when the nature of prophecy and of teaching are studied and compared with each other.

Prophecy is in its very nature always based on a revelation, given by the Holy Spirit. A prophecy was not well prepared in advance.¹⁰⁶ The prophet had to wait with his message until he received a revelation.¹⁰⁷ On the contrary, teaching is throughout the New Testament not based on a spontaneous revelation but on the scripture or the equivalent of it for that time, the authority of authentic apostolic teaching. The teacher prepared his message from the scriptures before delivering it. Verses like 1 Tim 4:11 and 6:2 show that Timothy was not to prophesy Paul's instructions, but to teach them. In the same way, Paul did not prophesy in every church but he taught them. The Thessalonians had to hold firm to the taught traditions and not the prophecies. Thus it was teaching and not prophecy that provided the doctrinal and ethical norms for the church and its direction.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 256.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁰⁷ Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 443.

¹⁰⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 140-141.

In this context it is good to consider the opinion of Brienen that God did not stop to reveal Himself after the canon was formed, but still speaks to people today, which will be elaborated more in another paragraph. Therefore he divides the special revelation of God into revelation that became Scripture and revelation that did not become Scripture, like many of the words and acts of Jesus (Jn 21:25).¹⁰⁹ The revelation that became Scripture is, as was said before, the measuring rod for the verification of all prophecy, but it does not erase the usefulness and uniqueness of the revelation that did and does not become Scripture. Those two cannot be made one, not in this terms and also not in the forms in which they come to the believers, the first through teaching and Bible study, the second through prophecy and revelations.

It can be that prepared teachers suddenly feel that God brings something to their mind. In that case it will be a teaching with prophetic elements. The word 'preaching' in our time stands for the same meaning as teaching in the New Testament time, which makes it unnecessary to give additional explanation to the difference between prophecy and teaching.¹¹⁰ Vice versa, a prophecy can come through a passage from the Scripture or be formulated with words from the Scripture. It can give a powerful explanation of the Scripture without being teaching or preaching, since it is an unprepared revelation that came to the mind of the speaker.

Forbes supports the opinion that preachers and teachers presented their material as reports of past events, in contrast to the inspired messages of prophecy. "Today's prophecy is tomorrow's preaching or teaching."¹¹¹ At least this was the case in the time of the New Testament. But next to the difference in content, the audience also is different. "In both Acts and Paul prophets speak to the church, not to the world; preaching is normally addressed to the world, not the church."¹¹² This does not exclude the influence of prophecy on non-believers (1 Cor 14: 20-25) or the need for teaching in the church, but it is according to Forbes not their main focus.

¹⁰⁹ Brienen, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 39-40.

¹¹⁰ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 143.

¹¹¹ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 228.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Other Important Aspects

Chapters 12 to 14 of 1 Corinthians are of course not the only important passages in the New Testament that throw a light upon the gift of prophecy. The focus of those chapters is the functioning of prophecy in the worship meetings in Corinth at the time Paul wrote his letter. Some other aspects should be mentioned to give a broader view of the gift of prophecy.

New Testament prophecy has much in common with Old Testament prophecy.¹¹³ That implies that also several aspects of the Old Testament ministry probably were present in the early church's prophetic ministry, even though they are not always mentioned literally. Gaps in knowledge of its functioning in the New Testament can cautiously be filled to some extent from the Old Testament Jewish background, that was still very much alive in the New Testament context of Jesus life and the early church.

Prophecy and Prayer

Prayer and prophecy are very much interrelated. This is seen in the Old Testament, but certainly also important in the New. In Antioch a service of prayer was held, which led to a missionary initiative. 1 Cor 11:4,5 deal with public prayer in the congregation in relation to man and women. 1 Thes 5:17-20 mentions both together, which seems to point at its interrelation. Acts 22:17-21 pictures Paul in a time of prayer in the temple, were suddenly he fell into a trance and received revelation from the Lord. This led to his departure and mission to the Gentiles. Most of all, 1 Cor 14:13-19 is not an excursus in the discussion on the differences between prophecy and tongues, but an integral part of the comparison. 'Prophecy and prayer are not the same, but they belong very closely together.'¹¹⁴ The given references show that prophetic prayer was both individually and in groups functioning. If more people were praying together, their prayers and prophecies could complement each other.

Paul sees prayer in continuity of the Biblical prophetic prayer traditions.¹¹⁵ Prophetic intercession and the task of being a watchman was very important for the Old

¹¹³ Friedrich, "Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament", 849.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 852-853.

¹¹⁵ Robeck, "Prophecy, Prophesying", 727.

Testament prophets.¹¹⁶ In the same way the people of the New Testament were praying for one another, as is seen in the occasion of Peter's imprisonment (Acts 12:12). They also would meet together to intercede for the sake of the Gospel (Acts 4: 23-31) This had very much the shape of the intercession of the Old Testament prophets. Added to that, the believers would surely have sought guidance of the Lord what He expected them to do, and the Lord choose to answer them in several ways, of which one was prophecy (see Acts 13:1). Prophetic prayer is asking the Lord for guidance what He wants to be prayed for.¹¹⁷

Prophecy as Foretelling

Could prophecy include predicting the future? Luke explicitly mentions it in Acts 11:27-30 and 21:11 when he writes about the prediction of future events by the prophet Agabus, who was fully accepted by the early church. Both cases seemed to benefit the church to be prepared for the future. The prediction was not an end in itself, it was simply one of the means to a greater end, the edification of the church.¹¹⁸ Although Paul never mentions prediction explicitly, even not in the discussed chapters in Corinthians, still it is almost unthinkable that he would hold the idea that prediction was not a part of prophecy. His Judaic background and view of the Old Testament prophets as predictors of the future; the fact that all the other New Testament writers, of whom he certainly knew some personally, had the same uniform view;¹¹⁹ and sub-apostolic writers like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Tertullian that held the same view of Old Testament prophets are unanimous in their view of this subject. Lastly, Paul himself seems to view prediction as part of his apostolic role and of early Christianity.¹²⁰ Therefore prediction can be seen as one function of prophecy.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ See paragraph 1.2.6, 1.3.4.

¹¹⁷ School van Gebed, *Profetisch Bidden*. A study of the School van Gebed (Zwijndrecht: School van Gebed, n.d.), 2.

¹¹⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 157.

¹¹⁹ See Matthew's Gospel and some references in Mark and Luke; 1 Pet 2:6-8; 2 Pet 3:2-4; Jude 14, 17-18.

¹²⁰ See 1 Thes 3:4, 4:6; Gal 5:21; Rom 11:25-27; 1 Cor 15:51ff.

¹²¹ Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 224-225.

Prophecy to Individuals is Conditional

It is rather certain that the prophecies given to individuals were “conditional for their fulfilment on the individual’s faith and obedience.”¹²² Timothy had received several prophecies concerning his ministry. Paul gives him instructions not to hesitate in carrying out his instructions, according to the prophecies given. Apparently there was a danger of failing in his ministry, even though those prophecies were given.¹²³

Prophecy According to the Measure of Faith Given

In Rom 12:3 Paul urges the believers to think of themselves in accordance with the measure of faith God has given to them. In verse 6 he mentions for prophecy that it should be used in proportion to his faith. This points out that there should be no false modesty that denies the existence of the gift or a refusal to use it.¹²⁴ Second, it highlights the important fact that everybody has received from God a certain measure of faith to do what God wants them to do. Prophecy should not be used in fear when God gives faith to listen to Him and speak what comes in mind. Reversely, a believer should also not speak greater things than what he has faith for. If God has given faith for the area of small meetings of believers, than a person should not prophesy over a whole city, because he lacks the faith and will easily fail and make mistakes.

Prophecy as Giving Direction

Prophecy has often a function of giving direction, usually through forth telling, sometimes through foretelling. The direction can be given for the leadership and mission of the church, as is seen with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2,3) who were sent off from the church of Antioch; or with Timothy, who received prophecies about his ministry (1 Tim 1:18).

Timothy’s life also shows another directing function of prophecy. He had received his gift through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on him (1 Tim 4:14). Apparently this could also be an aim of a prophecy given by the Holy Spirit. Those aspects of prophetic ministry will be elaborated more below.

¹²² Kay, *Prophecy!*, 15-16.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²⁴ International Bible Society, *The Compact NIV Study Bible*, 1690, note on Romans 12:6.

It is especially for this directive function important to prophecy according to the measure of faith given, since it involves huge responsibilities. Probably those aspects of prophecy were especially meant for the people with a greater measure of the gift, most of all for the prophets and for apostles with a prophetic gift. This topic will be worked out more in the next paragraph.

Prophecy and Interpretation

Did prophecy also need interpretation to get the clear meaning of what was spoken? 1 Cor 14:3-6,23-25,29-31 speaks about prophecy as something that was understandable to all, building up the believers and convincing unbelievers of their sin. The contrasts Paul is giving in those verses point out that, unlike tongues, prophecy could be understood by the other people who heard it. Therefore interpretation of prophecy is not the same as with speaking in tongues. But the fact that others should weigh carefully what was spoken leaves room for a process of interpretation of the meaning and especially the application of a prophecy. Usually there would be no confusion about the intention of a prophecy, but it could happen that some more prayer and discussion was needed to discover the specific meaning.

This process is seen in practice in Acts 16. Paul had received a vision from the Lord in which a man from Macedonia was standing and begging him to come. Immediately Paul and his companions prepared to leave for Macedonia, 'concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them' (Acts 16:10). Another occasion is the prophecy of Agabus, who tied his hands and feet with Paul's belt and prophesied that the Jews of Jerusalem would bind Paul in that way and hand him over to the gentiles (Acts 21:11). The other members of Paul's team and the people around came to the conclusion that Paul should not go to Jerusalem. They interpreted the prophecy as a warning for Paul to save him from trouble. Paul however, already warned by the Holy Spirit in several cities that hardships would wait him (Acts 20:23) saw this not as a warning *not* to go, but as a confirmation that he should go.¹²⁵ Both took the content of the prophecy serious but applied it different. When Paul insisted in his choice, the others gave up and left it to the Lord, probably recognizing the Lord's guidance.

¹²⁵ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 20.

Some difficulties are found in this situation, since the prophecy turned out to be not fully accurate. It is also often discussed if Paul made the wrong decision to go to Jerusalem. It seems that he was right, basing his conclusion on the previous given messages by the Holy Spirit that trials would await him, but we cannot be sure.

Symbolism

One example is given of how a prophetic message, a warning is given by means of a symbol in the same way as it was done in the Old Testament.¹²⁶ This situation in which Agabus uses Paul's belt to bind his own hand and feet is not regarded as something strange by the bystanders (Acts 20:23). This seems to indicate that it was in that time not a very rare way of bringing a revelation to others.

Jesus made extensive use of symbolic language and examples from daily life in His messages, also the ones with a prophetic content. They served as a means to communicate the points more effectively.

2.1.3 The Office or Function of a Prophet

The terms 'office of a prophet' or 'function of a prophet' can be confusing, since it has the connotation of a position or office to which people are elected. 'Office' refers therefore in this thesis not to an institution of men. But for the sake of clarity the terms 'ministry of a prophet' or 'prophetic ministry' will not be used for a prophet, as is said in the introduction.

The New Testament mentions several prophets, like Agabus, Judas and Silas (Acts 11:27-30; 21:11; 15:32). Prophecy became a specialized office in the church and prophets were ranked with apostles and teachers as church leaders (Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; James 5:10; 1Pet 1:10; Re 22:6-9).¹²⁷ What made a person to be a prophet and how was he recognized?

First and most important is that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who gave some persons to be prophets for the church. "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers [...]" (1 Cor 12:28). "It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors

¹²⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 172.

¹²⁷ Wilson, "Prophet", 830.

and teachers” (Eph 4:11). A prophet is not chosen by people, nor himself seeking to be a prophet, but appointed by the Lord in his wisdom as a prophet to lead the church into maturity (Eph 4:12-16). The Lord gave some gifted leaders to the church, not to do the work for the others, but to prepare other believers to do their part in the ministry.¹²⁸

Second, a prophet needs to work together with the other ministries or offices, the apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers. He should not work outside the church but always be aimed at its building up according to the grace and place God has given to him.

Different Degrees of Prophecy

There is widespread agreement that being a prophet was not totally different from having received the gift of prophecy, but that it is a matter of a different level of prophecy. All believers could prophecy or have the gift of prophecy, but some were given the gift in greater measure. The people that very regularly were prophesying and whose (relative) accuracy was proved during time and testing were most probably acknowledged as prophets.¹²⁹ “A man did not prophesy because he was a prophet; rather he was a prophet because he prophesied.”¹³⁰ Perhaps Luke’s usage of the term ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:3,5,8; 7:55; 11:24) refers that some had more sureness of insight.¹³¹ Of course, as is argued before, this does not say that there prophecies were perfect, but more accurate. The other believers could see and verify the results of their prophesying.

The New Testament gives much proof for the idea that the gift of prophecy could function at different levels. As a matter of fact, this is true for all gifts. It is evident for the gifts of teaching and administration that some of the people that are recognized as teachers or administrators are more capable than others with the same gift. On the other hand, some people had not those gifts, but were still to a degree teaching or administrating. They had something like the gift. This leads to the conclusion that it is not right to think of those gifts in the New Testament church in terms of absolute possession or

¹²⁸ Richard Lewis, *Saturation Church Planting, Church, Manual 3* (The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting: n.p., 2000), 17.

¹²⁹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 595-596; 620-621.

¹³⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 281.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

non-possession, but better to see it as a progression along a scale of increasing intensity.¹³² For Timothy it was possible to re-kindle his gift (2 Tim 1:6), what means that it was operating at a low degree of intensity. Rom 12:6, as mentioned before, speaks about prophesying in proportion to the measure of faith, which also indicates that prophecy is given in a lower or higher degree. Following on that, there would be greater and lesser degrees of prophetic ability in any given congregation, according to the level of faith.¹³³

The different degrees of prophecy can be divided in three or four ‘scales’, in an attempt to bring clarity in the terms used for prophecy. It can be good not to use this scale too rigid, since it is in reality a gradually increasing scale and not visibly divided into three or four parts. But the division can be helpful to get more insight in prophetic ministry.

<i>Simple prophecy</i>	<i>Gift of prophecy</i>	<i>Prophetic Ministry</i>	<i>Prophetic office</i>
			<i>Words of God</i>
<i>Human words</i>			
Weak	Normal	Mature	Strong prophetic

Figure 2: Level of prophecy

The first ‘scale’ is prophecy at a low level, something that the Spirit brings to the mind of a believer. According to some authors, this can even come to the minds of non-believers, like the Spirit was using the donkey of Balaam in the Old Testament.¹³⁴

The second is the gift of prophecy. As faith increases, like a limb that is exercised, the gift also increases.¹³⁵ This group receives regular revelations, often through dreams and symbolic messages, which can cause a lack of understanding in what they receive.¹³⁶

Thirdly, some put prophetic ministry. The ministry of this person has grown mature, but still his words contain much human words next to the words of God. Those persons

¹³² Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 207.

¹³³ Ibid., 208.

¹³⁴ M. Bickle, *Growing in the Prophetic*, 120 ff., cited in: Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, p. 46; Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 4-6; Nieuw Levend Evangelie Gemeente, *NLEG studie “profetie”*, as published on www.nleg.nl/plaza/profetie/toetspro.html, p. 2. Last visited: July 28 2004.

¹³⁵ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 5.

¹³⁶ Bickle, *Growing in the Prophetic*, 120 ff., cited in Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 46.

have been recognized in the local church and serving in a regular way.¹³⁷ Many have taken this 'scale' together with the fourth one.

Fourth is the prophetic office or the prophet. This ministry is strong prophetic. The words of this prophet have often turned out to be very reliable and should be taken serious, although he is not infallible.¹³⁸

For this thesis the division into three 'scales' is maintained, which implies that the office of a prophet can be varying from a maturing ministry to a very reliable one.

The difference in level does not mean that the aim of a prophet is different from the gift of prophecy. The example of Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32) gives an idea of their functioning. They were send to Antioch's young church with a letter from the Jerusalem Council. There they exhorted and strengthened the brothers. This confirms what is learned about New Testament prophecy in 1 Cor 14:3-5.¹³⁹

How is the Function of a Prophet Acknowledged in Someone's Life?

If the Lord has given the office of a prophet to a certain person, then this should become visible in his life. It may be possible to neglect a given gift (as Timothy was in danger of) but if a person is sincerely looking to utilise it then other Christians should start seeing in his life that he is given as a prophet by the Lord. This will not only be build on his prophesying, but also his authority, given by the Spirit to lead the people. Other leaders can lead him in the process to grow in his ministry, like Paul did with Timothy. A prophet can train a prophet, a teacher another teacher.

When a person has emerged as a prophet, he should officially be recognised by the church to receive the proper place and given authority for his task. If a person is trying to give this place to himself, then his ministry will and can not be blessed, since he is given to build up and serve the other Christians. An example is seen with Paul and Barnabas. They were already very fruitful in their work in Antioch and other places. It was also foretold by God that Paul would be His chosen instrument to bring His name 'before the gentiles and their kings and the people of Israel' (Acts 9:15). But it was only in a time of worshipping

¹³⁷ Bickle, *Growing in the Prophetic*, 120 ff., cited in Brienens, Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 46.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 156.

and fasting in Antioch, in which several prophets and teachers together, that the Holy Spirit told them to set apart two men out of their midst: Paul and Barnabas. Again they fasted and prayed or continued with it. When they had ended, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3). From that moment on they are called ‘apostles’, appointed by the church (Acts 14:14).

A prophet can only have the authority to be foundational for the church (Eph 2:20) when he is recognized by the church.¹⁴⁰ This is never literally mentioned in the New Testament, but without recognition none of the believers will follow the foundational principles that a prophet speaks.¹⁴¹ Together with the apostles they can lay foundations or uncover foundations laid by Jesus Christ. They always build on Jesus as the cornerstone, not on their own authority.

Should a Person be Called ‘Prophet’?

One aspect that has become controversial in our time, because of its number of abuses, is calling a person ‘prophet’ when he has received that gift or thinks he has. The New Testament seems not to hesitate to recognize and call prophets as such (Acts 11:27; 15:32; 21:10). An evangelist is called an evangelist, an apostle an apostle, a teacher a teacher. It is not unbiblical to do the same for a prophet. It can even be helpful to have a clear recognition of what a person is, to avoid unclear situations in the church. However, the importance is not in the title or position itself. If the use of a title is a goal in itself, leads to giving the person the central place instead of God or is used for other wrong purposes, than it is better to avoid it.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, chapter 4; Johnson, *The Fulness of Ministry*, 19.

¹⁴¹ Jens Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God - the five-fold ministry*, unpublished translation (first version) of *Die Starke Hand Gottes*, (n.p., n.d), 21-22.

¹⁴² Albert Grimes, *Ministry Gifts, part two, book three of The Christian Training Centre*, (Visalia: The Christian Training Centre, 1977), lesson 2, 4; Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 6; Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, 30; J. M. Verhoef, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, B. Th. Thesis, (Ede Christian University, Ede, the Netherlands, 2004), 22.

Types of Prophecies That Are Usually Reserved for the Function of a Prophet

The prophet's different level of accuracy and given authority gives them a broader area of functioning than the gift of prophecy, even though they have the same goal. "There are several types of the prophetic word which are generally reserved for the ministry of the prophet. They are as following:"¹⁴³

1. *Directive prophecy*: Words of prophecy that gives guidance to the lives of others. One example is the previously mentioned situation in which Paul and Barnabas are commissioned into apostolic ministry (Acts 13:1-3). Another example is Timothy, who had received a gift through a prophetic message, when the body of elders laid their hands on him (1 Tim 4:14). This is a regular pattern. The Holy Spirit reveals through prophecy a certain guidance for someone's life, which is imparted by prayer and the laying on of hands by prophets or other leaders or offices.
2. *Predictive prophecy*: The account of Agabus and the reaction on it by other Christians shows that this aspect was not abnormal for New Testament prophets (Acts 27-30; 21: 7-14).
3. *Corrective prophecy*: This is an aspect of exhortation, building up. It is often necessary for the Lord to warn, rebuke or correct His people to guide them in the way. Since considerable damage can be caused if this is done in the wrong way, it will usually happen through the more mature office of a prophet, who has more experience in listening and recognizing the Lord's message.

As said above, those types of words are not exclusively reserved for prophets. It is possible that a believer receives for example a predictive prophecy. However, the New Testament gives no reports that people with the gift of prophecy are giving this kind of prophecies. Therefore we should be more careful when this happens.

An Office or Function Can Change and Vary in Strength

The offices or functions given by the Lord are not necessarily static, unchangeable. Not only can they vary in strength in one person's life, it is also possible that God makes a leader grow into another (greater) office.¹⁴⁴ One golden rule is that it is always best to

¹⁴³ Johnson, *The Fulness of Ministry*, 46. The three mentioned types are given on 46-48.

¹⁴⁴ Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, 28-29.

obey the decision of the Holy Spirit, if He decides to change the task and office of a person. He knows perfectly well what is good for a person and necessary for the body of Christ in a certain situation and area. He may call for a task that lasts lifelong or change or enlarge it.¹⁴⁵ Again Paul and Barnabas' appointment as apostles gives insight in this principle. They were either teacher or prophet, according to Acts 13:1. At His time the Holy Spirit chose them to become apostles.

2.2 The Position of Prophetic Ministry in the Church

In the previous pages indirectly much has been said about the position of prophetic ministry in the church. Something more should be said about it to give more specific insight in the relation of prophetic ministry - the ministry of the gift of prophecy and the prophets - with the body of Christ, without intending to repeat what is already elaborated.

It has become clear that prophetic ministry is very varied in its outlook, yet it all has the same goal: The building up of the church. It should always work together with the other gifts to achieve the common goal of preparing the church for Jesus Christ. This makes it functioning best. As is said before, there is a ranking in the spiritual gifts. Prophecy is seen as one of the greater gifts, since its functionality for the building up of the church is higher, unless tongues are interpreted (1 Cor 14:4,5). This shows that the ranking is according to functionality in reaching the aim of the gifts, the building up of the church.¹⁴⁶

Prophecy Needs to Function in a Good Environment

What place should be given to prophecy? One of Paul's main concerns is that it has a good environment in which prophesying happens in an orderly way, 'for God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (1 Cor 14:33). The spirit of a prophet is always subject to the control of a prophet (v. 32), so they can stop their prophesying if another person receives a revelation (v. 30). Not all people should prophesy together, but one after another, so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged (v. 31). Not more than three should

¹⁴⁵ Verhoef, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, 19; Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, 28.

¹⁴⁶ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 50-51.

speak after one another (v. 29). God clearly expects an orderly and peaceful environment before He speaks, and wants a prophet to have control over his spirit.¹⁴⁷

The good environment is not only important for the orderly way of prophesying, but certainly also for its testing. While two or three prophets speak, the others should weigh it carefully (1 Cor 14:29). Fee suggests that this ‘two or three’ is not a limit for any given gathering, but the limit before the others discern what is said.¹⁴⁸ This is not an option but a need. The leaders of a congregation, who are responsible for its wellbeing, are also in a way responsible for a good functioning of the ministry. It can be good for young prophets or persons who are developing in the prophetic gift they received to have more experience prophets to teach and guide them in their growth, in order to become more mature and less vulnerable to mistakes. It is a biblical principle to be mentored by a more mature Christian, like Elisha was serving Elijah and Timothy ‘raised’ by Paul, his spiritual father. Due to its importance, the testing of prophecy will be given more attention below.

Were Prophets Leaders of the New Testament Church?

The rankings of 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11 bring us to the question if prophets were leaders of the New Testament church. It is not the scope of this thesis to go into depth into this question, therefore only some thoughts will be given. Those verses are the basis of very different opinions. Paul uses in Corinthians both personal ministries and gifts in one verse, without intending to give an official listing. He used it as illustration for his point of unity in diversity. It is not sure if this indicated a ranking of leadership.¹⁴⁹ But according to Fee it is almost sure that he both in Corinthians and Ephesians sees the function of those people not in terms of an office, but of ministering in the church to enable others for ministry.¹⁵⁰ They were not chosen and appointed by the congregation as was the case with elders and deacons.

Prophets derived their authority from their prophetic inspiration. The congregation could recognize their authority and acknowledge that they were prophets. In the same way the apostles, evangelists, pastors and teacher were recognized. Their leadership was

¹⁴⁷ Nieuw Levend Evangelie Gemeente, *NLEG studie “profetie”*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 251.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 189-190.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 190, 708. Fee uses ‘office’ as a term for a human institution, like people could be appointed for the office of an elder or deacon.

accepted by the church without being installed into a human-made office. It was possible for an elder to be a prophet teacher or any of the other gifted persons of Eph 4:11. Following on this, the leadership of the early church has probably been an unique interaction between the five functions and the offices of elders and deacons. The local church was led by elders, together with pastors and teachers who ministered to the people. Deacons did their works of service. Evangelists went out from the local churches to reach other people and bring them to the congregation. Apostles and prophets, together with a number of teachers, could both be present in a local church or oversee up to a very large region, according to the authority given to them.¹⁵¹ Therefore the local churches had their own leadership and were connected and served more by the itinerant ministries of some apostles, prophets and teachers.

2.2.1 Testing Prophecy

One very important aspect of the functioning of prophetic ministry in the church is the testing of prophecy. The gift should be adding to the health of the church. But the existence of so many prophets gave very soon problems in the early church, maybe followed by restrictions.¹⁵² The gift of prophecy has always had the possibility of false revelation, because of human abuse and its imperfect nature in the New Testament. Moreover, false prophets are especially expected in the last days.¹⁵³ Charismata in general and prophecy could be a real threat to the community if they were not functioning in the right way, as the correspondence of Paul with the church in Corinth, Rome and Thessalonica reveals.¹⁵⁴ It is even possible that truth is revealed in a prophecy, but that Satan is the one who gives the revelation and not God (Mk 5:1-20; Acts 16:16-18). Therefore, examining prophecy cannot be done only rationally, it is a spiritual and charismatic process.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Madras: OM Publishing, 1998), 78-79; Eberle, *De Vijfvoudige Bediening in de Gemeente*, 38-49.

¹⁵² Robert R. Wilson, "prophets", *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2002), 830.

¹⁵³ Krämer, Rendtorff, Meyer, "prophētēs", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 855.

¹⁵⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 266-271.

¹⁵⁵ Krämer, Rendtorff, Meyer, "prophētēs", 855.

Prophecy in the church has on the one hand the danger of false revelation which will lead to wrong teaching, when no one discerns the mistakes in it; or on the other hand it is possible that no revelation at all will be given when the prophetic gift is restricted or ignored, as is done throughout most of church history.¹⁵⁶ Therefore Paul writes: ‘Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.’ (1 Thes 5:19-21).

To avoid the pitfalls of allowing false prophecy or ignoring prophecy at all, a good environment should be created for the functioning of the gift. This is what Paul underlines when he says that prophecy should be judged or weighed (1 Cor 14:29). Also “the number of references to teachers, teaching and tradition within Acts suggest the creative role of prophecy in the early church was balanced by the conserving role of teaching.”¹⁵⁷ Prophetic ministry should get its proper place in the framework of the church and its leadership as a whole and of the other gifts, given to the other believers.

Who Tested the Prophecy?

Paul writes in 1 Cor 14:29 that ‘two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. Who are those ‘others’ that had to weigh a prophecy? Are they other prophets or is it referring to the entire congregation? Most arguments seem to be in favour of the last. The whole argument does not give a hint for the first option, but is supporting the last.¹⁵⁸ If Paul was referring to the prophets, than he would probably have used *hoi loipói* ‘the others of them, the rest of the prophets’ and not simply *hoi alloi*, ‘the others’.¹⁵⁹ Second, other places where judging congregational speech is discussed, the congregation as a whole seems to be involved. Especially 1 Thess 5:20-21 addresses all the Christians of Thessalonica when it urges them to test everything and to hold on to what is good.¹⁶⁰ Thirdly, it is not very convincing to picture a whole congregation sitting and listening to a prophecy without ever critically evaluating the message themselves. The

¹⁵⁶ Kay, *Prophecy!*, 55.

¹⁵⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts”, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 289.

¹⁵⁸ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 252.

¹⁵⁹ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 49; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 49; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 72; P. A. Siebesma, *Zijn er vandaag nog oudtestamentische profeten?* (3) (De Oogst, September 1998 (no. 729), 20-21.

whole Biblical testimony is that individuals are responsible to seek the truth and not only to follow their leaders.¹⁶¹ The conclusion is therefore that the weighing of prophecy was most likely done by the whole congregation and not only by a group of prophets.¹⁶²

Testing and the Gift of Distinguishing Spirits

This ‘weighing’ of prophecy (*diakrínō*) brings us also to the question what its relation is to the gift of the distinguishing of spirits (*diakríseis*) that is mentioned in 1 Cor 12:10. Are ‘the others’ people with the gift of distinguishing spirits? The similarities in the use of words and the appearance of the ‘gift-pairs’ of tongues-interpretation and prophecy-distinguishing spirits makes it arguable that this gift was involved in the weighing of prophecy. A considerable debate has been about this issue among scholars.¹⁶³ The scope of this thesis allows us not to take more space for this question. Aanen and Brienens give a good examination in interaction and mainly agreeing with the position of Grudem.¹⁶⁴ Their conclusion is worth following. In short, Paul uses both *diakrínō* and *diakríseis* in a wide range of meanings. It is therefore not necessary that *diakrínō* refers to the gift of distinguishing spirits. “Moreover, it is not legitimate simply to suppose that 1 Cor 12:10 is restricted to the testing of prophets and prophecies.”¹⁶⁵ It also was important in some of the exorcisms and other cases in which demon powers were involved, as with Elymas (Acts 13:8ff) and the soothsaying girl (Acts 16:16-18).¹⁶⁶ Grudem sees the gift of distinguishing between spirits as “the ability to recognize the influence of the Holy Spirit or of the demonic spirits in a person.”¹⁶⁷ Therefore it can be concluded that the ‘weighing’ of 1 Cor 14:29 did not necessarily involve the gift of distinguishing between spirits. This does not exclude a relation between *diakríseis* and *diakrínō*. It is arguable that they are related, therefore they do not necessarily point at two total different things.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 49; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 72; Kay, *Prophecy!*, 63.

¹⁶² Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 55-56.

¹⁶³ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 171.

¹⁶⁴ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 53-55; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 70-71.

¹⁶⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 70-71.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁶⁷ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, 1992), 59, cited in: Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 55.

¹⁶⁸ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 171.

God equipped His Church with several criteria to weigh prophecy. More about that will follow below. Second, He gave to some the gift of distinguishing spirits. Those should not be seen as the same, nor should be said that the criteria replaced the gift of distinguishing spirits.¹⁶⁹

We can picture this process of weighing as a time of listening to God, bringing the prophecy to Him in prayer and the sharing of individual thoughts and impressions following on the given revelation. Most probably this would be led by some of the leaders to let it happen in an orderly way. This would go on until the congregation reached agreement on the prophecy, may it be its full acceptance, partly or full rejection or the decision to wait for some period to see if the Lord affirmed the given message.

Criteria for Testing a Prophecy

We will now move to the weighing or testing itself. What are the given criteria to discern if a prophecy is true, partly right or false? A good beginning are the six criteria for true prophecy that can be derived from 1 Cor 12-14.¹⁷⁰ They are the following:

1. *Confession of the Lordship of Christ* (1 Cor 12:3; cf. Joh 16:14; 1 Joh 4:2,3; Rev 19:10).
2. *Criterion of love* (1 Cor 13). Only through love can the *charismata* function properly.
3. *Building up the congregation* (1 Cor 14:3,4,5,12,17,26). A central aspect of 1 Cor 14.
4. *The motive of care or concern* (1 Cor 12:25). All the members of the body of Christ should in their usage of the gifts minister to one another.
5. *Benefit or profit motive* (1 Cor 12:7, 14:6). It should benefit others in the congregation.
6. *Criterion of order* (1 Cor 14:33,40). Everything should be done in an orderly and fitting way, since God is a God of order and peace.

¹⁶⁹ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 57-58.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. M. D. Geuze, *Profetie: Onmisbaar voor de christelijke gemeente. Een welkome studie over een miskende gave en een vergeten opdracht* (Hoornaar: Gideon, 2004), 110; Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 56-57.

Those criteria are useful but do not cover all areas of the weighing of prophecy. Based on the mentioned criteria and other elements in the New Testament, three main areas of judging can be found¹⁷¹:

1. *The person of the prophet.* The person who receives and gives the prophecy has an important influence on the message. Therefore he or she¹⁷² as a person should be 'weighed' in several aspects.
 - a. *His doctrine.* The faith and doctrine of the prophet should not be in contradiction to the Biblical message.
 - b. *His life.* Even if a person is confessing a 'perfect' faith, still his life should be measured if he is living according to what he believes. He should be a person with a high morality. Jesus said that many people would come on the day of judgement and say 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?' But He will tell them plainly that He does not know them, because they did not do the will of the Father (Mt 7:22). Probably the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22) can be used for testing the person's life.
 - c. *The fulfilment of his prophecies.* If some of his prophecies were predicting future events, then their accuracy can be judged and taken in account. If they often were not very reliable, then it will be wise to be more careful with his present prophecies.
 - d. *Is he willing to be tested?* Is the person accountable for his messages and willing to be tested by the congregation, or does he refuse any critics on what he says?
 - e. *Is his 'spirit' subject to his control?* A prophet should be able to control himself and to be silent when another person receives a prophecy. Prophecy is not ecstasy, according to Paul, but it should happen orderly, since God is an orderly God (1 Cor 14:30-33). A more careful approach is recommendable if a person is not able to control himself.

Aanen gives a reminder to the fact that God can sometimes use a person that does not fit to the prescription. One example is Kajafas, whose words

¹⁷¹ Cf. Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 60-79; Bruce Collins, *Profeteer! Een praktische gids om uw profetische gave te ontwikkelen*, translated by Ruud ten Wolde (Utrecht: Huis van Gebed Domino, 2004), 94-99; Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 237-251; Kay, *Prophecy!*, 66-67; Nieuw Levend Evangelie Gemeente, *NLEG studie "profetie"*, 4-6.

¹⁷² To improve the readability, the masculine shall be used to indicate both prophets and prophetesses.

are considered to be a prophecy, although he himself seemed not to be conscious of the fact (Joh 11:50,51). Sometimes God uses people that are not righteous, like He also did with Balaam (Num 22-24).

2. *The content of the prophecy.* Prophecy should always be fitting to the message of the Bible, the revelation that God has given before. If it is contradicting to this, than it is certainly false. The opposite is not automatically right. Even if a given message is according to the Bible, then still it can become a false prophecy when it is used or given in the wrong context or when it is not given by God but by a demon. It is therefore also important to discern the spirit of a prophecy.
3. *The results of the prophecy.* A good message with a bad result clearly lacks something. This is certainly true for a prophecy. Two results should be considered:
 - a. *God's honour.* Is the prophecy honouring God? This can be by convincing unbelievers of their sin, by directly glorifying the Lord or other outcomes. Do the words of the message lead the receivers closer to God or also to other things? Has the prophecy the result of focusing the attention on the prophet as a person? Is the result that people get to know God better and love Him more?
 - b. *The building up of the Church.* Does the prophecy strengthen, edify and comfort the believers? Has it a positive result, maybe through some correction that is spoken in love? Does it make the believers to become a stronger unity, to grow in maturity and to glorify God more?

The areas of testing prophecy are necessary to weigh prophecy carefully and at the same time to prevent that the Spirit is hindered in His work. Testing should not be done as some kind of mathematical exercise. Also for the ones who test a prophecy is the criterion of love very important. Their aim should also be the building up of the church and of the person who gave the prophecy.

The main thing in testing is dependence on the Holy Spirit. The other believers should be focused to listen to the Holy Spirit as they bring a given revelation in prayer before Him to hear and be sensitive for His guidance in the testing of prophecy. He can point at weaknesses or false things in a prophecy through the given three areas of testing. Sometimes it will just be an uneasy 'feeling' that can lead to a more thorough examination

of a prophecy. If there is no peace after receiving a prophecy, then it should be brought before God again, until He gives peace.¹⁷³

Prophecy is a gift of the Spirit to the Church. In its essence it is good and it can be useful if it is functioning in the right environment, so it will build up and not distract the Church. However, testing prophecy is not only important for the receiver(s), but also for the person who is giving the prophecy. A good testing of and feedback on the revelation he has given can help to develop the gift or office of the person.¹⁷⁴

2.3 The Functions of New Testament Prophetic Ministry

Prophetic ministry has been elaborated from several perspectives in the previous paragraphs that dealt with prophecy as a gift and function and its proper place in the church of Christ. It is not necessary to repeat it all in this section, that is concerned with the specific aspects of prophetic ministry in the everyday life of the early church. Much of what is said before about the prophetic gift and office will be amplified with additional information and put together into a structure that gives a comprehensive overview of prophetic ministry and its outlook in the New Testament.

Prophecy was clearly not uncommon in the early church and certainly widely accepted. Even later writings make note of prophetic ministry in the body of Christ, both positive and negative. In spite of this, not as much information as we would like to have is found in the books and epistles of the New Testament. Fragments of the ‘daily practice’ of prophetic ministry reveal something of its functioning but leave the reader also with several gaps in knowledge. As a result, some of the paragraphs will be rather short and general in their content.

Prophetic ministry in the New Testament is in line with that in the Old Testament, according to Luke’s reports in the Gospel and Acts. It contains foretelling, warnings for things that are about to happen, symbolic actions, guidance for mission and encouraging of the brethren. The prophets were still functioning as the mouthpiece of God.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Nieuw Levend Evangelie Gemeente, *NLEG studie “profetie”*, 4-6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁵ See paragraph 2.1.1; Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 172.

Working in unity and complementing each other is always important for prophetic ministry, since it is a part of the whole, one of the 'tools' God has given to the church. It cannot function as a ministry on its own, even when we now take it as one separate ministry to examine it closer.

Prophetic ministry as the exercise of prophecy as a gift for every believer was functioning in the local congregations of Christians. It is known of several churches like the ones in Antioch and Corinth that also a number of prophets was present. Some of them were local prophets, others seem to have been travelling from place to place, visiting the churches and ministering to them, although it is not sure how common this itinerant functioning of prophets was. But it is sure that the prophets had serving the local congregations as goal in their ministering and prophesying.

2.3.1 Building Up the Disturbed and Distracted Church

Eph 4:11 and following is very clear about the purpose of prophets. It is their aim to build up the church. The church in the New Testament was in its early days already disturbed by false teachings, prophecies and practises. Many of the New Testament letters of Paul and other authors are addressing problems in the churches. Those problems were not always easy to solve. Not only a good foundation, but also a remedy for the problems was needed. Both aspects are part of prophetic ministry.

Laying the Foundation

Jesus had apostles and prophets intended to be foundational, according to Paul's teaching that the church is built on apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the chief stone, the corner- or capstone (Eph 2:20). A good building of the church is only possible if the foundation was laid well. If the foundation is clear then it is also clear when people start building next to it, based on human efforts, which is dangerous for the church as a whole. A result of an unclear foundation is that distractions and distortions are not easily recognised and therefore also not easy to remove. It is not for nothing that especially the apostles and prophets together lay this foundation. It is the apostle who has the gift and authority to pioneer and start new initiatives. He has overview over many aspects and speaks with authority. God intended him to have the role of making the new structures or

to reshape old ones (1 Cor 3:6,10).¹⁷⁶ The prophet had often the role of prophetic confirmation and guidance for what the apostle was grounding. Very regularly in Paul's ministry this confirmation took place, starting from his conversion.¹⁷⁷ 'without prophets much time can be wasted, acting according to human measures and strategies, and unnecessary mistakes can be made.'¹⁷⁸ Eph 2:20 and other verses, however, are not exactly clear in their meaning. 'The texts available are just not sufficient to be able to maintain without doubt that every church needs a prophetic ministry in order to be well-grounded. They are also not sufficient to maintain the opposite. It is certainly correct, however, to give whenever possible the prophetic ministry enough free room when founding a new church.'¹⁷⁹

Probably Paul's choice of his partners reflects this foundational aspect of the prophetic ministry in the office of a prophet. Acts 13:1 reveals that Barnabas was either a teacher or a prophet. Luke's usage of descriptions for Barnabas gives the impression that he was a prophet.¹⁸⁰ Barnabas was sent by the Jerusalem church to the new congregation in Antioch and went to Tarsus to take Paul also there. Together they met with the church and taught great numbers of people for a whole year (Acts 19-26). This seems to reflect a foundational ministry to build the Antiochan church and at the same time a strong desire to work together in Barnabas and Paul, what indicates that their ministries complemented each other.¹⁸¹ From that moment on they ministered together until disagreements came.

When they departed on a missionary journey (Acts 15:39), Paul chose Silas and left to his own way (v. 40). Silas was the same prophet who had travelled with the prophet Judas to Antioch. Just as with Barnabas, Paul was working close together with Silas, although we do not read much about Silas' own ministry efforts. They travelled together

¹⁷⁶ Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 8-10; Reinhold Scharnowski, Eine Aufgabe, fünf Dimensionen, der "Fünffaltige Dienst" und unser auftrag in der Gesellschaft, (unpublished article, Germany, n.p., 2003), 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 25-28.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸⁰ See K. N. Giles, "Prophecy, prophets, false prophets", *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 971. Giles argues that Luke deliberately draws Christian leaders as prophets. He explains the nickname 'Barnabas', given to the Levite Josos or Joseph as 'son of exhortation or encouragement'. Several parallels in the Bible suggest that Luke is introducing Barnabas as 'a son of prophecy'.

¹⁸¹ Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 10.

and were in prison together. The fact that the Phillippians seized not only Paul but also Silas and brought them before the magistrate seems to suggest that Silas could be distinguished as a leader, together with Paul, among Paul's companions (Acts 16:19,20). Timothy or Luke or others are not mentioned at all. This can support the thesis that he was as a prophet considerably supporting the apostolic ministry of Paul in a healthy way of working together, as was the case before with Barnabas.

Building a Mature Church

Paul's remedy for the restoration of the distracted Corinthian church is not just insisting on a strong leadership that should be obeyed by everybody. He encourages the believers in 1 Cor 12-14 to seek more of the higher gifts and especially prophecy, and less of speaking in tongues, which is aimed at personal edification. His concern is that the gifts function properly, in unity and order. This shows the importance of prophecy in a situation of distraction. It is not necessarily a danger. It can be of great value for the edifying of the church, which will lead it back to the basic teachings, the foundation that was laid on Jesus Christ only.

A very strong example of the functioning of prophetic ministry in the building up of the church is found in Rev 2 and 3. John the apostle receives a prophetic revelation from Jesus for seven of His churches in Asia. This accurate prophecy shows the heart of Jesus, the perfect prophet. The general pattern is first introduction of the Sender of the message, Jesus Christ. Then follows a commendation of the good things in the attitude and works of the congregations, a complaint about their wrongings, a correction and at last an encouragement to hold on until the end. The prophecies are very specific. If they were obeyed by the respective churches and they had repented and changed their attitude, then it would surely have had a strong growth and more maturity as result.

Prophetic ministry played a part in the continuing process of defending and spreading the truth of the Gospel in the churches and to build them up in unity. This was done in several ways. Often it had a directing function, as we have seen in Rev 2 and 3. It would point out certain truths or recommendable decisions and then leave it to the local leadership and church as a whole to act according to it. The ideal situation, a honest reaction of repentance, if necessary, and of a change of attitude and behaviour, would also involve the service of the other offices, each with their own giftedness and approach. The teachers would teach the - restored- truth, the pastors would in their caring for the

distracted flock and all its individual pains be able to explain clearly the background for the mistakes that were made and give the believers care and exhortation according to the given truth or decision. Evangelists probably had to change their message in some minor parts to explain the truth better. The result would be that the church moved a step from its distraction to more maturity.

Direction for Appointing Leaders

This kind of prophetic ministry is mainly given to prophets to exercise, since it requires more maturity.¹⁸² The directing aspect could lead the church to the appointing of the right leaders. Before Pentecost, lots were cast to receive the Lord's answer for the appointing of a twelfth apostle (Acts 1:23-26). After Pentecost no reference is found to this practice, but from that moment on it is seen that leaders appointed other leaders for service in the church. Some apostles appointed elders in local congregations. The appointment of a new leader was not only a matter of obeying carefully how the Spirit seemed to direct the leaders of the church personally in the conviction of their hearts and minds for who was to be chosen. Prophecy also played a significant role in the selection of leaders.¹⁸³

One example is the situation in which Paul and Barnabas were set apart and sent out by the Holy Spirit in a prayer meeting of prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1). Probably the message that Ananias, 'a disciple', had to bring to Paul who was blind sitting in a house after he had met Jesus can also be seen in this perspective. God clearly says that Paul will be His vessel for reaching the Gentiles and Israel (Acts 9:10-19).

Timothy was also brought into ministry through a prophetic message. A prophecy had been given that pointed out that a certain ministry gift, apparently teaching and administration, would be given to him. The elders prayed for him and laid their hands on him (1 Tim 1:18, 4:11-14).¹⁸⁴ This record gives not only a general view of how a new leader could be appointed by the direction given through a prophecy, but also shows that this could include directions for the ministry itself. The leadership of the church received

¹⁸² See paragraph 2.1.3.

¹⁸³ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 220.

¹⁸⁴ Robeck, "Prophecy, Prophesying", 757.

divine guidance for ministering to the people that were put under their care. Prophecy gave them also knowledge of the goal and the gifts that were given to them to reach that goal. That helped them to develop those gifts and to minister more effectively. Thus prophecy would lead to the strengthening of the church.¹⁸⁵

Direction in Imparting Gifts

This aspect does not need much explanation, since its functioning has become clear in the example of Timothy.¹⁸⁶ Besides this no other references are given in the New Testament, but it could apparently be one of the aspects of prophetic ministry. God used some of His servants to pray more specifically for the equipment of others. Prophetic ministry adds in this way directly to the preparation of God's people for works of service, which builds up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12).

Direction Through Correcting

When mistakes or distractions have come into the church, correction is needed. Leaders should take lead in this aspect. Everything that is built next to the foundation of Jesus Christ, laid out by apostles and prophets should be removed to make the 'building' good again. Sometimes this will be a big part of a 'building', but it is necessary, because else everything will collapse. If mistakes and distortions in a church are not addressed rightly, then they will damage it and bring down the whole. This can also happen when a church is distracted from its core purpose that was given when its foundation was laid, for example mainly reaching a certain people group, and has been doing all kinds of ministries that God did not intend it to do. God's work can be destroyed or hindered with good intentions by people with zeal to work for Him without having listened properly. Of course this correcting should always happen in love. When Paul uses the word 'encouragement' in 1 Cor 14:3, he probably also had a loving way of correcting each other in mind.

Rev 2 and 3 give examples of correcting. The church in Ephesus is urged to repent and do the things they did at first, to go back to their first love (2:5); Pergamum has to repent some things (2:14-16); Thyatira is tolerating a false prophetess, who shall be judged

¹⁸⁵ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 157-158; Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 221.

¹⁸⁶ Grimes, *The ministry gifts*, part two, lesson 9, 3; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 157; Johnson, *the Fulness of Ministry*, 46.

by the Lord Himself and its members are under threat of suffering if they not repent (2:20-23). Sardis should wake up and awaken what is about to die through repentance and obedience of the Gospel, because they look alive but are dead (3:1-3). Laodicea is lukewarm, which brings them in danger of being spit out if they do not repent, invite Jesus to come in and are willing to be disciplined (3:15-20). The used words are sometimes very strong, but always like the hands of a surgeon: Aimed at the removal or healing of sick parts, in order to save the body from death and to bring it back to normal healthy functioning.

Direction Through Foretelling

Through foretelling sometimes direction would be given to the church.¹⁸⁷ The often mentioned example is the prediction of a famine by Agabus, which made the church take action to answer the coming difficulties (Acts 11:27-30). In the same way, foretelling could bring awareness to the disturbed church of certain dangers that would come or a specific attitude that would be needed to face a future problem or challenge. This could not only be corrective, but it would certainly also have the result that churches would be bound together and work for a common goal. It showed them that they should keep their focus, running the race before them and not fighting each other or going aside. There are few things that unite people so well and makes them forget their own agendas as an important common future goal.

Encouragement

This aspect will be taken into consideration in the next paragraph, but it is also an important aspect of the building up of a distracted church. Correction can be needed, guidance, teaching, equipment. But without encouragement almost every believer will loose sight of the great goal and get discouraged. The prophetic ministry is meant to give encouragement, so that all people will not give up and have faith that all things are possible for God.

¹⁸⁷ Foretelling has previously been mentioned in paragraphs 2.1.2 and 2.1.3.

Prophetic Direction in Teaching

Previously the difference between (the gift of) teaching or preaching and prophecy has been made clear.¹⁸⁸ Teaching is based on Scriptural knowledge that is already present. Prophecy is based on a revelation and always according to Scripture. It fixes the path of the community from the angle of the future, while teaching gives direction for the present from considerations of the past.¹⁸⁹ Often it will explain or apply the Scripture for an actual situation. The prophetic ministry in the New Testament played a significant role in interpreting the Old Testament prophets and the sayings of Jesus for their own situation.¹⁹⁰

In the early church, prophetic ministry also played an important role in knowing the truth. A supreme example of this is found in Acts 15. When the Jerusalem council met and came to some conclusions for the Greek believers and their relation to the law, they send a letter to the Gentile believers. One significant statement in this letter is, ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with...’ (Acts 15:28). This shows that they were used to discuss matters and bring them before the Lord to hear His answer.¹⁹¹ This was not only foundational for the church, but also became the basis of further teaching and part of the canon. Prophetic ministry therefore mediated knowledge, so that one can learn from it (1 Cor 14:31; Rev 2:20).¹⁹²

Prophetic ministry can be very attractive for believers, since they can receive ‘instant messages’ from God. That seems to be much easier and exciting than studying the Bible. However, never should prophetic ministry replace the teaching, study and personal meditation of the Bible. Nothing can replace this authoritative and unfailing ‘Word of God’. It is also a task of the leaders to watch if prophetic ministry and Biblical education are in the right relation with each other, in order to give the members of the body a balanced menu for their growth.¹⁹³ On the other hand, prophetic ministry should be given its proper place, since it is not for no reason that the prophet is mentioned before the

¹⁸⁸ See paragraph 2.1.2.

¹⁸⁹ Friedrich, “Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament”, 854.

¹⁹⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 172.

¹⁹¹ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 223-224.

¹⁹² Friedrich, “Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament”, 854.

¹⁹³ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow: How to Find Your Gift and Use It* (Eastborn: Kingsway Publications, 1987), 227-228.

teacher (1 Cor 12:28). Probably this order points at a task for the prophetic ministry to indicate *what* the passage or topic for the education of the people will be, directly ministering to the need of that particular group of people at that particular moment, according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁴

Prophetic ministry is also useful in teaching others to listen for God's voice. This can help others to know God better and to act according to His guidance. Many distractions and human thoughts or influences of Satan can be avoided when people are more mature in their walk with God and recognise in their lives what He is speaking to them.¹⁹⁵

2.3.2 Encouraging the Disheartened

Very important in prophetic ministry is the encouragement of others, especially those who are disheartened. It is meant for strengthening, encouragement and comfort, three words that show the heart of prophetic ministry (1 Cor 14:3). The prophetic messages lift the eyes of the believers up to God again when they have become downcast through the sorrows and trials of this world or by their own mistakes. It inspires them to face the burdens again. The words nurture and sustain God's people.¹⁹⁶ Many prophets are also more able to look through the facts that are before the eyes and to see what is behind it, or to keep the vision that God had given previously alive. This can give the others the right perspective again when they have lost or forgotten it. Hope and believe are awakened.¹⁹⁷

Jesus' ministry gives an example of encouragement. Although He sometimes gave predictive prophecies about the future that showed a grim picture (see e.g. Mt 24), He also encouraged His disciples regularly. He prophesied that He would go to the Father and prepare room for His followers (Jn 14:1-4), promises the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of comfort and says that He through His Spirit will lead them, so that they need not to be troubled or afraid (Jn 14: 15-27). Again He tells of the Spirit, the 'Counsellor' when He speaks about the trials and hate that the disciples will face in the future (Jn 16:1-16). Always was His

¹⁹⁴ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 28.

¹⁹⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books) 478.

¹⁹⁷ Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 21.

aim to speak the truth that the Father gave Him, but to do it in an encouraging way. He built His disciples up in truth and love.

Another example is the visit of Silas and Judas to Antioch, where they ‘said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers (Acts 15:32). The same is seen when Paul and the prophet Silas came out of the Philippian prison. They went to the new believers at Lydia’s house and encouraged them, before leaving the city as requested (Acts 16:40).

The book of Revelations was in its entirety meant as prophecy, although its content is rather apocalyptic.¹⁹⁸ It was written in a time that the church faced more hardships. Those revelations helped the believers to look forward to the return of Christ, the rehabilitation of all who suffered and justice to be exercised over all the earth and all Satan’s forces. Most of all it showed how glorious the end would be: The church prepared for marrying Christ, eternal life with the Father, in a continuous life of glory in the New Jerusalem on the new earth (Rev 21). God would wipe away all the tears from their eyes and all the old pain and imperfectness would be passed away (Rev 21:4). They received the promise that God would make all things new (Rev 21:5).

The prophecies to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 also have many elements of encouragement. They are given in love, indicated by the positive statements that are made about churches, even if they did many things wrong. Especially the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia are encouraged to hold on in their difficulties. Smyrna was poor and faced persecutions, Philadelphia had little strength and much troubles, but Jesus gives them promises that He has seen it and will never leave them or let them go, promises that look forward to the eternal life.

2.3.3 Sustaining the Momentum of the Christian Mission and Ministry

Previously the sending of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1) and Paul’s vision that led him and companions to a new mission field in Macedonia (16:9,10) have been mentioned. Those situations are a confirmation of what Jesus told His apostles before the Ascension: ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my

¹⁹⁸ K. N. Giles, “Prophecy, prophets, false prophets”, 973-974; M. H. Shepherd, Jr., “Prophet in the NT”, *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 919.

witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). They were led by the Holy Spirit to reach the unreached. Being a Christian is being sent by Jesus through His Holy Spirit. The church is missionary in its very being. Mission is initiated and led by the Spirit. And this is what happened in Acts. Very rapidly the Good News was spreading throughout the then known world.

Prophetic ministry played an important part in the guidance of missions by the Holy Spirit. Not only the sending of Paul and Barnabas and the new adventure to reach out to Macedonia are proof for this. God revealed His intention, His will to save the Gentiles to this to the apostles and prophets (Eph 3:5).¹⁹⁹ Regularly when some prophets and others were meeting together in prayer, new revelations were given to show the next steps. For Paul, prophecy played a major role in directing his ways.²⁰⁰

Guidance by prophecy was most likely not always a great surprise. If it would have been, then Paul and Barnabas would probably have judged the prophecy that was the trigger for their sending out as something wrong, because they would not have recognised it in their lives. But nothing like that is recorded. The prophecy was confirming what God was already making clear to them in other ways for the purpose of the Great Commission.²⁰¹

In 1 Corinthians 14:22-25 Paul has written how prophecy can convict people of their sin and of the reality of God's presence in the Christian meetings. Prophetic ministry could be sustaining mission also in this way. We do not read many records of this, but the confrontation of Paul and Elymas the sorcerer can be an illustration of this function. We see that a prophecy, together with a work of power done by Paul, exposes the wickedness of Elymas, the attendant of the proconsul of Paphos, with the result that he was blind for a while. This convinced the proconsul Sergius Paulus and he became a believer of the teaching about the Lord (Acts 13:6-12). It was through a revelation that Paul knew for sure that Elymas was wicked and going to be blinded for a while, because the hand of the Lord was against him.

¹⁹⁹ Friedrich, "Prophets and prophecies in the New Testament", 849-854.

²⁰⁰ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 222.

²⁰¹ Kay, *Prophecy!*, 36.

The given situations and examples show how prophetic ministry was sustaining the momentum of mission in the early church. They did not only start with a great zeal to reach many, but this movement was sustained, guided and refreshed through prophetic ministry. God was very directly involved in reaching the nations. When He guides missions, everything will fall in place. Prophecy will help to ensure that people, resources and a field white to harvest will in a supernatural way come together at the right time.²⁰²

2.3.4 Living According to the Kingdom Requirements

One of the purposes of the prophetic messages is to teach the people to live holy lives.²⁰³ This means a life that is set apart, a living according to the principles of the Kingdom of God that has come. Those principles are opposite to the ways of the world, it is about serving, loving, caring, giving, selflessness, righteousness, justice. It is reflecting the exemplary life of Jesus. The task of the church is to establish this Kingdom on earth, defeating Satan's kingdom through humbleness. Christians should take personal holiness very serious. Added to this, the body of Christ should be involved in social activities, acts of mercy and defending the weak and unjust treated in society. Therefore prophecy is also involved in teaching and encouraging people to shape their lives and change their environment into a 'Kingdom-like' life.

God is a holy God. A congregation can only worship Him when it is aimed at following Jesus and letting the sinful nature die. Purity is needed. Prophetic ministry can point at parts that need improvement or correct what is wrong. This will lead to more holiness and therefore more revelation of God, if people act according to it with repentance and a new way of living.

The environment of the early church was full of injustice. Widows and poor people were oppressed or overlooked and many persons were serving as slaves for their whole lives. This could even happen in the church (Acts 6:1). Surely prophetic messages will have pointed out wrong behaviour in the congregations, since prophecy points at wrong attitudes to correct them. God is a just God, therefore His speaking through His children will speak about justice.

²⁰² Kaldewey, *The awesome (powerful) hand of God*, 20.

²⁰³ Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 478.

Were the prophecies also aimed at justice in the society in general? Nothing is mentioned about that. Not one occasion is written down in which a ruler or rulers are encouraged to do justice or in which their injustice is mirrored before them. This is in agreement with Paul's statement that prophecy is for believers and not for unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22). It shows believers the truth of God, including non-believers who see their lives exposed before them. And it encourages them to be a missionary entity, a holy priesthood that will transform the society by establishing the Kingdom of God. Prophecy is not directly speaking to and aimed at changing the non-Christian society, but at equipping the church to change the society according to God's principles.

The previously mentioned offering to help the believers that would suffer from the coming famine is an example of how a prophecy resulted into action to help each other (Acts 11:27-30).²⁰⁴ This collection was an act of *diaconia* from some members of the body of Christ to others.²⁰⁵ Prophetic ministry led to actions that mirrored the principles of the Kingdom of God and built and strengthened the unity of the body in a practical way.

2.4 The Duration of Prophetic Ministry in the Church

A very important issue is the controversy about the duration of the gifts of the Spirit and, connected with it, of prophecy. Many churches have not known the gift of prophecy for centuries and believe that it is something of the past. Some are just not sure if it still can exist. Others believe that the gifts or most of the gifts have ceased, together with the apostles and prophets. This position is often based on one or two arguments.

2.4.1 It Will Last Until Jesus Comes

The first argument is that because of the canonisation of the Bible the gifts and especially the miracle-gifts are no longer necessary. They were needed for the foundation of the church and had to cease at the time of the last apostle's death or the completion of the writings of the New Testament.²⁰⁶ 1 Cor 13:9,10 is used as argument to underline this point of view: 'For we know in part, and we prophecy in part, but when perfection comes,

²⁰⁴ Robeck, "Prophecy, prophesying", 755-756.

²⁰⁵ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 89-90.

²⁰⁶ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 227-228.

the imperfect disappears.’ The completion of the New Testament is then taken as the ‘perfection’ that has come, which implies that the imperfect, prophecy, disappears. It is sometimes argued that the later writings of Paul already indicate this cessation.

Several Biblical answers can be given that prove rather convincingly that this opinion cannot be true. There is no indication in the New Testament that the gifts have ceased.²⁰⁷ Brienens lists seven arguments that can be recognized in the writings of many others.²⁰⁸

First, 1 Cor 13:9,10 is written in the context of this whole chapter, that argues that love is superior over the gifts. Love is eternal, the gifts are temporary. Prophecy will cease when ‘the perfect’ comes, then its function will be better served by something else. Exegesis of this passage reveals that many factors point to the Lord’s return as the ‘perfect’ that will come. We shall see ‘face to face’ - a typical expression for meeting the Lord - and know ‘as we have been fully known’ only when the Lord returns. So prophecy will last until the end of time.²⁰⁹

Second, Pentecost marked the beginning of a new era, the era in which the Holy Spirit would be with the believers. It is the beginning of the ‘last days’, the ‘end time’. It is not a period that will end after some decades, but it ends with the coming of Christ.²¹⁰

Third, Jesus said that He would send the Holy Spirit who would be with His disciples forever (Jn 14:16). His task would be to teach them all things and to remind them of everything Jesus had said to them (Jn 14:26). This seems at least to have similarities with the gift of prophecy as it is seen after Pentecost. Jesus adds to this that those who believe in Him will do greater things than these (Jn 14:12).²¹¹ There is no reason to believe that Jesus would hold back the gifts of the Spirit when He does not hold back the Spirit Himself.

²⁰⁷ P. A. Siebesma, *Zijn er vandaag nog oudtestamentische profeten? (2)*, De Oogst, July/August 1998 (no. 728), 18.

²⁰⁸ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 65-66.

²⁰⁹ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 25; Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 65-66; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 228-234; Houston, *Prophecy*, 157-160.

²¹⁰ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 65.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

Fourth, Paul wants all Corinthians to know about the spiritual gifts and writes 1 Cor 12:1-11 in the present time.²¹²

Fifth, verse 18, as part of the argument in verses 12-31, makes clear that God has arranged the parts in the body, and those parts are specifically gifted parts. Everyone has at least one gift (vs. 11).²¹³

Sixth, to view the completion of the New Testament as the perfect that has come encounters another difficulty. It implies that we now know much more than the apostles did, who were taught directly by the Lord himself. Lloyd-Jones uses the word 'nonsense', John Calvin says that making this passage apply to the intervening time is 'stupid'.²¹⁴

Seventh, it is not really convincing to argue that Paul's later writings show a decay of the practical use of the gifts. Aanen gives many arguments to prove that the situations that can be interpreted as a 'coming down' of the gifts do not necessarily imply that they ceased. Paul did not heal Epafroditus (Phil 2:25-27) and Trophimus (2 Tim 4:20) and was not released from prison by an earthquake as happened before in Philippi (Acts 16:26). However, Jesus also did not heal all people while He could. He sought the honour of the Father in all He did.²¹⁵ In the same way it could be true for Paul, who always had to be obedient to the instructions of the Holy Spirit to do God's will.

Eighth and last, John 21: 25 says that many other things that Jesus did are not written down. That means that the revelation of God was not restricted to Scripture itself. Is it then usual to expect that God restricted Himself after the canonisation to reveal Himself by Scripture only? More likely He continued to reveal Himself to His people through the Scripture and through revelation that has not become Scripture.²¹⁶

²¹² Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 66.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 239-240.

²¹⁵ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 25-26.

²¹⁶ Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 39.

2.4.2 History Shows the Negligence of the Church, not the Cessation of the Gifts

The second argument that is given is that the course of history shows that the gifts have ceased, while the church still exists. If the gifts were really so important and good, then they would also still be there, because God would not allow them to disappear. Many of the church fathers and church leaders of the past centuries had a close walk with God. Would they just let something good disappear? Would God not use them to keep the good things in existence? And their writings, can we just simply say that they are wrong at some points, while they are based on many centuries of (reformed) theology?

History is a process of building on what predecessors left, changing it in some areas and coming to new thoughts (that often are not that new at all). If it would happen that in the first centuries some of God's truth was forgotten, due to some circumstances, then it will through this attitude never be rediscovered, since no one dares to challenge or add something to the theologians of the past. It seems that that exactly is what happened. Prophecy and other gifts ceased in the first centuries due to false prophecy, confusion, abuse of power and at last a Christianity that became settled down as state religion under Constantine. Christians had lost their zeal and the living church became institutionalised. It is not strange that in that context the gifts were not functioning anymore.

Forbes finds no convincing explanation for the decline of prophecy. He shows that it was able to adapt to changing structures, like the coming of the bishops, or it could remain in opposition to the structures. This same principle was seen in the Old Testament, where some prophets were more connected with the official order and others opposing it. The conflict between orthodoxy and Montanism may be partially responsible, but is also not a convincing proof for the reason of decline.²¹⁷ Hill argues that the Montanist movement was a reaction to the moral laxity in the churches and the Gnostic heresy of that time. Church historians have always written very negative about it, but probably this view should be changed. In this troubled time, the bishops and church leaders have most probably overreacted on the occasion in which a number of Christians was looking for new spiritual life in the church. This seemed to threaten the established position of many of the leaders of those days. As a result the leaders established their positions more strong, which caused more institutionalising. We can be negative about Montanism, but the result of the

²¹⁷ Forbes, *Prophecy and inspired speech*, 250.

Catholic Church of that time is also not a very great achievement. This period ended in the complete suppression of prophecy.²¹⁸

If prophecy would still be God's intention, then He would not let it cease, is one of the thoughts of this argument. The truth is that God *did* use people to bring the gifts again at their proper place in the church. After several centuries God in His grace brought a reformation of the church, back to the core of faith by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer and others. Following on that other renewals came. Missions was revived, together with a more passionate relation with God. And then, during the twentieth century, came a renewed attention for the gifts that God wants to give His church to function much better than it did. Is it a coincidence that since the beginning of the Pentecostal and charismatic movement, with all its mistakes and excesses, the spread of the Gospel went very fast and most of the world's Christians today belong to those kind of churches? Is it a coincidence that many of the churches that do not really believe in the gifts of the Spirit as a good gift from God are not growing or even declining? If it is true that the gifts are also in our time given for the building up of the church, than we could expect exactly what we see: growth and building up of churches that - in wisdom and in maturity - use them for the purpose God gave them for, and a standstill or decline in churches where they are not present. If one of the basic elements that are needed for growth are left out, than growth cannot happen. It is possible that wise predecessors had much knowledge in many areas but still overlooked others. God did not revive the whole church at once, that would not be possible. He is doing it throughout the centuries. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, a strong growth of organic churches, very basic and similar to the New Testament gatherings, is clearly visible. We see happening that the Gospel again spreads with power, through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and accompanied and supported by (miraculous) gifts.

This argument keeps many people at the place were they are, afraid to open up for 'new' possibilities, or afraid because of many mistakes that are made in churches. It does not recognize the fact that in our time also 'church fathers' are developing who will influence future generations like the others did in their time, if Jesus does not come back before that time. It is not really a biblical argument, based on Jesus' proclamation of freedom and peace. Instead of that it is build on fear and the desire to preserve what is gained without risking anything. It is staying where you are.

²¹⁸ Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 261-269.

Another thought needs to be added. Until here it has been taken for granted in this discussion that prophecy in many churches has ceased. But is that really true? We hear often those stories about a person whose thoughts were very strong directed towards a missionary far away or a friend to pray for him, to hear afterwards that exactly at that moment prayer was needed most. Or that someone ‘just got some thought in mind’ that he shared with his friend, who was greatly encouraged by it. The believers fail to recognize those revelations in their lives and do not understand that they are given for the benefit of the whole congregation.²¹⁹ It is certainly true that the gift of prophecy is present even in churches that do not recognize it. It only has not got the chance to develop.

As we sum up, there are not really arguments for the cessation of the gifts that cannot be refuted. There is no indication in the Bible that the gifts have ceased. If people say that the gifts and therefore prophecy are not existing anymore in our days, then it says probably more about their limited view of the given reality in our time than about the Holy Spirit. If the gifts are not acknowledged, expected and longed for, the fire of the Spirit will be put out (1 Thes 5:19) and their view will become a ‘self fulfilling prophecy’.²²⁰ Prophetic ministry as we have seen in the New Testament is still possible and existing in our days.

2.5 Summary

This chapter aimed to make clear what prophetic ministry in the New Testament is and how it functioned. A framework has been given that can be used for the further investigation of the significance of this prophetic ministry in the postmodern situation.

Prophetic ministry in the New Testament has several appearances. John the Baptist and others were prophesying under the Old Covenant. Jesus belonged both to the Old Covenant and functioned as an Old Testament prophet, as well as to the New Covenant that He established by His death and resurrection. Then the church came into existence after His ascension, at Pentecost. It is characterised by the Gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus Christ. From then onwards prophecy has a different character. It became something that could be given to all believers, a fulfilment of Joel 2:28-29.

²¹⁹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 147.

²²⁰ Aanen, *De toetsing van profetie*, 26.

Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit, given for the building up of the church through unity in diversity. It is not totally different from 'Old Covenant prophecy', but it should be tested. The Holy Spirit can still enable people to utter perfect, unending revelation, but we cannot anymore be sure that a prophecy is unending. Therefore it should function in a good environment of other believers, not specifically prophets or people with the gift of discerning spirits, that can weigh the given message. For that purpose the person that is prophesying, the content of the prophecy and its result should be taken into consideration, according to several more specific criteria. This all should be done in love, aimed at the best for all believers.

It is often closely related to prayer, like in the Old Testament. Even symbols were sometimes used to convey the message to the people.

God is a God of order and therefore prophecy should also happen orderly. The spirit of the prophets should always be subject to their will. They should not all prophecy together or more than two or three in one meeting of the congregation. The congregational meeting is not the only place where prophecy is meant to function, it is also useful outside the official meetings, provided that it happens with the given precautions.

Women are not excluded from prophesying but fully involved. Paul's (in)famous words about them in 1 Cor 14 are written with a different purpose. The reason that he asks them to be quiet and to ask their questions at home to their husbands is most likely that they were much younger and lower educated than their husbands and therefore they would have several questions during the meeting. In the Greco-Hellenistic culture it was considered to be shameful to ask others and especially other husbands questions. Paul restricts in no way the usage of prophecy by women.

Prophecy can function in different degrees. A person can be enabled to utter a revelation occasionally, prophesy regularly as a result of having the gift of prophecy or the Lord Himself can give the function of a prophet to him as a gift for the body of Christ. This is a gradual difference and not a total difference in gift, purpose or functioning. When the prophecies of a person are often proven to be very accurate, then it is likely that he is gifted in such a way that God uses him as a prophet. The congregation should give him the possibilities and guidance to grow in this function and acknowledge him in his calling. Then he has been given the authority to fulfil his task, locally or regionally.

Prophets were a part of the organic leadership of the early church, but not by being appointed or chosen in the way it happened to the elders, who were the leaders of the local churches. The prophets were ministering to the churches, building them up, guiding and correcting them. This task happened in relationship with the other functions of the apostles, teachers, the pastors and the evangelists.

Prophetic ministry in the New Testament has several characteristics. It was functioning to build up the distracted and disturbed church of that time by laying a good doctrinal and organisational foundation and to build and keep the believers close to it. This was done through giving direction for appointing leaders, imparting gifts, prophetic teaching, correcting and other aspects. Another characteristic was the encouragement of the believers in their daily circumstances. Eschatological perspectives could keep the children of God aimed at the hopeful future that was promised by Jesus. This would also cause more unity in the church, for it would help to work together for one goal. Third characteristic is the sustaining of missions through knowing the will of God through the Holy Spirit for His plans to reach the world. Lastly, it was important to teach and guide people to live according to the Kingdom of God, which implies a holy life, concern for our neighbours, justice, mercy and so on.

God did not take back what He has given to the church, although sometimes is argued that (some of) the gifts of the Spirit have ceased. It is better to say that the church has throughout history neglected the gifts and especially the gift of prophecy. The New Testament gives no reason for restricting the functioning of the gifts to the time of the beginning of the church. The gifts, prophecy, will exist until the perfect comes: Christ the Lord, whom we will know and see face to face when He returns. Then prophecy is no longer necessary. This implies that prophecy is also actual and given by the Spirit in our time, for the building up of the church.

In the first paragraphs the question of the relation between prophetic ministry in the Old and New Testament has been discussed, and it appears that the main difference is that the former is functioning under the old covenant, while the latter is a part of the new covenant. From the early Church onwards, the Holy Spirit is living in Christians and endowing gifts on them, of which prophecy is one. Old Testament prophetic ministry has therefore not become totally irrelevant, but the outlook of the ministry is changed. It has become something that is given to all, regardless their background, race or gender.

The situations that are mentioned in this chapter seem to reveal that prophetic ministry was fully relevant for the early Church, in spite of all its weaknesses. It provided direction and led to changes in many areas of church life, according to how the Spirit was leading them through revelations. More than that, He was using it to strengthen and encourage the people. Added to this, it encouraged and guided the mission into the world, in which the missionaries were functioning boldly, convinced of the commission that Jesus had given them and testifying of Him even before the governors and kings of the Roman empire. In a changed appearance, compared to the Old Testament ministry, prophetic ministry was making the Church relevant and adapted to its time and situation, that just like in our time was very much changing and challenging. Prophecy never spoke directly to or about rulers or those with power, but it equipped the Christians to act prophetically in their environment, according to how God guided them. Therefore, prophetic ministry seems to have been important in the New Testament situation.

This chapter has dealt into some detail with the gift of prophecy as part of prophetic ministry. This was necessary to address the confusion and suspicion towards prophecy that is present in many churches, not without reason. We hope to have shown that prophecy as it is described in the New Testament is intended to be an important aspect of the functioning of the Church and can be at the core of its prophetic ministry without leading it astray. On the contrary, it will result in growth in the four mentioned areas, building up the distracted Church, encouraging the discouraged, sustaining the ministry of the Church and leading it in living according to the Kingdom requirements. As such it fits well in the outlook of prophetic ministry in the Old Testament under the old covenant, while it is at the same time renewed from within.

Chapter 3 The Contemporary Postmodern Context

3.1 *Postmodernism Defined*

The previous chapters were concerned with the question of what prophetic ministry is and how it functioned in the context of Israel and the early Church. In this chapter we shall explore the contemporary postmodern situation, since the intention of this thesis is to investigate the significance of prophetic ministry in our time. The term ‘postmodernism’ will be further defined, followed by an exposition of its characteristics and its influence on the church. This leads to an opinion about the challenges and opportunities that it gives to the Church.

Many cultures and the lives of the people that belong to it in our time have become postmodern. However, those who live in a postmodern culture will not always recognize the reality of postmodernism, its disastrous effects and its opportunities. That is the danger of proximity: we get imperilled by immersion. A person will always have blind spots for certain areas and aspects of his culture, until he steps out of it for a while by living in another country. Only after his return he will recognize some of those areas. Proximity does not guarantee that we have an accurate perspective. ‘Sometimes there is more justification in the surprise reaction of unfamiliarity than there is in the desensitization that comes from immersion.’¹ Culture is very powerful. In all of us there is a certain surrender to its demands while we boast individuality and freedom of thought. Culture has the power to drift us unnoticed into turbulent waters.²

Living in a so-called postmodern time and society needs more explanation. What exactly is postmodernism? This question cannot be answered unanimously. Postmodernism has numerous expressions. ‘The’ postmodernism is not existing. It is more like a mood or

¹ Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 19.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

lifestyle.³ There is a great variety of opinions and, following to that, of definitions. Many authors even never come to a final definition, but describe only what postmodernism is. This tends to confuse writing and sharing thoughts about the subject. However, most of the differences in viewpoints are concerning peripheral aspects, leaving the possibility to sketch a broad definition or explanation of postmodernism.

It is remarkable that most dictionaries describe postmodernism merely as a movement in architecture and arts. The *Oxford Dictionary* for example explains it as “a style and movement in the arts that features a deliberate mixing of different styles and draws attention to artistic traditions.”⁴ But postmodernism is much more than that. A very basic definition is given by Lotter and Thompson, who define it as “a reaction against modernity as it developed out of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment”⁵ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* uses a more elaborate description by saying that it is “any of several movements (as in art, architecture, or literature) that are reactions against the philosophy and practices of modern movements and are typically marked by revival of traditional elements and techniques.”⁶ Olthuis explored this thought and demonstrates in a number of antitheses how postmodernism reacts to modernism:⁷

³ Robert Doornenbal, *Kenmerken van de postmoderne samenleving, collegedictaat filosofie* (N.p.: Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 26-11-04), 1.

⁴ Sara Hawker, ed., *The Compact Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Wordpower Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 689.

⁵ George A. Lotter and Glendon G. Thompson, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for CHE, n.d.), as published on: <http://www.tbs.edu/documents/thompson/postmodernism.htm>, no page. Last visited: March 31, 2005.

⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Postmodern*, as published on: <http://www.britannica.com/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=Postmodernism&query=Postmodernism>, no page. Last visited: April 16, 2005.

⁷ Olthuis, as cited in Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

Modernism <i>confidence in Reason (and Science) as Way to Truth and Happiness</i>	Postmodernism <i>distrust in Reason (and Science) as the Way to Truth and Happiness</i>
<i>modernism privileges</i>	<i>in reaction to resulting imbalances, postmodernism emphasizes</i>
'the real is logical'	'life is more than logic'
Universality	particularity
iron-clad arguments	no knock-down arguments
Closure	open-ended
Clarity	ambiguity
Univocal	equivocal
unity	multiplicity
Autonomy	interdependence
Uniformity	diversity
Sameness	difference
Homogeneity	heterogeneity
Totality	partiality
Wholes	fragments
Stability	change
safety	risk
progress	discrimination / oppression
presence	absence
control	flow / attunement
mastery	mutuality
power-over	power-with
neutrality	prejudice
timelessness	timed
genderless (read: male)	gendered
equality	uniqueness
sameness	otherness

center	margins
system	positions
public / private	continuum
essence	relational
identity	difference
cohesion	dispersion
mind	body
rational	emotional
systematic	eclectic
law	justice beyond law
continuity	discontinuity
patterns	ruptures
predictability	unpredictability / surprise
what we know or see	what is unknown or unseen
representable	un-representable
answers	questions
faith is illogical	faith goes beyond knowledge
master story	stories
truth	truths

Table 1: Antithesis of modernism and postmodernism

This series of antithesis can be helpful in a further investigation in the meaning of postmodernism. It does reveal the reactionary side of postmodernism. However, as shall be argued later, postmodernism is not only a reaction against modernism, but also building on it or interacting with it. Therefore the definition as it is given in the *Wikipedia Internet Encyclopedia* seems to be most appropriate: “Postmodernism is a term applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature, religion, and culture, which are generally characterized as either emerging from, in reaction to, or superseding, modernism.”⁸ It comes most close to what we consider to be postmodernism, when we look at it as it is studied in the following paragraphs.

⁸ Wikipedia, *Postmodernism*, no page.

3.1.1 The Enlightenment and Modernism

Postmodernism is not standing on its own, it is a reaction on modernism. The term 'postmodernism' implies a new vision away from modernism.⁹ Historically, the modern period can be dated from the end of the eighteenth century in the humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment and its attempt to account for all of reality within the confines of natural reason. The thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were governed by the idea of the liberation of humanity. The progress of the sciences, technologies, arts, and political freedoms held out promises to emancipate the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, and oppression. Not only would it produce fulfilled individuals, but thanks to modern education in particular, it would also produce 'enlightened' citizens, masters of their own destiny.¹⁰

Enlightenment thinking is based on the authority of French philosopher Rene Descartes' "autonomous man", the man who starts from his own thought, from "I think, therefore I am" and who builds his world view systematically from reason alone. It is based on the influence of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, L. Feuerbach, G. W. F. Hegel and others.¹¹ Naively, postmodernists charge, modernists assumed that the mind was a "mirror of nature," meaning that our perceptions of reality actually correspond to the way the world is. From this presumption, modernists built a culture that exalted technological achievement and mastery over the natural order.¹² Nature could be subjugated and exploited, sometimes even justified from God's order to mankind to have dominion over this earth. The Enlightenment assumed that meaning and morality could be discovered simply within the bounds of natural reason and without reference to God. They had a naive faith in inevitable progress. Knowledge is always good.¹³ Human beings determine what happens in history. Advances in science and technology make progress inevitable.¹⁴ It was

⁹ Michael G. Moriarty, *The Perfect 10: The Blessings of Following God's Commandments in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 18.

¹⁰ Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 18.

¹¹ David L. Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology: Tracing Trends and Discerning Directions in Today's Theological Landscape* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1992), 165-166.

¹² Jim Leffel, *Postmodernism, the spirit of the age*, as published on <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/p02.html>, no page. Last visited: March 24, 2005.

¹³ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 46.

¹⁴ Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 18.

the way of thinking that led to Darwin's evolution theory and Marx's ideology of a perfect state, written down in *Das Kapital*.

But modernism planted the seeds of its own undoing. As arrogant, autonomous modernists conquered the globe and subjugated nature in the name of progress, oppressed and marginalized people have responded. "Progress toward what?" was their cry. Postmodernists say that the idols of autonomous reason and technological proliferation have brought the modern age to the brink of disaster. The "myth of progress" ends up in a nightmare of violence, both for marginalized people and for the earth.¹⁵ The ideology and faith in progress of the Enlightenment and modernism was brutally torpedoed by the brutality and the frustrations of the twentieth century.¹⁶ History showed that in spite of all human achievements even the most civilised and 'developed' countries were still able to fight each other. The new technologies made those wars even more disastrous and worldwide than ever before. Times of widespread poverty and crisis still existed. Whole regions could be held captive under devastating leaders with equal devastating ideologies, empowered by the new scientific and technological accomplishments. 'Advance' turned out to be able to promote as well as destroy the well-being of humanity. The modern confidence was scattered as a result of the collapse of confidence in the universal rational principles of the Enlightenment.

The 1960's were an era in which people sought for meaning in the midst of despair. Traditional beliefs were under attack and theologians started to seek for a new approach to God which would be more relevant to an increasingly secular generation.¹⁷ By the end of the 1960's modernity had lost most of its Enlightenment soul. Postmodernity began to emerge.¹⁸

¹⁵ Leffel, *Postmodernism, the spirit of the age*, no page.

¹⁶ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 46.

¹⁷ Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 165.

¹⁸ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 46.

3.1.2 The Rise of Postmodernism

Postmodernism claims to address the sense of despair and fragmentation of modernism through its efforts at reconfiguring the broken pieces of the modern world into a multiplicity of new social, political, and cultural arrangements.¹⁹ It is moving away from the modern way of viewing things. The progress myth that has been the driving force of the West for two centuries is totally abandoned, the emphasis on rationality rejected and any ideology that espouses certainty is watched with a highly sceptical attitude. The emerging postmodern worldview has no fixed moral or spiritual framework. The primary assumption is that truth is not rational or objective, but individually constructed within the context of any given community. All views are equally valid and respect for differences is a sign of maturity. Absolute claims are 'intolerant' and must be dismissed. Tolerance is the new vanguard absolute.²⁰

Humanity is not an ocean of individuals. Humans are 'social constructs.' Leffel explains it as follows: "We do not exist or think independently of the community with which we identify. So we can't have independent or autonomous access to reality. All of our thinking is contextual. Rather than conceiving the mind as a mirror of nature, postmodernists argue that we view reality through the lens of culture. Consequently, postmodernists reject the possibility of objective truth. Reality itself turns out to be a 'social construct' or paradigm. In the place of objective truth and what postmodernists call 'metanarratives' (comprehensive world views), we find 'local narratives', or stories about reality that 'work' for particular communities, but have no validity beyond that community. Indeed, postmodernists reject the whole language of truth and reality in favor of literary terms like narrative and story. It's all about interpretation, not about what's real or true."²¹

Postmodernists hold that the pretence of objective truth always does violence by excluding other voices (regarding other world views to be invalid), and marginalizing the vulnerable by scripting them out of the story. Truth claims, we are told, are essentially tools to legitimate power. That's why in postmodern culture, the person to be feared is the

¹⁹ No author, *Postmodernism*, as published on: <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body.html>, no page. Last visited: February 14, 2005.

²⁰ Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 18-19.

²¹ Leffel, *Postmodernism, the spirit of the age*, no page.

one who believes that we can discover ultimate truth. The dogmatist, the totalizer, the absolutist is both naive and dangerous.²²

“In the postmodern world, feeling and understanding have changed places. Something is true if it feels right. If it feels right, we should believe and act on it (for today at least) - choices - the will - follow emotion.”²³ Ideas and understanding are now seen as changeable and uncertain, thus replacing emotion as the realm of personal expression. Understanding is not just subjective, but it can produce unreal ideas. At the same time, emotion has taken the place of understanding as the realm of what is real. It is an experience rather than just an idea.²⁴ That is the result of the loss of objective truth. The personal experience has become the pivotal basis to perceive the reality in which one lives. Postmodernism led to the result that authority is undermined and pluralism in the society is heralded as the new absolute.

Although a cultural disjunction can be found in the 1960's, it seems that postmodernists are overstating the case when they insist that they are owing nothing to modernism. Wells suggests that “there is an ironic sense in which the proponents of post-modernity can be viewed as the purest exponents of Enlightenment humanism, having taken its essential principles to their logical extremes. They have denounced the false values of modernity, pushing on to a point where they are no longer restrained by any moral or religious values - but this process is itself quintessentially modern. The program they are advocating cannot be understood apart from the modernity from which they claim to be emancipated.”²⁵

This inclines some persons to think that postmodernism is bringing forth a variant of modernity rather than a radical break from it. Modernity stripped from the false hopes that were once supported by the straw pillars of Enlightenment ideology. The last Western superstition, unlimited faith in the idea of progress, has died. But the essential impulses that brought modernity into being still remain, including remnants of this faith in progress. Maybe postmodernism is nothing else than “modernism devouring itself.”²⁶

²² Leffel, *Postmodernism, the spirit of the age*, no page.

²³ Philip Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium: A Straight-Talking Guide to the Postmodern World and its Impact on the Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000) 4.

²⁴ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 4.

²⁵ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 220.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

Mc Laren describes current interpretations of postmodernism. He makes a valuable contribution by suggesting that at least three different views of postmodernism are in existence, confusing the usage of the term. The first is the view of postmodernism that modern people talk much about. “It’s a big scary monster of nihilism and relativism and self-destruction that seeks to undo all that is good in modern Western civilization. [...] This postmodernism is absurd: it says, “There is no truth,” which means that if the statement is true, it is also false. This first postmodernism probably doesn’t exist outside the imaginations of frightened modern people and those who seek to intimidate them”²⁷ The second is what he calls ‘adolescent postmodernism’, since it has much of the (destructive) characteristics of adolescents, but must also give way to the phases that are to come. It is grown away from the first postmodernism. This is not widespread anymore, according to his opinion. The third postmodernism is ‘emerging postmodernism’, the postmodernism that is developing at the moment and which shape is yet unclear. “It sees relativist pluralism (the irrational idea that all opinions or views are equally valid) as a kind of chemotherapy intended to stop the growth of modern reductionistic rationalism (the oppressive idea that all reality can be reduced to mechanisms that the mind can understand via validation by the five senses). In order to kill the malignancy, the patient has to take dangerous medicine that would prove poisonous if taken in too high doses or for too long.” Consumerism, one of the results of postmodernism, is like the giant Goliath, seemingly unbeatable, but this third postmodernism believes that a David can stand up to defeat it. Postmodernism is also not anymore exclusively Western, but can and should be a worldwide endeavour. It should go beyond the second postmodernism.²⁸

Mc Laren gives attention to the fact that no movement remains the same. Postmodernism is very hard to define and constantly reshaping. Probably he is right in suggesting that postmodernism is heading in the way of the third definition, which views the past period as a time of taking ‘dangerous medicine’. However, it seems to be too optimistic to state that the second and first definitions are past stations. Still the belief that everything is relative, next to other aspects of postmodernism, is very much alive.

²⁷ Brian Mc Laren, *The three postmodernisms: An explanation* (American Bible Society, 19-4-2004), no page. As published on *For Ministry*, a website of the American Bible Society <http://www.forministry.com/vsItemDisplay.dsp&objectID=765C19D4-42FB-45BC-A3154C8F45483F5F&method=display&templateID=C3435351-D45C-4B52-867A3F794D1CD85C>. Last visited: March 26, 2005.

²⁸ Mc Laren, *The three postmodernisms*, no page.

3.1.3 The Area of Influence of Postmodernism

Is postmodernism the only mindset that reigns at the moment in our societies, and is it worldwide or regional influential? The answers to those questions are not unanimous. It is clear that postmodernism and many eastern religions and philosophies have much in common. It can be discussed whether it all should be called postmodernism. “Although it is tempting to think these two outlooks have borrowed, one from the other, this is apparently not the case. Instead, they are compatible outlooks which have made common cause in popular culture, often blended with native spiritualities and New Age consciousness.”²⁹

At the same time, postmodernism is too often seen as only Western. Outside the West, examples are found in Asia. M. M. Thomas observed in his works that the postmodern view of globalization carried the dangers of poverty as well as affluence. He saw the postmodern condition, but in a way that is different from the Western countries. The Western countries are influenced by the Enlightenment and ask different questions than countries that have another history and frame of reference.³⁰

In the two-thirds world, it will more likely be called ‘post-colonial’ rather than ‘postmodern’ for obvious reasons. Regardless the label that is given, the main postmodern characteristics are present. By nature, emerging postmodernism seeks to listen to diverse voices, especially the voices of women, the poor, the oppressed, Native Peoples, non-westerners, and the uneducated as people with their own truth and own history.³¹

For this research, a choice has been made to use the word ‘postmodern’ as a term that represents the contemporary situation of our pluralist societies, including those that are not exactly postmodern, but highly compatible with all aspects of its worldview. This choice is defensible by the aim of the study, seeking the relevance of prophetic ministry in a postmodern situation, which means a situation with the characteristics of postmodernism. If a situation almost exactly mirrors the aspects of postmodernism without bearing the name, then it is still useful to be included in this investigation.

²⁹ Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, “Postmodernism and you: religion” in: Dennis McCallum, *Postmodernism and you* (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 1996), as published on: <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/pmandyou.htm>, no page. Last visited: March 24, 2005.

³⁰ James G. Emerson jr., *The Effective Parish in the Twenty-First Century: A Pastoral Response in Mission to the Postmodern World* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 39.

³¹ Mc Laren, *The three postmodernisms*, no page.

3.2 Characteristics of Postmodernism

The previous section has provided a general overview of postmodernism and its backgrounds. This paragraph will look at some characteristics and results of postmodernism in more detail. Moriarty gives a revealing picture of many of those results by comparing God’s Ten Commandments with man’s postmodern commands of tolerance, which have replaced the former.³² Although this comparison does not give all aspects of postmodernism, it does cover many areas of its results.

<i>God’s Ten Commandments</i>	<i>The new Ten Commandments</i>
1. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.	1. Thou shalt worship any god that makes you feel good about yourself
2. Thou shalt not make for yourself an idol.	2. Thou shalt attempt to create anything which brings you pleasure and success.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.	3. Thou shalt not object to anybody’s god or religion. All religions worship the same God but call him or her by a different name.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.	4. Remember yourself and don’t worry, be happy.
5. Honour your father and your mother that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.	5. You are the ultimate authority. You determine your own destiny.
6. Thou shalt not murder.	6. Thou shalt not oppose abortion
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.	7. Thou shalt not oppose pornography.
8. Thou shalt not steal.	8. Thou shalt look out for No. 1 (“self”).
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness.	9. Thou shalt uphold relativism.
10. Thou shalt not covet.	10. Thou shalt seek to fulfil one’s desires even at the expense of others.

Table 2: God’s and man’s commandments

Behind all this ‘new commandments’ lies the same basic attitude that caused man to commit the first sin. It is the desire to be autonomous and to shape reality according to one’s own insights. The core of postmodernism is that there is no absolute truth, which will automatically lead to man taking his life and future in his own hands, without being held responsible by anyone else. Pluralism, relativism, constructivism, consumerism, they

³² Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 226-227.

all are based on this one thing: believing something very strong is truth. Truth is subjective, not objective. It is a person's private perspective, a collection of subjective and fallible ideas which is greater than all ideas.³³

3.2.1 A Variety of Aspects

In short we will have a look at a variety of aspects involved in postmodernism. Any other arrangement of aspects can be made, since they are all interwoven by cause and effect. This overview is therefore not attempting to be complete, but to deepen the picture of postmodernism.

Relativism and Tolerance

Relativism is just another word for the absence of absolute truth. 'What is true for you is not necessarily true for me.'³⁴ Postmodernists are afraid to make claims of truth. The argument is that every time somebody claims to be in possession of the truth (especially religious truth), it ends up repressing people. So its best to make no claims to objective truth at all.³⁵ Universal truth is not existing, only 'mini-truths'.³⁶

Related to relativism is tolerance. If there are no absolute truths, then we should accept every opinion, even if it is not ours. Suggesting that some beliefs ought to be accepted as true for all is to be guilty to the unforgivable sin of dogmatism.³⁷ Strangely, it turns out that one exception is allowed to this universal prohibition against intolerance. For some reason, questioning and even denouncing religious views that are labelled as 'fundamentalist' is allowed. Today, when people refer to 'fundamentalists' they no longer

³³ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 45.

³⁴ Paul Copan, *Is Everything Really Relative? Examining the Assumptions of Relativism and the Culture of Truth Decay* (Chennai: RZIM (Ravi Zacharias International Ministry) Life Focus Society, 2001), 6.

³⁵ Leffel, *Postmodernism, the spirit of the age*, no page.

³⁶ Maria I. Martinez, *From modernism to postmodernism* (American Bible Society, January 3, 2004), no page. As published on *For Ministry*, a website of the American Bible Society, <http://www.forministry.com/vsltemDisplay.dsp&objectID=12A7BAED-2320-4E3F-99D4AB8D0338533B&method=display&templateID=C3435351-D45C-4B52-867A3F794D1CD85C>. Last visited: March 26, 2005.

³⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 23.

mean just religious extremists. Fundamentalism may refer to anyone who claims to know truth or who charges another religion with falsehood.³⁸

Constructivism

Constructivism is the main underlying learning theory in postmodernism. The basic idea is that all knowledge is invented or ‘constructed’ in the minds of people. Knowledge is not discovered as modernists would claim. In other words, the ideas that are taught and learnt do not correspond to ‘reality’, they are merely human constructions. Knowledge, ideas and language are created by people, not because they are ‘true’, but rather because they are useful. Reality is a story. All reality exists, not objectively, ‘out there’ but in the mind of those who perceive it. Nobody’s version of reality can claim to have more objective authority because all versions are merely human creations.³⁹

Pragmatism, Experience and Sensation

Experience has replaced the central position of the mind. What is experienced is real, what is real is true. If something works, than it is good. We should take the path that is most practical, since objective truth is beyond our grasp.⁴⁰ The postmodern man seeks continuously to experience things himself, constructing his reality out of his impressions, thoughts and perceptions. This is the reason that he will not just accept certain ‘truth’ or experiences from others. It will still be uncertain for him if their language and ideas will be true for his life. This undermines the position of tradition and the old methods of sharing knowledge by books and teachings. Sensate triumphs over cognitive. An example is MTV, which takes fiction and non-fiction together in a mixture without meaningful connection between events. The same is true for reading a book. It is all about the experience, the sensation of the reader, since the postmodern constructivism believes that words mean what the reader wants them to mean.⁴¹

³⁸ Leffel, “Postmodernism and you: religion”, no page.

³⁹ Gary DeLashmutt and Roger Braund, “Postmodernism and you: education” in: Dennis McCallum, *Postmodernism and you* (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 1996), as published on: <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/pmandyou.htm>, no page. Last visited: March 24, 2005.

⁴⁰ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

⁴¹ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 220.

Pluralism

The result of the postmodern view of truth and its accent on constructivism and experience is pluralism. Everybody is free to have his own worldview and religion. Diversion is encouraged. No one should say that something is right or wrong. Even the countries that were previously dominated by Christianity now face a new pluralism, with minority-religions growing in numbers and influence.⁴² It is not anymore necessary to choose one of the world religions as a given whole. Everyone can make his own religion, out of components of other religions, even out of their original context, since knowledge is subjective and truth what you experience. New Age is a typical example of Eastern and Western religions blended into another worldview.

Our societies are said to be pluralist. But are they really pluralist in everything? Often we are pluralist in respect of what we call beliefs but not in respect of what we call facts. Beliefs are a matter of personal decision; facts a matter of public knowledge.⁴³ However, postmodernism sees this statement as typical modern. Modernism made a 'split' between subject - the person that thinks, feels, perceives - and object - that what is worked on and observed by the subject. The modernist adjective 'subjective' refers to feelings; the adjective 'objective' refers to an independent and external reality.⁴⁴

God Has Become 'Weightless' in Immanence or Total Transcendence

Together with all other 'objective beliefs', God now has become subjective. Most people will say that God exists, but it should be kept as a personal belief. 'God' is a personal perception, which is often not the God of the Bible.⁴⁵ For many God is no external God but a God who abandoned himself to become more identified with us. Some even believe He does not really exist anymore. It may sound ridiculous, but it is generally accepted by a whole generation. God has become internalized, tamed to our own desires and wishes, and we are grown deaf.⁴⁶ If we create our image of who God is, than He has become 'weightless', not anymore of any moral or ethical meaning. The other opposite is

⁴² John Stott, *Issues Facing Christianity Today: A Major Appraisal of Contemporary Social and Moral Questions* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1988), 45.

⁴³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 27.

⁴⁴ Maria I. Martinez, *From modernism to postmodernism*, no page.

⁴⁵ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

that God is seen as so far away of our 'daily life', so transcendent that his existence is hardly relevant to us. He is a 'ground', needed to explain our existence and that of the world, or He may even not be useful for that purpose, since that implies a general, objective truth.

Religious Consciousness

Modernism gave many scientific answers, but it left humanity only with a deeper awareness of its religious feelings that are undeniably present in every person.⁴⁷ The postmodern man has made God 'weightless', but it does not say that he is not interested in religion. The opposite is true. Postmodernism is very much aware of and seeking for religious experiences, as long as they are not claiming an objective truth about God. "There is no logical contradiction between a collapse of belief in the objective reality of God on the one hand and interest in religious things on the other."⁴⁸

There is a quest for religiosity that is driven by the hunger in the soul. It has to be a religion that can be experienced and gives satisfaction. Truth does not matter in the new spirituality. Maybe Jesus did rise from the dead. After all, the world is full of spiritual mysteries. "The question is, does believing in him help me to find inner tranquillity and strength? If it does, Christianity is for me. If not, I can try any of the other spiritual voices and powers, from Satan to sacred stones around my neck."⁴⁹ It is all about satisfaction of needs on the market of religions. This common need is recognized, but there is no common way of fulfilling it. No one just takes second-hand experiences, written or told by others, to be his own truth. It should be a first-hand experience.

Often it is said that a certain dissociation, a loss of conscious awareness of the real world, is important for such experiences, even more so if you are longing for 'deep religion'. Especially rational categories - reason and truth - can be a barrier to reach a certain experience or to ascend to a godhead.⁵⁰ The postmodern man is therefore very open to try everything without restricting himself by rational 'barriers'. Then he makes a choice of what he likes. His religion is a designer religion, "a pick-and-mix religion where

⁴⁷ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 37.

⁴⁸ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 91.

⁴⁹ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 36.

⁵⁰ Leffel, "Postmodernism and you: religion", no page.

you choose for yourself what kind of religion or God you want and reject any challenge on it on the basis that you personally do not accept it.”⁵¹ .

Individualism

Relativism, pluralism, constructivism and experience have led to a main accent on the individual. He shapes his world and chooses who and what ‘God’ is. This whole pattern undermined the ‘old’ values, morality and ethics. People have lost their connections with the world around them, the fixed norms that once were the basics of their society and indirectly of their life. If nothing around you is certain and truth is only found in yourself, then blowing up your inner life is all that remains to fill the gap that replacing external realities has left.⁵² Feelings, intuitions and personal opinions get all the attention, regardless of what others say or think. It is not for nothing that more stress is put on personal counselling, psychiatrics and psychologists in countries where individualism is widespread. People want to be heard, want to express their inner life that has become the centre of their universe. The attention has been shifted from living for others, God and the family, to caring for oneself. Needless to say that this leads to a deep emptiness in the lives of many, who don’t feel satisfied at all in a world that offers no certainties, only options and possibilities. Nietzsche already foresaw that the ‘death of God’ and decline of absolute truth’s would not make the brave new world to be an idyllic place. The vacuum that is left in a postmodern world when this view of God is gone leads to a diffusion of identity and a pervasive feeling of unreality.⁵³ It is a struggle to start understanding who you really are and what you are living for. What is the universe, what is existence, what are we if this particular ‘God’ is not there? One thing is sure: *We* should make it and *We* are responsible to make the best of this. ‘Take care of yourself’ is not without reason very often heard as an expression that shows the love and care of a person for another in a way that he or she does not become responsible for the other one’s life.

⁵¹ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 37.

⁵² Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 93-94.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

Authority

As it is said before, nobody can claim more ‘truth’ or authority, since we all are human beings with our own perception of reality. We ourselves are the centres of our universes without a common concept of God, tradition, morality and ethics. This leads to a very serious authority problem. Previously, before modernism, meaning was dominated by tradition and authority, for example the Roman Catholic Church. Modernism replaced tradition and authority by the idea of the autonomous, reasoning human. However, it was still believed that out of nature and reason general truths could be derived that would be applicable for all. Postmodernism rejects this also. What is left is ‘do whatever you like’. Consequently, without shared traditions and common thoughts, everything will collapse. All science is impossible without a certain ‘tradition’. At least tradition should have some authority.⁵⁴ The same is true for the statement that there is no absolute truth. It is also impossible to live when truth is not given any authority. Family life or society cannot exist when no authority is possible. One of the main struggles of postmodern society is the quest for a way of living together when everyone is said to be allowed to have his own views. What will be the position of a government or law system if authority is not accepted anymore?⁵⁵

Pleasure-Centred, Consumerism and Instant Satisfaction

Postmodernism has led to an attitude of pleasure-centeredness, consumerism and the desire for instant satisfaction. All its aspects promote the idea that the individual should be the centre. He is seeking for experiences and never satisfied. Society practises and promotes spending rather than saving, self-indulgence rather than self-improvement, and amusement at all costs.⁵⁶ Long term commitment does not seem to pay off, the world is changing all the time and it seems best to take what is available *now*.⁵⁷ The whole society is adapted to this way of living. More and more products are designed and sold with the motto of ‘instant available’: instant coffee, instant meals, plug-and-play electronics,

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 46-47.

⁵⁵ See Gary Saalman, “Postmodernism and you: law”, in: Dennis McCallum, *Postmodernism and you* (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 1996), as published on: <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/pmmandyou.htm>, no page. Last visited: March 24, 2005.

⁵⁶ J. I. Packer, “Leisure and life-style: Leisure, pleasure, and treasure”, *God and culture, Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, edited by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993), 356.

⁵⁷ Graeme Codrington, *Minding the gap, introduction to the generations*, as published on: <http://www.tomorrowtoday.biz/content/view/66/56/>, no page. Last viewed: March 8, 2005.

intelligent software, internet banking, booking holidays online and so on. The postmodernist does not want to wait anymore. He even considers it to be his right to have instant access to everything he wants. This life style has evolved into consumerism. Was it in the past production that kept the economy going, in a postmodern world consumption keeps the economy moving. “One might say that production is still central but in fact it shares the stage with the new field of marketing, especially advertising.”⁵⁸ Shopping has become like an addiction for many people in their never satisfied longing for something that will give them pleasure and fills the emptiness inside. Consumerism is a way of filling the emptiness for a short while by buying goods or services. It is buying instant satisfaction without a lasting effect.

Fragmentation

The world of the postmodern man has fallen into pieces. Pluralism has led fragmentation. He picks up whatever he likes from the never ending stream of choices and possibilities in his world. TV offers over a hundred channels in the US and many European countries. Every kind of good is usually available in many brands and with many different prices. Religions are each promoting themselves as the best one to find satisfaction in your life. The choices and possibilities are overwhelming. Each person therefore creates his own life and ‘world’ by his selection of what is available. One result of this attitude is little brand-loyalty.⁵⁹ He will take food from certain places, buy his clothes at certain other shops, chat with some friends at internet and have other friends that meet other needs when he is alone in his apartment during the weekends. His work provides him some things he wants, his holidays several times a year serve their purpose in filling other desires.

Virtual Reality

More and more the world of postmodern humanity appears to have become fiction. Television, computer games, mobile phone’s and the internet provide never ending opportunities to live in a fake world, a virtual reality world. The virtual world we see in movies and on TV and maintain through internet relations becomes the norm to which reality is compared. The real world is not so nice and satisfying as the imaginary one.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁸ Martinez, *From modernism to postmodernism*, no page.

⁵⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 199.

⁶⁰ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 21.

technological developments of the past decades influenced and fitted the growing individualism and search for pleasure and entertainment. At the moment we are bombarded with images of all kinds, which shape us according to the worldview they propagate.⁶¹ Advertisers use beautiful women and role-model man to propagate certain items. It strengthens the feeling of unreality and makes people strive more to live up to an illusion. “We imagine what we would like to be and then strive to become like the image.”⁶² God made man in a variety of shapes and looks with unique capabilities and characteristics. The models in our ‘virtual world’ suggest that we all can be like them and may even become almost faultless. The result is misery, self-hatred and the rejection of those who fail us, which will constantly happen.⁶³ Living in such an imaginary situation makes it hard to face reality and take the responsibilities that come with growing up and living in this world. Children who grow up learn most about relations from the media. Playing on the streets is considered dangerous. They can arrive at puberty without any real skills in relationships at all. The first independent and powerful relationship they develop is sexual. No wonder that they are early aware of sexuality. It becomes the drive and button which is inevitably pressed in their search for human closeness independent of family and authority.⁶⁴

Little Commitment

As is explained above, the virtual reality and other aspects of postmodernism seem to make it hard to be committed to something. People often start something with the perfect picture, the beautiful dream in their minds. But when perseverance is needed, they quit. The great number of broken marriages is one of the examples. Long term commitment does not seem to pay off, the world is changing all the time and it seems best to take what is available *now*.

The exception is when people are offered opportunities that give significance to their life. Since they are searching for something that ‘works’ and ‘fills’, they will be committed to it, if it is brought in the right way.⁶⁵ When they clearly see a useful purpose

⁶¹ Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 20.

⁶² Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 22.

⁶³ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 22.

⁶⁴ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 24.

⁶⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 345.

and vision, they will get excited. As long as the challenges are not about ‘big general truths’ but things that relate to them, than it can trigger them into action.⁶⁶ Then they should quickly be involved in the process and guided along the way, to prevent them from stepping out early if difficulties come. Once they have tasted the experience of the result of perseverance and overcoming difficulties, the chances are bigger that they will develop into stable committed people.

New Relationships

Authority has collapsed, autonomy risen, marriage is increasingly under pressure, many families are broken and the role of women has totally changed. Many children even don’t even feel welcome at home. Life has become compartmentalised. The discipline of building deep, good and satisfying relations is gone.⁶⁷ People grow up without knowing good relations and seek compensation for it in other relations. A sense of belonging is found by selecting groups and communities as seems good to meet the need. When the need changes, the relations can also change.

In the postmodern world, people seek to belong to communities to find meaning, since the family and authority are gone. Meaning in life is a matter of psychological connectedness: the gang, the peer, recovery groups, a vehicle association, a supermarket savings plan. They buy themselves into such communities, often finding little more than a momentary sense of belonging somewhere.⁶⁸ Other possibilities are internet communities or relations through chatting and e-mailing, without ever meeting the other person in real life. There is a certain restlessness in seeking for new relations and trying to forget hurts of the past ones. At the same time, relations are more important than would be expected, seen from the background of the individualism that is also part of their lives.⁶⁹

Postmodern people often have very extended networks of acquaintances through SMS and chatting, which keep them occupied all day. This network is exceeding their number of ‘real-life’ friends by far. Those relations are very important. When asked to join

⁶⁶ Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 20.

⁶⁷ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 64-65.

⁶⁸ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 220.

⁶⁹ Josiah Venture, *Learning the meaning of “Go”* (Wheaton: Josiah Venture, n.d.), 3, As published on: www.josiahventure.com. Last visited: March 26, 2005.

a certain programme, they will not first ask what the programme is, but which of their friends or acquaintances are joining the same programme. If they do not find those relations in one place, they will go to another, no matter how good the programme is.⁷⁰

An Emphasis on the Old

Modernism believed in progress and discovering new things. Postmodernism has left this belief and turns back to rediscovering old things. “It recognizes that everything we say has already been said before. Still, the use of the already existing does not mean exhaustion or inert imitation.”⁷¹ This rediscovery is connected with the fragmentation. Mixing together old elements of experience, history, arts or whatever area the postmodernist may be interested in leads not to something totally new, but it brings a unique outlook. A new compilation of borrowed fragments brings insight that differ from the original ones. This rediscovery may lead to a ‘new’ order and expression. This fact is even seen in contemporary fashion. Usually old styles return in a new shape once in a while but the current fashion seems more than ever focused on old styles and even making the new fabrics like old, long-used ones. Is this a hidden way of seeking stability in a drifting life and a drifting world? The good old classics that give a feeling of belonging?

Generational Backgrounds in Postmodernism

When speaking of postmodernism, often the younger generations come into mind. The reality is that the world we live in has a great variety in backgrounds and generations. Graeme Codrington, South African authority on generational theories, gives a helpful explanation of the different generations that are part of so called ‘postmodern’ societies. Those backgrounds make the modern and postmodern currents that are influencing each other more visible. Codrington distinguishes the following four generations in today’s societies:⁷²

1. *The silent generation: 1930’s and 40’s.* They grew up when children were expected to be seen and not heard, in the midst of the Depression and World War II. They learnt to save money and pay cash through all the crisis. They are fairly authoritarian and behind the scene types, who dress formally.
2. *The Boomers: 1950’s and 60’s.* Raised in dr. Spock’s permissiveness and with the Pill, in the midst of the sexual revolution. Seen by other generations as loud and highly individualist. They

⁷⁰ Josiah Venture, *Learning the meaning of “Go”*, 3.

⁷¹ Martinez, *From modernism to postmodernism*, no page.

⁷² Codrington, *Minding the gap*, no page. This summary is an abstract of his more extended description.

never stop talking and are always right, believing there is a solution to every problem. They were rebellious in their youth, moralistic and idealistic, yet happy with authority, as long as they have it themselves (which they do: Clinton, Bush, Blair, Putin). Now they are legislating against the excesses of their own youth: smoking, sex, swearing and violence in movies. They grew up in relative affluence and are obsessed with health and wellness. They run the media, are well educated and prepared to pay to get what they want.

3. *Generation X: 1970's and 80's.* X stands for the unknown factor. The defining characteristic of Xers is that they don't have one. They grew up as 'latchkey kids' while their Boomer parents were working to sustain their yuppie dream of middle class suburbia. Many of them spent alternate weekends with their mom or dad and their new partners, since the divorce rate went up dramatically. They're skeptical of relationships - peers and friends have become surrogate families. They were expected to grow up quickly (which they did in schools that were microcosms of adult communities with drugs, violence, sex and murders). They are risk-taking, challenge-lovers who buy experiences such as canyoning and bungee jumping in preference to Boomer-type assets. Indeed, the Gap between Boomers and Xers is the biggest ever. Boomers regard Xers as wild and soulless while Xers see Boomers as pompous and dangerous. They realize long-term commitment won't pay the dividends it did to their (grand)parents so they opt for the car, cell phone and big salary now, attracting the unfair label of selfishness and disloyalty.
4. *The Millennial Generation: 1990's and 2000's.* They were born in a time where child neglect shifted towards support. Hands-off parenting is now stigmatised. The new status symbol is a stay-at-home-mom. Child abuse and safety are hot topics. They receive free health care and education. They're confident, assertive, optimistic, incredibly brand-conscious, and, raised in dual-income and single parent families, are extremely money-wise. Parents listen when they advise on car (or grocery) buying; they own cell phones, credit cards and raise funds for school functions without teacher or parental support. Millennials are readers, as is seen with the incredible success of the Harry Potter series. Hollywood's replacing the Xers child devil and lost kids movies with child angels and child superheroes. However, this generation lacks heroes and has substituted celebrities like actors, models, pop and sports stars whose claim to fame is being famous for who they are rather than what they do. Style is more important than content. They play video games, listen to music on digital compact discs, programme the family VCR and surf the Net for homework projects. They're smarter than their parents. They're civic minded, practical, get involved.

It is clear that especially the last two generations fit very well in the characteristics of postmodernism. However, it also shows that the so-called 'postmodern' societies consist of groups of people that are modernists, postmodernists or a mixture of both. Even when a generation in general fits most in one of the categories, still many of its representatives will have aspects of the other. Some of the children of the Millennial Generation for example are raised in families that value the modern ideas very high and were also able to communicate it to their children. It is therefore good to realise that we, when looking at our societies, cannot automatically generalize as much as is done in the previous paragraphs, since they were exclusively concerned with 'pure' postmodernism. The Millennial Generation shows many aspects of postmodernism. At the same time, it seems to hold some promises for a change in their values and attitude, compared to the generation before them. They are for example used to 'shop' their life and world together while on the other hand their parents have sometimes raised them with more care and affection than the previous generation, which may lead to more commitment in relations and a less great need for substitutes of family relations. The future will show in what direction this generation will develop.

3.3 The Impact of Postmodernism on the Churches

The developments that take place as a result of the postmodern culture seem to have affected the Church in many ways. It is an often heard statement that Christians have been influenced by postmodern culture more than they have influenced the culture. In resistance to modernism, evangelical Christians created their own Christian subculture. But now they are letting their guard down and the Christian subculture is looking more and more like a microcosm of the larger secular culture.⁷³ The church is weak, often adjusting to the postmodern context. It is difficult for Christians to live a holy life and to show what God's will is for this world.

We as Christians are also in danger of being imperilled by immersion. We don't recognize many aspects of our culture, because we are a part of it.⁷⁴ Not recognizing means also not responding to it, or only in an unconscious way. In the meanwhile congregations and denominations are shaped by postmodernism. The new generations have all the characteristics of it. They are the ones who will lead the churches in the decades to come. Their postmodern habits will more and more influence the churches into other directions.⁷⁵ This is not necessarily bad in itself, but it can involve severe risks.

All aspects of postmodernism can be traced back in the church. Pluralism, relativism, pragmatism, constructivism, all those 'isms' have found their way in the mindset of the Christians. The previous paragraphs have extensively dealt with those aspects, therefore this part will give less attention to the details. Several areas of impact can be discovered in the churches of today.

Diversity in Theology

A great number of new theologies has emerged in the past decades, each with its own specific approach and subjects. This appears to be caused by postmodern influences. The role of women has enormously changed by the influence of feminist theology. Black theology; 'All American' theology; liberation theology; gay and lesbian theology; traditional white, liberal theology, all of those and more can be listed as part of today's

⁷³ D. Massimiliano Lorenzini, *Taking every thought captive: introduction*. As published on: <http://www.frontlinemin.org/chapter1.asp>, no page. Last visited: March 31, 2005.

⁷⁴ Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 18-19.

⁷⁵ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 222.

theological pluralism in the church. “These theologies, many of which are rarely denoted as Christian theology, are in fact Christian only to the extent that a basic element of their database is the Christian tradition...”⁷⁶

Martinez underlines this idea of the postmodern influence on theology when she speaks of theology of abundance. One example is the *New York Times* bestseller *The prayer of Jabez*. Typical of such theologies, this one combines asking for God’s abundant blessings with the conviction that it is up to God to decide what the blessings will be. In this response to postmodernism, the American Dream, which is steeped in freedom, independence, personal rights and the pursuit of pleasure, combines with the idea that God becomes great through us and the management of the God-given resources.⁷⁷

The response to postmodernism falls into two main camps: there are those who oppose it, and those who give it cautious endorsement.⁷⁸ The former are sometimes building walls to hide behind, but others have an open attitude to represent Christ in this world without accepting the postmodern attitude and worldview. The latter believe that we as Christians should come close to the postmodern culture. Their reasons for doing so are diverse. Some seek to adapt to this culture as far as possible, in order to win people for Christ. Others see postmodernism as the promise of liberation from the modern world.

Influence on Belief and Practices

Spirituality has been redefined in popular usage by the influence of postmodernism. It is now a blending of elements of different religions and beliefs. This is also visible in churches. Christians try to take ‘useful elements’ from other religions to enhance and enrich their spiritual experiences and needs. Everybody can find something suiting in this process of fragmentation. The ties with the own religious background, Christianity, are more loose.⁷⁹ While for some interfaith dialogue means that persons from different religions try to enrich each other without losing their own belief-system, for others it has

⁷⁶ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

⁷⁷ Maria I. Martinez, *Christian Theologians and Thinkers Respond to the Challenges of Postmodernism* (N.p: American Bible Society, 2003), 2.

⁷⁸ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

⁷⁹ Maria I. Martinez, *The Impact of Postmodernism on American Religious Practices* (N.p: American Bible Society, 2004), 1.

become an area of picking from every religion some interesting aspects, adding it to the already existing mix of Christian beliefs with some personal flavour.

Words are often rejected in favour of images, reason is replaced with emotional gratification, and meaning is abdicated in favour of entertainment.⁸⁰ The postmodern Christian has difficulty to concentrate for a longer time on something, since he is used to a world of fast changing impressions. He is looking for this in the church also.

Unity Without Truth

There is a tendency to strive for unity between churches, even very different ones. The World Council of Churches and the connected Ecumenical movement is one example. At the same time, certainty is seen by many as arrogant and all perspectives are equal. That is the new 'creed' that the church also has to face. Even when people confess to believe in most Biblical, Christian dogma's and values, still their worldview is very much influenced by postmodernism. "While 88 percent of those in evangelical churches say the Bible is the infallible Word of God, 53 percent also say there is no such thing as absolute truth."⁸¹ There is a rise of tolerance in the church. The growing attitude of tolerance among Christians today is seen in the downplay of doctrine for the sake of unity. This can be a dangerous development. The result is a certain unity, but truth is lost. Even inside the professing churches polemics - defending Christian truth within the church - are needed.⁸²

Many Christians do not now how to react to all the questions that are asked and how to cope with the 'true for you but not for me' adagio. They feel insecure and uneasy, for their lives are thoroughly influenced by the postmodern thinking and they don't know how to find security. It is a conflict with the basic beliefs of Christianity that speaks about revelation from God and knowledge about Him that is absolute true and certain. Although they are Christian, under the surface they experience the same result of the 'weightlessness of God'⁸³ as many non-Christians do. They seek unity and being together while deep in side a hunger is created for truth. There is an emptiness inside.⁸⁴ Many Christians are longing for truth but not able to accept it with all its consequences. Sin,

⁸⁰ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

⁸¹ Lorenzini, *Taking every thought captive*, no page.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 90.

⁸⁴ Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 20.

hell, the need for redemption, those topics are not popular in church and often even avoided. But unity without truth is no unity at all. It will lead to following the ‘revelations’ of particular leaders and bring more diversion. That is why so much suspicion and diversion is spoiling the charismatic and evangelical world today.⁸⁵

Most people, including Christians, seek relief of their problems in the church. Their first concern is not truth.⁸⁶ They look for what is real, for what works. From a distance they will sense what is fake in a church and reject it. Being real is more important for them than big programmes, since they seek something to fill them and to solve their problems at least a little bit.⁸⁷ It is not without reason that Jesus started to meet the needs of people first, before He taught them truth.⁸⁸ Seeing the reality of His life, words and deeds, many believed in Him. He was real and that made them accept ‘His’ truth.

Conversion Without God.

Christians believe in conversion. They do not simply believe the message of the Gospel but claim to have an authentic experience of it through Jesus Christ. Postmodernism resonates with evangelicalism very well at this point because the postmodern world is deeply committed to having experiences which prove the reality of a belief. But it is a love for every kind of experience, for experience on its own. This has crept into the churches, especially into their evangelism and worship.⁸⁹ The Gospel has to be relevant, but for what? Regularly experiences have taken the place of a conversion with ‘heart, mind and soul’. Hill differentiates between on the one hand the willingness to believe because you know that you need it, and on the other hand a total unrestricted surrender of your life to Christ, so that He becomes yours and you His.⁹⁰ The first one is what happens in the lives of many persons. Their emotional need for stability and purpose is somehow met by a certain change in their lives and by the emotional and sensual satisfaction of times of worship and other religious things that are experienced as ‘sacred’. It is seen as spiritual, but in fact it is more sensual. Several churches offer conversion- and

⁸⁵ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 53.

⁸⁶ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 227.

⁸⁷ Josiah Venture, *Learning the meaning of “Go”*, 5.

⁸⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 227.

⁸⁹ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 54.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

emotional satisfaction moments to those who are involved. But it can be a conversion, a change of life without God. Of course should this not be generalized. Emotion and experience in itself is not wrong. God made us in a way that we can experience emotions and we should use it in our worship of the Lord. The focal point of view is *what* we seek in our services and Christian meetings. Are we looking for a life changing experience in itself, or are we looking for God.

Fellowship Without Real Relations

In the churches of our time, small groups have become increasingly important. They respond to the search for intimacy and community and correspondent with the decentralization of church leadership, with the accompanying increase of the role of ‘lay’ people and women.⁹¹ This is tied to the growing accent of the importance of ministry by all believers, but also closely related to consumer mentality. Everyone can find what he likes by selecting a particular subgroup in a church. With the increasing growth of the influence of women in the church, also more stress is placed on relational aspects.⁹² However, there is also the other side of the coin. The Church fails often to give a place of belonging to the people. Visitors are turned away after one Sunday morning service, or people who want to become a member of a congregation still do not feel at home after a long time.

One important influence of postmodernism on Christians is that pluralism and fragmentation lead to a compartmentalized life.⁹³ It is possible that a person becomes wholeheartedly a member of a church, gets baptised and involves with enthusiasm in a cell group. He is active in church service and is liked by the other Christians. At the same time, he has his work, where he may be a hard-working perfectionist, respected for certain other aspects in his life and attitude. Thirdly, he has his ‘Saturday night life’, the things he is does in his leisure time, which may be opposing the values of his ‘Sunday life’ and ‘work life’. Fourthly he has different attitude when he is at home, where only his family sees him. It is this compartmentalization that makes it very hard for a postmodern Christian to become fully changed by Jesus Christ. Every Sunday or at other church meetings he can hear and speak about God’s values and will for his life and seemingly live according to it. He is not trying to deceive others, but really encouraged and probably satisfied by the

⁹¹ Martinez, *The Impact of Postmodernism on American Religious Practices*, 3.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 63.

fellowship with others. However, after that he moves into one of his other compartments, where this 'Sunday life' does not influence him. "Today people live lives increasingly in separate boxes. Who they are at work is irrelevant tot who they are at home. Who they are at home is not necessarily the same as when they are socializing."⁹⁴ Loss of family relations and community roots, the loss of the idea of God who is present in every aspect of life, it al leads to the dissociation of a holistic experience of one's own life into compartments. Friendships and relations change all the time with the changing circumstances around us.⁹⁵ The media teach us how we should have relations. In the end, people end up with hollow relations at the surface level that do not satisfy, but also cannot hurt them by allowing a person to become involved in *all* compartments of their life. Much of this pattern develops out of fear to get hurt or a refusal to change a paradoxical lifestyle into a consistent one. This lifestyle has influenced Christians very much. All pretend to be fine and live happy lives and all play the same compartment-game. Broken lives are not taken care of anymore by relations. More and more attention moves from teaching to pastoral care and worship that entertains and satisfies, since people are in desperate need of something lasting and filling. Getting help has become something to be offered by a professional, since so many small groups keep up the general talking. We talk about belonging to a church, but it means now that the church belongs to us in the sense that it should be there when we want it and that no one should mind if we do not want it for a while.⁹⁶

Spirituality Without Selflessness

Postmodernism has led to a focus on the self, on experience. This also becomes visible in the churches. Things should feel good and satisfy our feelings. But at the same time, many people are not willing to make a commitment. There is very little loyalty to the own congregation or denomination. A research done in the United States showed that 33 percent of the Christians had changed denomination in their lives, including the older generations.⁹⁷ Jesus and the whole of the Bible teach us selflessness. The postmodern influence leads to more accent on the self and makes it more difficult to serve others in a selfless attitude. Many people are willing to help others, but the reasons are often self-centred. They seek the gratefulness of the other and the good feeling that it gives. Or they

⁹⁴ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 63.

⁹⁵ See Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 63-65.

⁹⁶ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 64.

⁹⁷ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 199.

are helping someone because he or she promised to do a favour back. Those reasons are not necessarily bad in itself but should never be the most important reason to serve others. Spirituality has become selfish. Seeking God is seeking experiences that satisfy us. Worshipping the Lord because we know that He will bless us and give us a good feeling.

The purpose of the church has changed from calling a person to service to giving him the power to resist Satan for another week and to enable him to work. As Christians we believe that God is almighty and that all things work for good for those who believe in Him (see Rom 8:28). But there is a strange dualism between the power of God and that of Satan. Gone is the knowledge that Satan is bound and serves the purposes of God despite himself. “The very people that proclaim their victory over him give him too much credit for everything that appears to go wrong.”⁹⁸ Many Christians allow themselves to live in an universe as haunted as that of the New Agers, and often using similar language and techniques to approach it. Sometimes the blessing that ‘falls’ is nothing else than mind alteration technique.⁹⁹ The element of God changing and disciplining our lives into His image has often disappeared or is not very popular. Disciplining can even often be seen as something bad from Satan, since things we don’t like are automatically seen as evil.

Market Approach

In many churches there is an increased use of marketing methodologies and a tendency to view people as consumers, next to a smaller movement into more tradition in others. Both mega-churches as well as small congregations can use those methods. Characteristics are an informal style that allows the seekers to be involved at their own pace, contemporary music, avoidance of ecclesiastical symbols, high flexibility, emphasis on religious experience and formation of relationships, and individual independence.¹⁰⁰ One example is the approach of Rick Warren, the well-known senior pastor of *Saddleback Community Church*.¹⁰¹ The roots of many of those churches are in evangelical traditions, while denominational ties are often loose or not present, since they are often viewed as being problematic for reaching the spiritual seekers.

⁹⁸ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 74.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Martinez, *The Impact of Postmodernism on American Religious Practices*, 1.

¹⁰¹ See Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*. His views are a honest attempt to be based on biblical truth and at the same time relevant for this postmodern society.

Technology

In a time in which technology is very important and very influential, churches also adapt increasingly to the use of the best technology available to serve their congregation. In many situations the central leadership has become less important by better means of communication. It has changed the way how churches carry out their work.¹⁰² Internet has become an important communication medium. The stress on images instead of words is influencing the churches to use more real-life video and technologies to make multimedia presentations of the message they have.¹⁰³

3.3.1 Challenges and Opportunities

Several aspects of postmodernism and its impact on the churches have been discussed. Some attention will now be given to a number of challenges and opportunities presented by postmodernism. “The opportunities and challenges of postmodernism bring to mind Charles Dickens’ memorable opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” There is much within postmodernism which is diametrical opposed to the Christian Faith and if the Church does not heed, she will surrender many of her distinctives on the postmodern altar of tolerance”¹⁰⁴ The Church can choose this surrender, give critical opposition to postmodernism or try to use its possibilities. Some reasons for the last are given in the following words:

But postmodernism is many other things (than only relativism), and many young believers must swim in its currents as they study, work, watch current movies, and relate to friends—especially in university contexts. A growing number of these Christians are embracing some postmodern ideas – not uncritically, but believing they offer an authentic context for Christian living and fresh avenues of evangelism. This openness to postmodern ideas makes many conservative Christians nervous. Indeed, the postmodern set often criticizes aspects of evangelical culture, and the pomo vocabulary sounds impenetrable to evangelicals’ ears.¹⁰⁵

It is this fear that keeps Christians inside their church buildings and - habits, while the postmodern situation is a ‘field ready for harvest’. So much is at stake, but so few do the hard work of seizing the moment and contextualizing the church to make it culturally

¹⁰² Martinez, *The Impact of Postmodernism on American Religious Practices*, 2-3.

¹⁰³ See Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

¹⁰⁴ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

¹⁰⁵ *The Antimoderns: Six postmodern Christians discuss the possibilities and limits of postmodernism* (Christianity Today, November 13, 2000), no page. As published on: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/013/7.74.html>. Last visited: March 8, 2005.

relevant. “There are plenty of critics who stand at a safe distance on the modern road that runs beside the postmodern fields, shouting their criticisms and warnings.”¹⁰⁶ Of course, postmodernism is very different from the (modern) shape and culture of most churches. Is that a reason to justify fortification of the old situation? Jesus went out to meet the people where they were, without compromising Himself and His vision. That is the biblical attitude. We cannot ignore the Great Commission by standing on a distance. Postmoderns are very different from the people churches have reached in the past centuries.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, our postmodern context has much in common with the cultural context of the New Testament. It must be possible to use many opportunities to build bridges for reaching the unreached.¹⁰⁸

Challenges

Challenges of postmodernism for the churches are found in several areas. The first is the challenge of relativism. The postmodernist has great difficulty in accepting revealed truth, which is a basic assumption for the proclamation of the Gospel. Second, constructivism challenges the way of communicating. Language has become something to be suspicious of, and truth is regarded to be constructed by the reader, not to be conveyed by the speaker or writer. Thirdly, pluralism and tolerance is a challenge to the Biblical belief of the unique God and Jesus as the only way to God. Christianity encourages variety but rejects that all religions are true and lead to the same God. Fourthly, postmodernism gives a moral challenge, since everyone wants to do what he thinks to be good. As a fifth, it is a practical challenge to get and keep the attention of the entertainment-orientated people. Sixth, commitment and a change of attitude is sometimes a difficult process for a postmodern person. He knows and has access to much information, but has difficulty to apply it in his compartmentalized life.

¹⁰⁶ Mc Laren, *The three postmodernisms: An explanation*, no page.

¹⁰⁷ Ed Stetzer, *Culturally relevant ministry in a postmodern world*, no page. As published on: http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A=153590&M=50004,00.html. Last visited: March 31, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ *What is postmodernism and what does it have to do with the church?* As published on: <http://www.mosaicfw.org/faq%20-%20what%20is%20postmodernism.htm>, no page. Last visited: March 26, 2005.

The result of the impact postmodernism has on the Church is that it is losing its witnessing power in the world. The challenges the churches face are things that have kept many congregations from being an effective gathering of believers that is able to communicate Jesus Christ and the Kingdom. For the world, many churches have become just another religious group with their own beliefs, next to others with other beliefs.

Opportunities

Opportunities for reaching people are also clearly present in postmodernism. It would not be right to judge everything as ‘wrong’, even if the previously investigated aspects seem to justify such a view. Postmodernism seems to have many opportunities for the Church, because of its reaction at modernist thinking and its openness for new input.

In its challenge of modernism and rejecting the distinction between reason as truth and experience as personal belief, a basis is found for communicating the holistic Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is a message that is not only focused at the mind, but at the human being as a whole. It is about heart, soul, mind and body. Following Jesus involves also a healthy lifestyle and a good emotional life, not only intellect and knowledge. The modernist would have difficulty to accept it, while it seems to be very normal for someone who is shaped in the postmodern way. The unnatural separation between mind and all other aspects is not present in postmodernism, neither is it in the Gospel of Christ. Jesus came to set the captives free (Lk 4:18), which was not only something spiritual. He released people from spiritual bondages, but also from prisons.

A second opportunity is the postmodern claim of pluralism and equality of all opinions. This helps us to insist at least in some tolerance for our position. If someone honestly lives what he says, including the ‘tolerance-credo’, then it can be a good opening to ask for tolerance or even understanding of what we are living for. It can help to open the eyes of people who unconsciously exclude some views, while promoting tolerance.

Third, people have a great hunger for spirituality and are open to try everything that ‘works’. The Gospel can be presented as (the) answer to the existential questions of purpose and identity.¹⁰⁹ Many people face times in their lives in which they wonder why they are living and what their purpose is. The described loss of in-depth relations, the

¹⁰⁹ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

fragmentation of lives and God who has become 'weightless' add all to this feeling. Jesus' Gospel is clear and straightforward: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Mt 11:28). This message can speak to the heart of the people that are seeking for purpose and identity. The Gospel provides a vision for their lives and answers for existential questions.

Fourth, experiencing a real 'family-relation' with other believers can provide people with the higher quality relations that they are desperately seeking for. A Church that is alive has something to give to this world: community. People can experience a sense of belonging, love, care, mutual joy and shared sufferings. Moreover, Jesus becoming incarnated fits in the postmodern longing for a real relation within religion, more than just knowing a system. Relations with human beings are important, but the relation with our Lord succeeds this by far. God is not just something spiritual, He is a person who desires an intense, open relation. It is possible to experience this relation with Him. The postmodern attitude gives an opportunity to share Jesus Christ through the way of relationships with one another and with the Lord.

The South African theologians Lotter and Thompson react on the different challenges and opportunities of postmodernism as follows:

The answer is not a 'service-oriented' Church governed by supply and demand, nor a diluted popular Church, which tones down conversion and personal commitment. Even less do we need a Church that adapts to our worldview's haste for instant gratification. Such a consumer mentality results in congregations that become a spiritual smorgasbord from which people chose dishes according to colour, taste, and satisfaction, more than according to nutritional value and a balanced diet.¹¹⁰

The question that almost automatically arises from this reaction is: What kind of church is needed if it should not be service-oriented or adapting to the desire for instant gratification, while seeking to be relevant for this time? How can the Church reinvent her role in this world? These are some of the central themes of the next chapter, which will seek to explore what the significance of prophetic ministry can be for the Church in her postmodern situation.

¹¹⁰ Lotter, *Challenges and opportunities of postmodernism for the church*, no page.

3.4 Summary

This chapter tried to give insight in the historical and ideological backgrounds of postmodernism as a whole, its specific characteristics and its generational diversities. From this gained perspective the situation in churches has been examined to reveal in general how postmodernism has influenced the churches and what challenges and opportunities the churches face in their interaction with postmodernism.

After the Enlightenment and the almost arrogant attitude of modernism, a change has occurred in the thinking and worldview of many people. The old certainties and belief in progress were scattered in the twentieth century. As a reaction, some people rejected modernism and its systems of thought and came with a new vision. This reaction is called postmodernism. At the same time, however, postmodernism owes much to modernism and can even be considered as a process of rejecting modernism by using its own modern methods. Though started in the West, postmodernist ways of thinking can be found worldwide and are highly compatible with Eastern mysticism.

The basic 'creed' of Postmodernity is that there is no truth. Keywords are relativism and tolerance; constructivism; pragmatism and experience; and pluralism. God can be moulded as wished - He has become 'weightless' - while at the same time a strong religious consciousness is present. This all leads to individualism, authority-problems, little commitment, consumerism and a pleasure-centred attitude. The world of a postmodernist has become fragmented and compartmentalized, dominated and filled by virtual reality and with relations that are very different from the long-term relations with family and a number of close friends. Finally, there is an emphasis on going back to what was, since we cannot do anything that is really new, to use fragments of it in a unique new compilation.

There is a certain ambiguity in postmodernism. Seemingly there are no absolute truths while at the same time a person who is convinced of a certain truth will keep it as his absolute truth. He will defend it by saying that this 'truth' is subjective, true for him and not necessarily for others. He cannot be approached by reason, for he will not defend his views by arguments that are 'objective truth'.

In some ways postmodernism shows a healthy breakdown of human pride, compared to modern thinking. There is a certain realism and a consciousness of finity. At the same time, virtual reality gives a way out of this by offering the feeling of infinity, power and an ideal world. Postmodernists are seeking for something of value, out of a loss of self-identity and an experience of emptiness inside. Families break up, friendships are lost and

made all the time, insecurity reigns. The world revolves around yourself, but that attitude does not fill you. It creates tension and an intense loneliness. Everything will be done to experience a certain feeling of belonging. Experience is very important, more than reasoning and truth. Therefore, 'if it works, than it is good for me.' People will just choose what they want, including what 'their' religion will be. No one can know anymore what the life of others is about.

Postmodernism seems to have influenced the Church more than the Church has influenced the world around it. There is diversity in theology, change in belief and practices, unity without truth, emotional conversion without really being changed by God, fellowship without real relations and spirituality without selflessness. Churches have often adopted a market approach, not wrong in itself, but sometimes resulting in running after the postmodern culture. Finally, technology has become more important, which reflects the great value that postmodern people give to technological advanced tools and gadgets. The result of the influence of postmodernism on the Church is that in many cases the Church' witness to the world has been affected. It is struggling to be relevant for its environment, rather than challenging its environment to change according to the values that it lives. Talking about the truth of the Gospel and the Word of God has become difficult. Claiming revelation is something personal which should not be imposed on others.

Should postmodernism therefore be considered to be something that is only dangerous and bad? No, not necessarily. It provides challenges, but also many opportunities, like any worldview in any time of the world history. The challenges can lead to the weakening of the Church, but also force it into a healthy response. The opportunities are also great in several areas, in which the Church possibly can renew its vision and become relevant again. The Church seems to be in need, but it also can have the hope of great opportunities for this time, if it is able to reinvent its role. The way in which this is probably possible is the basic question for the next chapter. How can the Church come out of her current situation and again impact the world around her?

Chapter 4 The Significance of Prophetic Ministry in the Postmodern Situation

4.1 *The Church in Need*

In the previous chapter, postmodernism and its impact on and challenges and opportunities for the Church has been elaborated. It was underlined that it is the task of the Church to accept the challenges to reach our generations for Christ, without compromising the message and lifestyle as a Christian. Contextualisation of forms in which the Gospel is communicated is very much needed, without changing the core values and functions that lay behind the forms. At the same time it became clear that postmodernism has certainly very much influenced the churches. There is confusion because of pluralism, relativism and so on. Unbalanced teaching and spiritual life result in unbalanced churches, with all its related dangers.

What we see before us when we read those statements is a Church in need. It is not dead or in a hopeless situation, but it seems to have lost its vision, witness and life that was given to it when Jesus found the Church.

The loss of vision becomes visible in the programs of many churches. They are full of activities that keep the members busy during the Sundays and the week. When examined a little more thorough, it becomes clear that only few of those programs are aimed at reaching the world that we live in. The churches have often become complacent and self-centred, trying to keep things as they are in order to stay comfortable. But that is not what it is called for! 'Church' itself comes from *ekklesia*, the called out community. Staying inside buildings is contradicting the reason of existence of the Church. Jesus intended it to be His instrument in reaching the world.

When asked, many Christians agree with the function of the Church as called to reach the world, but they don't know how and they are not equipped to do so. Their communities are not active in reaching out. Rather, many expect unbelievers to come to the Church to hear the Gospel, instead of bringing it to them. This situation reveals that the vision of the Church has been lost. Where is the zeal to live a holy life that is pleasing to the Lord? The desire to influence this world, to act prophetically to reach those who do not know the Lord and to change what is wrong in the society?

Connected to the loss of vision is the loss of being a witness. Fragmentation, pluralism and individualism have divided the testimony of the Christian life. Christianity is a divided, not a united body. Many battles are fought within the own ranks about differences in minor doctrines and irrelevant details, diverting the attention of the Church from its task. Many believers are simply not really different from the world in their lifestyle. Impurity and unholiness, selfishness and independence make the Christians often unrecognizable from their non-Christian neighbour, except from their walk to their church building on Sunday morning. The witness of the Church is often the opposite of promoting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and living exemplary lives that are a good witness to this world. Many Christians seem to be known for their hypocrisy, not for their sincerity and honesty. Where is the lifestyle and witness that is pictured in Acts 2:42-47, where we see that the first fellowship of believers was in all it did 'enjoying the favour of all the people' (2:47)?

Furthermore, many churches appear to have lost their life from within. Everything just goes on and on, but tradition and forms without changes become dead. "When forms freeze, churches become dead."¹ Churches are meant to be alive, applying God's eternal purposes in their lives and to the world around with contemporary forms and traditions that are open for change. It seems that too often the reality is that a change in the habits of a church means division and fights for the 'truth' of things that are not really described in the Bible, because the vision of the Church is not really clear and the members want to stay in their comfort zone. On the basis of this is often a lack of vision for the purpose of the Church.

¹ Richard Lewis, *Saturation Church Planting, Church, Manual 1* (The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting: n.p., 2000), 70.

In broad strokes the Church in need has been painted. It brings us to the conclusion that it is a Church in need to be revived. But how can this happen? Many attempts are often made to make people more active again, to revitalize the church programs and meetings. The result is sometimes encouraging, other times without any result. It seems often not to reach the root of the problem, the internal changes that are needed to renew the Church and to reinvent its role in the world. We shall argue in the next paragraph that it is prophetic ministry that is given by God to which the Church has to resort, in order to bring those changes into being.

4.2 Theological Importance of Prophetic Ministry in the Postmodern Situation

The question we are mainly concerned with is what the significance or theological importance of prophetic ministry is, precisely in this postmodern situation. Of course, a good response of the church to postmodernism and a postmodern society is needed. But why specifically prophetic ministry?

As we have seen in chapter two, prophetic ministry is given to build up the church. It is an important gift and an important ministry, which has not ceased after the time of the New Testament. That means first of all that it still is useful, no matter what the circumstances are. The Church always needs prophetic ministry to become healthier and to grow towards more maturity. It stays into existence even when less prophetic ministry is present but that always has its influence on the functioning of the Church, like a hand with one finger missing is still existing and at the same time handicapped.

This is not the only reason. Prophetic ministry is in our time not only important as a basic aspect of being Church. More than that, it seems to be exactly fitting the need for guidance, restoration and building up of the Church. It can be relevant to reinforce the mission of the Church. We have suggested before that the Church is in need to be revived in its witness and vision for the world. In this situation it can look back at the situation in the Old Testament. As is summarized in the first chapter, Israel was often desperately in need of guidance and restoration. Due to its mistakes and sin it ended up in trouble. The prophets were sent by the Lord to restore and revive the original vision of the nation when

it was indulged in ritual religion and only seeking its own pleasure.² God used prophetic ministry time and again to bring justice back, to do away with wrong behaviour, and to encourage and urge the people of Israel to return to a service of Him that came from the heart and not only in a ritual way. The Lord gave prophetic ministry in increased intensity when the nation was in need of revival and restoration.

In the New Testament, prophetic ministry is also active in restoring situations, but at the same time it leads the Church forward into the world. It kept is alive, full of zeal and geared to the Lord in its mission. Being close to God kept it from immorality, selfishness, injustice, pride and the struggle for power and money. The only time for example that a servant of God speaks death over someone's life is the case of Peter, confronting Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Peter knew through the Spirit that they were acting deceitfully and thus not only lying to men, but mainly to God. This prophetic ministry was needed to help the young Church realize the importance of sincerity for God. God cannot be mocked. As is concluded in the second chapter, prophetic ministry appears to have been very important to keep the Church in touch both with God and the changing and challenging time it was living in.³

When we have a closer look at the four areas that were specified in which prophetic ministry was mainly important in the New Testament and we compare those with the situation of the Church in the postmodern situation, then it turns out that the Church is disturbed and distracted in each of those areas. Its situation of a loss of vision and living according to Kingdom requirements also has many similarities with the situation of Israel in the Old Testament. It is prophetic ministry that can speak and act in those situations. God did not take back the ability to be guided by Him through His word and revelations, but He gave it as a gift of the Spirit and a privilege of every believer until the coming of the Lord.⁴ All these aspects tend to promote a call for prophetic ministry in our situation. The Church needs it. The Church has already received it long ago, but lost it. Prophetic ministry can be the ministry that revives and reinforces the Church in its dynamism. It is significant for today, for now. Both the Old and New Testament show us that it is not only given by God as something extra to help Israel and the Church. It was necessary in their situations. In

² See paragraph 1.5.

³ See paragraph 2.5.

⁴ See paragraph 2.4.

the same way the Church today has no alternative than to resort to prophetic ministry, in order to become relevant for this world again.

Prophetic ministry is significant in the four important areas in which it already ministered to the Church in its most early beginning. Therefore, we will look at those areas to see how the ministry can fit the need of the Church today.

Building up the disturbed and distracted church, first of all, is needed by bringing it back to the theological foundation that was laid already by the first apostles and New Testament prophets. Added to that, it should be of use, together with other ministries, to build it up in truth and unity.

Second, encouraging of the disheartened is very much needed in a time and way of thinking that caused people to experience deep loneliness in their world without good relations. Pastoral care and encouragement is very important. Hope in hopeless lives.

Third, sustaining the momentum of Christian mission and ministry is needed in an increasingly complex world, especially in urban areas with thousands of subcultures living intertwined with one other. God's wisdom and guidance is desperately needed to reach all the different subcultures. At the same time, prophetic ministry attracts the postmodern quest for experience. If it works, then it is true. If God gives a direct revelation about someone, than that can help him to accept the truth and reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Living according to the kingdom of God and its righteousness, as fourth and last, is very important in a world of injustice and immorality. Compartmentalization, tolerance and pluralism have led to an immoral world. Prophetic ministry speaks directly, according to God's guidance, into those ways of living to correct and build believers up. It leads them to live according to God's principles and in (re-)establishing justice in the society.

4.3 A Specific Task for a Specific Ministry

Prophetic ministry, as is argued above, seems to have much theological importance for our Church in its postmodern situation. It has a specific task, given and initiated by God. Did the previous chapters find their main concern in describing situations, trying to gain insight in the main elements of the thesis statement, this chapter is attempting to

take this material, combine and apply it, in order to give practical insights in the significance of prophetic ministry in our contemporary postmodern situation. The following outline is corresponding with the description of prophetic ministry in the New Testament time, as given in chapter two, to improve the clarity of the application.⁵ It should be underlined that this practical application is an attempt to give an overview of the main aspects, without claiming completeness. This chapter will bear a certain personal mark, risking over- or undervaluing in the eyes of some of the readers, due to the great variety of opinions on this vast topic.

From our survey of the prophetic ministry under the old and new covenant it has become clear that prophetic ministry is interrelated with other ministries given by God, while at the same time unique in its focus and function. All those aspects will not be repeated, but some will be mentioned as an introduction for what follows.

4.3.1 The Task

The task of prophetic ministry is to serve as the communicator of God's will and purposes for His Church and, by means of the Church, for the world. Its nature is therefore to cause a threefold movement in the body of Christ.

First, it aims *upward* by worshipping God and seeking His will. Through this intimate relation with God does He reveal Himself, lovingly empowering and changing believers.

Second, it aims *inward* by building up the Church through exhortation, restoration and equipment of the believers to enable it not only to stand against the postmodern culture, but also to be prepared to have an answer to it.

Third, it aims *outward* by initiating and sustaining Christian mission and ministry in the world around to bring people to Christ and incorporate them in the body of believers, where they can be discipled and equipped to go out in their turn to reach others.

This threefold nature or task is important for a Church whose body has become dead, wounded or sleeping in many parts of the world. Prophetic ministry is one of the things that is very much needed for the restoration of the Church and a renewed, Spirit-led impact in the world. In short: Prophetic ministry is leading the Church to be prophetic, to be the communicator of God's will for the Church and the world.

⁵ See paragraph 2.3.

4.3.2 The Practical Outlook

The word ‘prophecy’ sounds for many Christians in our time as something that is or far away, or blemished by all bad examples of false prophecies and abuse of power that the past decades have seen. It can be different. Prophetic ministry, including prophecy but being more than that, is meant to function in a good environment, as can be seen from the New Testament. If so, then it can and will be useful and healthy for the Church.

Several authors underline that prophecy is not so ‘far away’ as it sometimes may seem to be.⁶ Often it has the connotations of something that is almost a mysterious event, a very striking thing that happens. Many Christians have just through trying to listen for God’s words experienced that it can be very ‘normal’. It is a powerful gift and a practical gift. It should be practical, the daily practice in a church, not only a theology. Prophetic ministry functions at different levels, from incidental revelations to the gift of prophecy and the ministry function of a prophet in its most mature state. It is important to keep this in mind while looking for the significance of prophetic ministry for today’s situation. Friends that are worshipping together can share some things that came to their minds concerning each other. A mother can pray for her neighbour and receive a revelation of a certain aspect in her life. An elder in a church can speak a prophecy concerning the theme for a youth retreat in the coming summer. A young man can prophesy over the future of his land. Prophetic ministry is not restricted to meetings of congregations, but can function everywhere. Peter’s application of Joel 2:29 shows that *all* can prophesy according to what the Spirit gives.

Both the Old and New Testament give examples how prophecy can be received and delivered. Taken together, nine different ways can be discerned.⁷ God can speak through verses of the Bible; thoughts and impressions; images and visions; dreams; words spoken by others and highlighted by the Spirit (Judg 7:13-15); circumstances; material, visible things (Jer 1:11); an audible voice or by the gift of interpreting prophetic tongues. All of those ways are rather practical. In every part of life, through every circumstance is the communication of God with men possible. And that is exactly what is so important for the postmodern context. As pointed out before, the postmodern man is very much experience-orientated. He is not seeking for objective truth but for something that ‘works’. He may be

⁶ Two examples from a more traditional Christian background are Brienens, *Streeft ernaar te profeteren*, 4; and Collins, *Profeteer!*, e.g. 12-13, 33, 59.

⁷ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 47-56 uses this helpful overview. See also paragraph 1.1.4.

totally disinterested in or even irritated by the best arguments to allow Christ in his life. That same man can all of a sudden change into the most interested person by one word of revelation about certain things in his life that no one could know. He gets interested if he sees that something seems to be real.

In the same way, prophetic ministry, flowing from inspiration and guidance by God, can minister to the hearts of the people and oppose what is wrong in a society. It is tender and bold, gentle and strong, humble and courageous. It speaks into pains and it speaks against wrongs. It is acting according to what God asks us to do in light of His word, being in a close relation with Him to know His will for a specific situation.

The great variety of beliefs, value-systems and very different generations provides the churches with the great challenge of reaching all those varied people. Prophetic ministry can be of such enormous help, since it is easily adapting to every situation. God knows the heart of every man and can speak to the need of every single person, no matter how diverse their backgrounds are. Prophetic ministry can function in every group of believers in every situation to minister to everyone, if it is given its place. It helps the churches to be more dependant on God for reaching out to postmodern people in a pluralist world.

Prophetic ministry seems to 'fit' the personal quest of postmodern people for true and valuable things to fill their life with. God speaks directly to the heart and can convince people through prophecy in a way that other means of sharing His love cannot do. It is not the only necessary gift to reach this world for Christ, since the gifts are given to be used in cooperation with and addition to each other. But when done in the right way, in love, dependent on God and always respecting His sovereign will and choice to reveal Himself or not, then it is probably the most powerful *charismata* that the Holy Spirit has given to the Church (as Paul already suggested in 1 Cor 14). Its impact can be enormous, its value is great, and it is certainly significant for the postmodern situation.

4.3.3 The Significance of Prophetic Ministry in Four Areas

The specific task of this specific gift as an answer to the need of the Church in our time has briefly been stated. We spoke in general about how prophetic ministry can communicate and be of use in the postmodern situation. The next four paragraphs will

again look at the four previously mentioned areas of prophetic ministry,⁸ this time to explore how its work in those areas is useful for reaching and ministering to and in a postmodern world. This allows us to look closer to its functioning, opportunities and threats. The chosen division makes it possible to expose the important aspects of prophetic ministry, but can also be replaced by another subdivision.

4.4 Building Up the Disturbed and the Distracted Church

Taking away what is wrong, leading into what is right. A good foundation, a solid building. That is in short the mission of prophetic ministry in the Church. And there is much to restore and build in the churches of today. Modernism and postmodernism have left their traces in an ongoing process of influencing the mindset and actions of Christians and church visitors. It is time to return to the foundation of what being church is. Time to remove everything that not belongs to the Biblical viewpoints, even if it is not ‘nice’ or according to what ‘everybody does’. A house that is divided and a house that is not built well cannot stand.

However, breaking down what is not right is not an aim in itself. It is only the necessary operation to let healing of the sick parts of the Church start. Prophetic ministry is aimed at the equipping and building up of the Church in order that it may grow into Christ towards maturity, leading to a body of Christ that is closely knit together and serving one another in love (Eph 4:12-16).

Leading the church to maturity is a process in which the following aspects are involved, together resulting in a restored, healthy Church.

4.4.1 Worship

The Lord is a God who is worthy to be praised. He is the holy One, who is enthroned on the praises of His people (Ps 22:3). The highest call of a Christian is to praise and adore His Master and King. ‘The Lord God set apart His Church to worship Him.’⁹ There are many occasions in the Bible in which God reveals Himself more through worship or gives victory over enemies. The Lord reacts on worship by revealing more of Himself to us through His Spirit. As a result and reaction, we have even more reason to worship Him, which again

⁸ See paragraph 2.3.

⁹ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 52.

results into more intimacy and revelation of God. It is especially in worship that God gives guidance, encouragement, restoration, power and strength to His Church. When we come into His presence, God ministers to us.

Worshipping the Lord and teaching the Church to do so are two important tasks of prophetic ministry. As we see in both the Old and New Testament, prophets and Christians of the early church were often interceding and worshipping the Lord. It was a part of their being and a part of their task. A prophet could not be a prophet without worship. Abraham built altars to call upon the Lord and his sister Miriam praised the Lord with the tambourine. Moses' ministry was a ministry of worship. David transformed Jerusalem into a city of worship and established regular worship in the temple to minister unto the Lord. Elisha looked for a musician before he prophesied, and when this man played music, "the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha" (2 Kings 3:15,16). Anna the prophetess was always worshipping in the temple, even when she was 84 years old (Lk 2:37). Worship is not an option but totally intertwined with the prophetic mission.

Worshipping God is first of all aimed at Him. At the same time, He uses it to minister to us. Both aspects are very important in the postmodern context. A postmodernist looks for ways to experience and 'feel' God, to know Him, to communicate with Him. Even just being among other believers worshipping from their heart can make him experience something of the greatness and reality of God. It creates a desire to know God too.¹⁰ Added to that, worship brings people into the presence of God. Christians and non-Christians can be transformed by the Spirit in such moments of looking to the divine One and acknowledging that He is far above all we think, pure and holy, just and almighty, and the only truth. Out of revelation that God gives in such times, many prophetic words and actions can come forth to restore and build the Church.

Should all worship leaders have the gift of prophecy or be a prophet? No, it can be useful but it is not necessary. But prophetic gifted people should always be active involved in worship, together with the body of Christ. When worship is undervalued or not focused on the right things, then it should guide the congregation into a right attitude of worship.

¹⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 242.

4.4.2 Restoration of Truth

Meeting the one and living God leads to a restoration of truth. And that is what is very much needed in a pluralistic and relativistic society where everyone constructs his own personal truth. A church that is pleasing unto God and alive in this world cannot live without truth. Otherwise it is nothing more than some social gathering. God wants a Church in which He and His truth are the centre.¹¹ Jesus is the Living Word, revelation from the Father. He should be the centre, through the Bible as unfailing word of God, and through prophetic ministry, based on the word of God. Truth, the authority of the Word needs to be restored. The Church should be a community of faith and love, spiritual in touch with God, based on truth.

In this time there can be a denial of God speaking to us. Or it is explained as a personal experience without authority for all. However, truth is inescapable. It is impossible to maintain that everything is relative. There are numerous arguments to prove that truth in itself is inescapable.¹² Building on that, if God chooses to reveal Himself, then it is important to share those revelations, since they have general importance. Therefore, prophecy, which is God revealing Himself through men, has importance for this time in which truth is thrown away. It can have its function in returning truth and break down false bulwarks.

Prophetic ministry is not the only means in which God speaks to us. Studying the word, preaching and teaching and circumstances around us clearly also are inspired by the Spirit. But it is prophecy that comes very close to the postmodern mindset and can build a bridge to start accepting truth. People are looking for something that suits their needs. The Church can, like Jesus, minister to the needs of the people.¹³ When prophetic words are spoken about a person that directly touch his needs, he will become more interested. Then a movement can start from the need to the truth. A person is much more willing to consider accepting something as truth when it seems to work, while starting from truth does not make much sense to him as long as it is not real for him.¹⁴ Authentic prophecy,

¹¹ Hill, *The Church of the Third Millennium*, 79-86.

¹² Copan, *Is Everything Really Relative?*, 7. He explores and proves this statement in the following chapters of his book.

¹³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 197.

¹⁴ Josiah Venture, *Learning the meaning of 'go'*, 5.

not its fake counterpart, convinces, since it is real. Is it unbiblical to minister in this way to the need of the people? Not necessarily. As is said before, it was also the approach of Jesus. Added to that, emotion and experience is not unbiblical, it is part of how God made us. If there is a healthy balance between will and emotion, mind and experience, then it is good and useful.¹⁵ It might be the case that many postmodernists are attracted by prophetic ministry because they can directly experience it. That is not wrong in itself but right education should be offered to highlight also the importance of study and growth in knowledge of truth.

Restoring the truth also involves warnings, correction and restrictions.¹⁶ Prophecy is a means of convincing people of their sins, in order to bring repentance and the confession that God is in the midst of the congregation (1 Cor 14:24,25). It can also warn them if they are not intending to do anything wrong, but simply are not able to oversee the consequences of a choice that is before them. God uses prophecy to warn people for ways that seem to be the best and even God-given, but in reality will harm them or others.

Some aspects of the biblical truth speak more to postmodern people. They have a hard time to start believing the truth of the Gospel when beginning from the doctrine of the Trinity, to give an example. On the other hand, Jesus becoming incarnated fits in postmodernism, since it promises the possibility of a personal relation, which is considered to be very important. Prophecy can make this relation more real. God who speaks directly, maybe ‘through a mist’ because of the human intermediation, is what most people are looking for.

4.4.3 Preserving the Church From False Teachers and Prophets

The negation of the previous paragraph, restoring truth, is the removal of ‘non-truth’. This was an important issue in the Old Testament as well as the early church, and it is still important today. The Ancient Near East and the Hellenistic environment of Israel knew a great variety of religions and religious practices, including different kinds of prophecy that were on the outside not much different from true prophecy.¹⁷ Even so, our

¹⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 341.

¹⁶ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 31-32.

¹⁷ See paragraphs 1.1.2 and 2.1.

pluralistic time has its own variety. Religious pluralism has provided a confusing number of variations on the Christian theme. It was not only hard in the time of Israel to discern if a man who called himself a prophet claimed to have received a word from God to marry a prostitute (Hos 1:2; 3:1). It is also hard in our time to discern false teachers and prophets. Every false teaching, every false revelation that is claimed to be true has a dividing result in the body of Christ. Believers will become confused and start to quarrel amongst each other. The postmodern believer is often not very well-trained in discerning right from wrong. They easily follow what sounds good, seems to make sense or gives a good feeling. If it satisfies and fills for a while, than they will come back to hear more from a person, not knowing that he probably is deceiving them. It is the nature of false teachers and prophets that they will speak to the human desires, which is a great risk for both Christians and non-Christians (2 Pet 2:18). That makes the responsibility of prophetic ministry even greater.

It is a task of prophetic ministry to be on guard for false teaching and prophecy. Prophetic gifted people should strive to increase in knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ and His Word, the Bible. If the truth is clear, then everything that is 'non-truth' can more easily be recognised and removed. The several aspects of testing prophecy are already given in paragraph 2.2.1. Lies and untrue teachings and 'words of the Lord' that have entered the congregation need to be openly rejected, followed by an explanation why it is not right and what God's word says about the specific situation. If the truth is not clear, then it is the task of prophetic ministry to be on guard in a prayerful attitude, or to take initiative to warn for possible misleading influences. God can also reveal false teachings or prophecies that are brought into the gathering of believers to prophetic gifted people.

In all this should the way of love be followed. Prophetic ministry is extremely vulnerable of falling into the same pit that it is others accusing of, like speaking human words and judgments in the name of God, even with the best intentions. The judgment of false teachers is severe, as 2 Pet 2 shows. This implies also that God does not take it lightly if we, full of zeal to preserve the Church from false revelation, make false judgments about others.

4.4.4 Setting the People of God Free

In our time many new believers are from a background that has not been Christian since several generations. Although bondages and thought patterns that bind people can be

developed in any situation, this is more likely when someone is from a non-Christian background. The postmodern drive to try and experience everything to see if it ‘works’ has brought many into addictions. Others have given an open door to demons to influence or possess them. The postmodern liberal lifestyle and broken down family values have also left many damaged and hurt, which often leads to other bondages or wrong influences. Lust, greed and hunger for power make people slaves of many things. Those people are not immediately free from all those things that bind and occupy them when they become Christians. Habits, thoughts, bondages need to be discerned in their lives. Then a change is necessary, which can include breaking bondages and casting out demons. When the true God comes, the false gods have to go.¹⁸ Prophetic ministry can have an important role in discerning influences in people’s life that are binding them, through personal prophecies and inspired prayers. Following this, it has the task to set the people free with the authority of Jesus through prayer and possibly fasting, guiding them in better ways of life through discipleship. That was the purpose for which Jesus was anointed (Lk 4:18,19).

4.4.5 Leading the People Into Their Ministry

Worship, restoration of truth and setting the people free is all very important, yet lacking when it does not lead to the preparation of people for the ministry that God seems to have in mind for them. Eph 4:12 and 16 speaks of ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.’ Many Christians are confused about their place and task in the body of Christ and which gifts the Spirit has bestowed upon them for that task. Prophetic ministry has its own task in bringing and appointing people to the right place and task.

God uses prophetic ministry often to help Christians understand which calling He has given them. It might be that prophecies underline certain aspects in their lives that were overlooked until that moment, or that they felt insecure about. A person can for example have the impression that he has the gift of teaching, according to the results that his teaching has in the life of others, but still hesitate to devote himself more to it, out of insecurity. He might be very much encouraged to step out and dedicate himself to teaching if God uses another Christian to give him a certain prophetic word that tells him to use the given gift to educate others.

¹⁸ Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 151.

Postmodernists have difficulty in committing themselves to something, since they feel most things are not really worth their efforts. Prophetic ministry can greatly be of help for those experience-oriented persons. A 'direct' affirmation of the Holy Spirit through other believers will help them to realise that *this* is exactly the thing that God wants them to do. That will give them a feeling of usefulness and belonging, of purpose and focus in their fragmented worlds, which leads them to more dedication and growth. And it helps to become more specific *what* their task is in a certain ministry, since the options and choices are many. Strong guidance and leadership is needed in a world in which everything seems to be insecure.

Not only is prophetic ministry helpful in leading people to a fitting ministry, it also helps discerning the gifts of the Spirit in their lives. Prophetic gifted people and especially prophets have often a special insight in the giftedness and characteristics of other persons. God uses them to bring clarity into lives of others and to pray specific for a certain gift and its growth in the life of a person. It is important that gifts are stirred up in the lives of believers and that they are motivated to use it.¹⁹ Prophets can also lay their hands on people and impart gifts in their lives. This all should happen according to how God leads them. This will result in believers who fit more together and serve each other with a unique variety of gifts. It is God who knows best which gifts are needed in a certain congregation or church, so it is best to let Him take the lead.

More important than gifts in itself is that believers are motivated to grow into the character of Christ and receive a heart that is strong in Gods grace. The fruit of the Spirit should become visible in their lives (Gal 5:22). If a person is reliable and dedicated to the Lord, then He will work more powerful in his life and reveal more of Himself to him. If we grow more in obedience to God, become more like Christ, then God can trust us with more than He did before.²⁰

Added to this, prophetic ministry also has its task in appointing ministers to lead the believers. It will depend on the organisation of a church in what way this is possible. Many churches do not leave much room for revelation in the appointment of elders and deacons, as happened in the early church, since they vote for new ministers. This is a system that is borrowed from the worldly idea of the majority who decides what is right.

¹⁹ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 39.

²⁰ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 44-45.

Voting is very important in the contemporary culture. For many people the outcome of a vote shows what is right or wrong. If the majority says that abortion is right, well, then we should change the constitution. Who are we as leaders of a country that we can tell people what is right or wrong? This attitude has also much influence in churches, while it should be reversed. Leaders need a servant heart, seeking the best for the people. But that also implies that they should take their given authority and take the responsibility of appointing other ministers, of course always while listening to the other believers.

As we have seen in the example of Timothy, God uses prophetic ministry also to set apart and appoint ministers. It can be during a prayer meeting or in other ways that He gives instructions who has to be taken as a new leader for a particular ministry. Those prophecies can be very useful and of practical help to discern Gods will in a particular situation. And again, if we listen to the Spirit, then the right persons with the right gifts will come in the right place, which results in the best growth and unity for the Church.

4.4.6 Training and Teaching

Training and teaching are some of the most important aspects to build a healthy church. This can never be stressed enough. Prophetic ministry should never replace study and teaching. Directly after prophets are teachers mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12: 28. Prophecy gives very up to date revelation from God and prepares the heart to obedience to God's word and expectation to hear Him speak through it. Training and teaching gives knowledge to the prepared hearts on which the Church will be build and become solid. Without knowledge it is impossible to become a mature body of believers.

For believers who discover others with the gift of prophecy the danger is often the attraction of 'easy knowledge'. The feeling is: 'If God speaks so directly to me, why should I study much in my Bible?' Unconsciously or consciously, the discipline of studying and growing in the Word of God becomes less important.²¹ This is very close to the postmodern pluralism and relativism. Each one can have his own personal revelation that leads him to what is good and which should not be challenged by others. If you have experienced God's words for you, who can judge you? This opens the door to pluralism in the church, false teachings, divisions and defeat by Satan.

²¹ Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, 227-228.

If only prophecy is important in a certain church, then it will go out of balance. The growth in depth will be missing. It is the task of prophetic ministry, together with teachers and other ministry functions to equip believers. The Word of God needs to be the centre of all teaching. Knowing and understanding the Bible is the core for both those who are prophetic gifted and those who are not. All need to be grounded in the true, living Word, through which God builds us up and speaks to us. Our hearts need to be eager to learn from Him.²² Furthermore, knowing the Bible also provides solid material that the Spirit can use in prophecy. Usually He makes use of the knowledge that we have to communicate the revelation that He gives. If we have a thorough knowledge of Scripture, then He can use those words to make His will known, which is far more powerful and effective than some self-chosen words. Furthermore, it helps the one who prophesies to discern if he is speaking Biblical truth or not. Only a person who is at home in the Bible will be able to grow more in the prophetic gift or function.

Teaching and training needs to impart all that is important to challenge the unbiblical aspects of postmodernism and to lead and train believers to adapt Biblical thinking in their lives. Every person who becomes a Christian starts the process of offering themselves totally to God, being renewed and reformed in their thinking, which leads to a behaviour that keeps their body, mind and soul pure (Rom 12:1,2).

Authority of the Bible and of others who are appointed to lead you, like parents, husbands, teachers and leaders, needs to be restored. Education is needed to teach people what real community is, how relations are intended to be, and so on and on. Without knowledge, every group of Christian people will perish. This was not only true for the Israelites (Hos 4:6).

The same applies for training in gifts of the Spirit and possible ministries. This knowledge will help so many churches to start understanding its relevance and will prevent so many mistakes that are made in our days at a high cost, disturbing the church. Truth is an important cure to prevent or do away with false teachings and ways of living.

However, note that it is both teaching and training. Edifying the people is not just a thing of the mind, but something that involves the whole life. Discipleship and exemplary lives are necessary to lead others into more committed lives. It needs to be practical, including ways to practice what is taught in the meetings of believers.

²² Collins, *Profeteer!*, 43, 44.

4.4.7 Ministering the Ministers

Finally, an important task of prophetic ministry is giving guidance for the church and its leaders, as was seen in Chapter 2. A group of people around a leader, praying and interceding for him and sharing received revelations with him, will surely be an enormous blessing for him.²³ Ministers are often in a lonely position without many others with whom they can share their burdens and responsibilities. It is the guiding and consoling ministry of a prophet or prophetic gifted person that can again encourage him, strengthen him and give a clear direction for the ministry that he is doing. Again, Timothy is a good example of this principle (1 Tim 1:18). In this way, a minister is enabled to be in his turn a blessing for all others he is serving, as Paul had in mind with his example of the body of Christ serving each other. A healthy church needs this ministry to its ministers, in order to let them be continuously inspired in leading the whole of the church towards God's purposes.

4.5 Encouraging the Disheartened

Exhortation of the body of Christ is another main area of prophecy. The Church is too often defeated by discouragement. Instead of running the race, fighting the good fight and sowing the good news of the Gospel it is sitting down in despair, with a feeling of defeat and of being unable to do the work that is before them, while facing Satan, the world and themselves.

Prophetic ministry can give a new perspective, hope in difficult times. The good news of the Gospel and the encouraging words that are spoken lift the eyes up to God again. It can give a future perspective that keeps hope living in the hardest situations, like the negro slaves in America experienced. So many of their songs, the so called Negro Spirituals, are about heaven and the land that awaited them. That is truly a prophetic perspective. The following verse explains this principle:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*²⁴

²³ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 28.

²⁴ Lyrics by Helen H. Lemmel, 1922.

Especially in our time much attention is given to the self. This egocentrism of postmodernism has resulted in a deep emptiness. At the same time the old relationships of families and committed lifelong friendships are lost, who used to be the vanguard for a person in emotional or spiritual need. Churches have seen a great increase in the need of pastoral care. Prophetic ministry can be of great use in those situations. Personal words of encouragement, inspired by God can mean so much for a person. The Holy Spirit can give exactly the right encouragement to a person, remembering him of a verse that spoke to him long ago, or some situation that always made him happy. No other person is able to speak so specific tailor made to the heart of another one.

This exhortation is very much important in the postmodern confusion and a time of massive uncertainty. Prophetic ministry has an incredible power to release people from ‘cages of discouragement’.²⁵ It lifts up their heads and tells people with an inferiority complex of their dignity, proclaiming the truth of being a new creation in Christ.²⁶

Christians have often dedicated and rededicated their lives to certain tasks and ways of living, failing every time. It is in this discouragement that new perspective is brought by remembering them of the truths of the Bible: being a Son of God, having Jesus’ authority, running towards the end where Jesus will wait for them. Training is given in how to live a victorious life, overcoming sin and living by faith.²⁷ With an increased faith, believers step out again to run the race, fixing their eyes on Jesus only. Defeat can be changed in victory and fear in fearlessness.

To be involved in this kind of prophetic ministry, a caring heart and a deep brokenness inside is important, which helps to be able to feel the needs of God’s people and to bring them before Him, asking Him to comfort them.

²⁵ David Parker in Collins, *Profeteer!*, 25.

²⁶ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

4.6 Sustaining the Momentum of the Christian Mission and Ministry

We have been looking at the significance of prophetic ministry for the building up of the Church. Now we will look at its significance for activities that come out of a healthy church, as a result of its growing maturity.

The purpose of the Church is not merely to bring people into the Church. Its commission is to go into the world, telling the good news of Jesus, baptising the people and disciplining them. After they are equipped, they need to be sent out again. All the ministry and missions work that is done by Christians is aimed at building up the churches and reaching the world for Christ. The Church is missionary in its essence. Without ministry and mission it cannot be Church.

The word of God is always alive and full of power. If God speaks through human beings, then it will never return without fruit, as is the character of all His words. Like the rain brings forth growth in the earth, so God's words will bring growth where they are brought (Isa 55:8-13). Therefore, prophetic ministry, if it is pure, will bring forth life, fruit, growth, strength. It will take away what is wrong. It will be a power behind the mission that the Church is fulfilling and the ministries that are done. What is weak will be strengthened and encouraged to move on. What is doubting about the direction will be guided towards the future plans of the Lord. Prophetic ministry has an effect of sustaining the momentum of missions and ministry.

4.6.1 Guidance Into (New) Directions

It is said that the evangelist enlarges the tent while a prophet strengthens the stake.²⁸ This is true, but not all truth. Prophets and prophetic ministry are also used by the Lord to give a new direction. Added to sustaining the growing Church is the function of sustaining the mission of the Church. Often churches start very enthusiastic with new missions and ministries. The vision is fresh and the desire to fulfil the mission strong. Regularly this all comes down after some time and it seems that the end of the road is reached. Or the desire to fulfil the mission is still present without knowing the right direction and ways to go. Prophetic words that indicate a certain direction or give new

²⁸ Francis, *Where are the Prophets*, 59.

insights in a dry situation help a mission that lost its way to become fruitful and effective again. Prophetic ministry can lead in missions today as clear as the Holy Spirit led Paul and his team centuries ago. A new suggestion or fresh input can do miracles to reform or revive a ministry. It is amazing how sometimes a little bit of guidance can do great things.

On the personal level, prophetic ministry is powerful to help others discover that Jesus is Lord, that He knows all about them, loves them, wants to forgive their sins and is longing for a personal relation with them. Collins proposes how Jesus was prophetic in His reaching out to the people.²⁹ The Gospels do not give us much examples of Jesus' one to one evangelism. Two stories are especially interesting for our topic. The first is the meeting of Jesus and Zacchaeus. The fact that Jesus knew his name (since God knew everything about him before he ever met Jesus) was enough for him to invite Jesus heartily into his house and, more than that, into his heart (Lk 19:1-10).

The second story is the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan women (Jn 4:1-42). Jesus could have observed that at least something was different in her life from the unusual time that she came to draw water and the fact that she came alone, not with other women as was the custom. Jesus, being in communication with the Spirit and led by Him, asked her to bring Him water, in order to give living water to her in His turn. This led to the life-changing conversation that followed. Again He uses information that was revealed to Him by the Spirit when He asks her to bring her husband. This encounter made her to say: "I can see that you are a prophet." (Jn 4:19). In fact, she said with those words three things, that can be derived from the enormous impact that Jesus' prophetic ministry had on her life:³⁰

1. *I can see that you know God and have a living relation with Him*
2. *You are able to hear what He says to you, even about me!*
3. *Through you He has showed me that He knows everything about me and in spite of that still loves me.*

The result in her life was that not only she, but many others with her came to the knowledge of Christ as their saviour. Jesus' ministry was in fact not so miraculous at all, if seen from a distance. It was the fact that His words and deeds were directly inspired by

²⁹ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

the Holy Spirit that penetrated the life of the women and changed her. In the same way, prophetic ministry can be very 'normal' but life changing for personal evangelism. It is very simple just to ask the Lord how to minister to the people around you and probably to reveal things about them that can be used to open their hearts for Him.

Another important part of guidance and sustenance in missions is guidance for church planting. God can lead us to reach groups of people in the same way as He is doing for individuals. And reached individuals can become a new gathering of believers, a new church. Dependence on God is the number one responsibility in missions. Listening to Him and being in touch with His will is the lifeline. Prophecy is intended to be a powerful tool for reaching this world in the way of the Spirit and not in our own power.

4.6.2 Watching and Interpreting the Signs of the Time

Looking forward helps a person to keep going and gives him perspective. Understanding helps him to react right to a situation. That is the importance of watching and interpreting the signs of the time. As with the Old Testament prophets, Christians are called to know the times and to be prophetic in their attitude towards it. They should not be deceived. Instead of that, prophetic gifted people can ask the Lord to open their eyes for the reality around them and to see what is behind it. Things in itself can look good or bad and we are unable to value them right. God knows all things and is willing to reveal what is good and important to know. Nations are giving over to lying propaganda, deceiving thoughts and ways of living that are promoted while leading the people against the will of God. Like Micaiah, prophetic ministry has to stand for the truth, even when a whole nation's leadership is deceived and leading to darkness.³¹ We are living in a time in which witchcraft and magic are again rising and seen by many as useful for daily life. This return to paganism and even the worship of Satan is certainly changing the atmosphere of a country, as was the case in several times of Israel's existence, when idolatry was widespread in the country. Prophetic ministry has a major task in revealing the schemes of darkness and showing the evil works of Satan behind the beautiful *façade* that he has put up before it.

Together with this all things should constantly be placed in an eschatological perspective. They are not standing on their own. On the contrary, everything is part of the

³¹ Kjell Sjöberg, *The Prophetic Church* (Chichester: New Wine Press, 1992), 100.

whole of history that is leading to the end of the world and heaven as we know it, which will be the beginning of the new heaven and earth and eternal life or death. Not only keeps this perspective Christians on the move towards the great end goal, it calls them at the same time to stay alert in the midst of all this. No one should fall asleep. We have to stand ground against the evil schemes of Satan, looking forward to the return of the Lord.

4.6.3 Intercession and Spiritual Warfare

Churches in the western countries as a whole are now often in defence against Satan and the influence of the world on them. That is not how it is intended by God. The Church was designed by Him to overcome the powers of hell and to establish His kingdom on earth. That means progression and defeat of Satan's strongholds. It means taking whole cities and countries for God. How can this happen? One major aspect is intercession and spiritual warfare. As real as war between humans is a fact, in the same manner war in the spiritual realm is a fact. God wants us to be equipped and armed to fight those battles that are the real fights in our lives (Eph 6:12). We are called to put on the full armour of God (vs. 13). God is instructing us in this fight through His word and through prophecies. As in all times, prophetic ministry is on the forefront of spiritual warfare. For the purpose of this thesis only a few aspects will be mentioned.

Moses is an important example of prophetic intercession. While Joshua was fighting the Amalekites, Moses was interceding on the mountain. Joshua and the Israelites were winning as long as Moses continued to be strong with his staff held high (Ex 17:8-15). In the same way, prophetic intercession, tuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, cannot be missed in anything that the Church of Christ is attempting in this world. God's revelation is needed to know what to pray and intercede for.³² The Holy Spirit can reveal what is needed to break the power of Satan in a certain situation. Like in any warfare that we can see on earth, strategies and ways of approach that have to be used in order to win a battle will differ from place to place.

Spiritual warfare and prophetic prayer is needed to change things in the spiritual world to extend the reign of God. God's kingdom is not of this earth, it is fully incorporated in the visible world, but more than that. It is a reality that often after

³² John Dawson, *Taking our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds* (Pune: YWAM publishing, 1989), 42.

something in the spiritual world has happened, for example the defeat of a demonic force, that things change in the visible world. One well known example is that of Daniel, who started to pray for understanding of a vision that God had given him about a great war (Dan 10). After three weeks of intensive prayer and mourning, an angel appeared to him who revealed the truth to him. This angel explained that he had been hindered by the prince, the angel of the Persian kingdom, for twenty - one days, until Michael, one of the chief angels, came to help him. Then he was able to come to Daniel and give him the answers that were sent to him at the moment he started praying.

The example of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel underlines also this principle (1 Kings 18). The rain God promised (1Kings 18:1) came *after* the open defeat of Baal and Asherah, the fertility gods that could not bring rain. When it had become clear that they could not do anything, God gave rain again. First the victory came in the spiritual realm, then the result became visible in the natural world. This is the principle that is important behind missions and ministry. If we are longing to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ effectively, then the 'strong man' has to be bound first (Mt 12:28,29). When strongholds are broken in a city or country, people will become more receptive for the Good News, since things that have kept their city or country captive have been broken.

Often the promises of God have to be prayed into being. He already has announced what He wants to do, but uses human beings to let it become reality. Prophetic prayer opens the way for the fulfilment of God's promises. It is like the process of giving birth. God told Elijah that rain would come (1 Kings 18:1) and Baal and Asherah had been defeated, but this promise had to be delivered by prayer. Elijah prayed and waited for the fulfilment of the Lord's promise. Even Elijah's prayer attitude reflects the way women used to deliver babies in his days (1 Kings 18:42).³³ It shows a very strong personal involvement of the prophet in the things he is praying for. This attitude is needed to see changes break through in our postmodern world when God promises to give them. If we do not know how to intercede and conquer the powers of darkness, how can the Church overcome this world? Prophetic ministry is leading the Christians in those areas to be victorious, in order to extend God's kingdom.

Prophetic ministry is like being a watchman, on guard for his people and looking for coming dangers. Prophets like Ezekiel were appointed by God to be a watchman for Israel.

³³ School van Gebed, *Profetisch Bidden*, 2.

Prophetic ministry is interceding for the nation like Moses and Elijah did.³⁴ This is based on God's promise that He will give what we, in unity together, from Him (Mt 18:19-20).³⁵ Being a watchman can have many different appearances.³⁶ What unites it is a sense of responsibility, faithful prayer and a heart for the people you are praying for. If the Church becomes a prophetic praying church again, cities and countries will be changed, like is happening in Africa at the moment.

As we have seen in the second Chapter, the New Testament prophets never prophesied to the government and their rulers. At the same time, by interceding for the nation and leading the Church to be prophetic in prayer, more difference will be made than by any other way. The Church is in great need of becoming prophetic again in its prayer and in its deeds. Christians need to take their responsibility as salt in this world.

One aspect should not be overlooked when talking about prophetic intercession and spiritual warfare. We have seen that both in the Old and New Testament symbolic acts could accompany prophecies or prophetic prayer. Oil, wine, salt, grain, each of those symbols stand for certain Biblical principles which can symbolise something that is important in a certain situation, after which God will give victory over the evil powers.³⁷ It is therefore important to obey the Spirit and do according to how He guides us also when He asks us to use symbols. Symbolic actions can lead to the defeat of certain powers that otherwise will not be broken.

This section about intercession and spiritual warfare has been very general and short. In spite of that, it represents one of the most important aspects of prophetic ministry. It functions as the engine behind the mission of the Church, as well as preparing and battling new ground for the progress of the Gospel and the fulfilment of the Lord's promises, together with its importance for the protection of what has been achieved.

³⁴ Sjöberg, *The Prophetic Church*, 161.

³⁵ Collins, *Profeteer!*, 30.

³⁶ School van Gebed, *Profetisch Bidden*, 3-4.

³⁷ Ana Mendez, *Shaking the Heavens: How You Can Pray God's Will on Earth as it is in Heaven* (Ventura: Renew, 2001), 164-172.

4.7 *Living According to the Kingdom Requirements*

The fourth area of significance for prophetic ministry is living according to the requirements of the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. We live in a world in which law and justice have become pragmatic. If the majority thinks it is good, then it is good. This has led to more unjust situations. Sexual immorality, lust, indulgence, selfishness and greed are ruling the societies. Sexual immorality seems to be dominant but lust is present in the lives of humans for all kind of things.³⁸ The Church needs not only to be build up in a biblical way, living a life of holiness, it also has to have this impact on the world around. God is a pure, holy God, demanding purity and holiness. Prophetic ministry should speak into situations that are wrong, according to how God leads.

The Christian life is a life given by grace, to which the law can provide the guidelines how God wants us to live. It teaches us to abstain from what is not good, leading to a life that is both pleasing to God and better for ourselves and the people around us. The void, the seeking, the longing inside us that is often behind lust and greed, the self-centred life does not satisfy.³⁹ This is true both for Christians and non-Christians.

We have a commission for the world. It is not only the preaching of the Gospel. It is bringing reformation and restoring justice. Biblical principles lead to active involvement in the world around. Social action is an integrated part of being Christian.

Many churches have replaced this part of being Christian for a 'hyper-spiritual' outlook, while they forget to do what is explicitly lived and ordered by Jesus: to take care of those around them who are imprisoned, impoverished, victims of injustice, sick, miserable. Jesus came for those who needed healing, not for those who thought to be healthy. That was a holistic vision, including spirit, soul and body. Some parts of the Church of Christ condemn others that are active in social activities, saying that it is not the task of the Church. In the meanwhile they themselves are bringing judgment to themselves, disobeying the orders of Jesus by staying in their comfortable buildings with their nice spiritual sermons. That is absolutely wrong. Every Church has to care for the whole of the persons and societies it tries to reach. An awakening is necessary to become

³⁸ Moriarty, *The Perfect 10*, 148-149.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

more active again to change this world. It is prophetic ministry that has to communicate this message to the Church and to lead her into specific ministries.⁴⁰

The Church is the ambassador of God's Kingdom and His message to the world. Where prophets spoke directly to governments in the Old Testament is the situation now that prophetic ministry has to prepare the whole of the Church to be a prophetic voice. Christians are living and working in almost every area of society. Each of them should have an impact that changes its environment, equipped and envisioned by a local church that is prophetic. Each person, no matter if he is cleaning offices or minister of a government, should strive to bring justice and holiness in his area of influence by prayer and acting.

The Church as a whole has to be led to lift her voice in unity and speak and act against unjust structures in a society. Prophetic ministry helps the Church to be actively involved in this prophetic mission, while listening to what God is telling to do. It is both a praying and interceding Church, changing situations by prayer, and an active Church, working in situations with both hands to show the love of God. Depending on the situation and country, ways can be found to help the poor, the marginalized, to defend the case of the widows, to care for elder people and those who are unable to keep up the pace of the technology-society. When a government is going in a way that is not healthy for the country, it can in a humble attitude seek ways to warn it for the consequences, while at the same time offering alternatives that God is willing to reveal His children through prayer. It means for many Western Christians giving away what is not necessary of all luxury and being content with what is enough for daily life and the place in the society that someone has. Too much wealth is also injustice, since it means that someone is not doing everything possible to help others who lack so much. Many Christians have never repented of this attitude.

If the Church takes her prophetic task and way of living seriously, how much more will she be the salt and light of this world again. She will influence the world and establish the Kingdom of God in the world by prayer, preaching and social action, aimed at the building up of new believers in order to send them out again to reach others. She will be healthy and alive, impacting the nations rather than be impacted by the nations.

⁴⁰ See paragraph 4.4.

4.8 Summary

We have stated at the beginning of this chapter that the Church in our time is not dead, but in need of revision. It has become adapted to its environment or fallen asleep. The vision, witness and life is often lost. The Church has a great need of becoming alive and relevant again. The question was asked: “How can the Church be revived and reinvent its role?”

After that we argued that it is especially prophetic ministry that is important in such a situation. Both in the Old and New Testament is it functioning as God’s tool to revitalize what is sleeping, to renew what is old, and to change and take away what is wrong, leading Israel and the Church back to its mission. In the same way prophetic ministry is supposed to function in our time. The situation of the Church is problematic in all four areas in which we have studied the New Testament prophetic ministry. It has therefore no alternative than to resort to prophetic ministry.

In its nature, prophetic ministry causes a threefold movement in the body of Christ, a movement upward, inward and outward. It is leading the Church to be prophetic.

Prophecy, which is included in prophetic ministry, is not a ‘far away thing’ but something that can be very normal in the daily functioning of a believer and of a church. God can use it to reach the person next to us in a bus or any other situation. This is a great blessing for the Church in a postmodern time. All people have developed their own belief systems and we are living in an enormous complex world. In that, the Spirit leads His people into an effective approach of those who do not know Jesus. It fits the quest for experience and something ‘real’ that is central in the life of a postmodern person. It ‘works’ and that is what he is interested in. From this he can start to accept truth and possibly come to know Christ.

The four areas of prophetic ministry that were given in the second chapter are again explored in this chapter, now with the perspective of how they are significant especially in the postmodern time.

First, building up the disturbed and distracted Church is necessary. It is time to return to the foundation of what Church really is and to build on that, which is both involved in the task of prophetic ministry. This process involves *worship*, leading people

into the presence of God to magnify Him and where He ministers and works in the lives of those who are present; a *restoration of truth*, which means much more than only running after (prophetic) experiences; preventing the opposite of truth, i.e. *false teachings and prophecies*, as actual now as it was in the Ancient Near East and Graeco - Roman environment of the Old and New Testament era. Furthermore, *setting people free* from bondages and addictions by listening to the guidance of the Spirit and acting according to it; *leading people into the ministry* that God has specially prepared for them, which can help uncommitted postmodern people to become really committed to something, and with this, it is involved in appointing leaders that please God to lead the people. Very important is the aspect of *training and teaching*, which is not exchangeable for anything else, in order to grow a balanced, healthy church. Finally, prophetic ministry ministers to the ministers in their responsible and often lonely positions.

The second main area of prophetic ministry is encouraging the disheartened. The postmodern situation seems to need this more than ever before. Individualism, egocentrism and the loss of close, committed relations causes a deep emptiness without the social vanguard that used to prevent people from falling. Pastoral care has often a task of replacing a little bit the relations that people are missing. In this situation of massive uncertainty, encouragement and exhortation is extremely important.

Third, prophetic ministry can sustain the momentum of Christian mission and ministry, the movement outward. The word of God is true and full of power. Through the Bible and prophecy, God speaks and revives His Church in missions. Prophetic ministry can be the engine behind the mission and the guide for how to move forward, preventing an early stop of a ministry by lack of perspective or inspiration. On the personal level, prophetic ministry can speak very directly to the heart of people, like Jesus did with Zacchaeus and the Samaritan women.

By watching and interpreting the time, prophetic ministry reveals the schemes of darkness behind the beautiful *façade* that Satan has put up before it. At the same time, it helps to look forward with hope for the future, while being prepared to face it.

Intercession and spiritual warfare are very important in the Christian life. Prophetic ministry functions as watchman for the Church and its ministry in the world, while at the same time battling spiritual battles to win new ground for Christ. God's promises are prayed into being. The battle is mainly against the invisible world, like Paul writes in Ephesians 6. When a spiritual battle is won, progress can be made in the visible world.

Fourth and last, in a pragmatic and immoral world, holiness and justice needs again to be established, according to the principles of God's kingdom. Prophetic ministry leads the Church to be holy and to become active in working for the society, social justice, purity and morals and so on, in all areas and levels of life. The Church has a prophetic task in this world, given by Jesus in His example of bringing justice and help for the poor. It is not an option, it is a priority.

We have considered in this chapter how prophetic ministry is significant in the Church today in her difficult situation, and how it functions in several areas. This brings us to the concluding chapter, in which some final notions will be given and a number of proposals will be given for what is advisable for the Church to do in order to restore prophetic ministry in its proper place, which can lead to her renewal.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 *Conclusions From the Attempted Research*

In our endeavour to explore the significance of prophetic ministry we have seen that the Church in its postmodern situation has to resort to prophetic ministry to reinvent its role in this world. This prophetic ministry is more than mere prophecy. Prophetic ministry as it is used in this thesis is the ministry by prophets, prophetic gifted or prophetic inspired people to their environment, ministering inspired by the Holy Spirit through Scripture and direct revelation. It can also mean to minister according to given prophecies, e.g. the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets. The ministry has prophecy at its centre in its twofold appearance. The foretelling aspect is often problematic in its functioning in the Church, in contrast to the forthtelling aspect. Therefore we have mainly focused on prophecy as forth telling.

In the first chapter we have explored prophetic ministry in the Old Testament. In all their differences, the prophets had also many things in common. What we understand is that prophetic ministry in the Old Testament was very relevant. Especially in times of crisis God would raise prophets to lead His people. Regularly the situation in which Israel found itself was very challenging. The threats from different countries and changing political situations asked for an adaptation of the country. Those difficult situations for the nation of Israel, when it was in spiritual decline and far away from God, were usually the times that prophetic ministry was extra needed and extra effective. As is said before, this was challenging for those who had to bring God's message and could even cost them their lives. But it would also bring healing to the nation and lead it back to the worship of God if the people were willing to listen. It was prophetic ministry that revived the vision of Israel and taught it to find its way back in the course of the events, in the course of history. Prophetic ministry was a powerful aspect in the existence of Israel, that it was desperately in need of.

This conclusion of the first chapter has led us to the question if this kind of ministry is still actual. It brought us into the second chapter, which attempted to study prophetic ministry in the New Testament. We have seen that prophetic ministry in the New Testament has several appearances. John the Baptist and others were prophesying under the old covenant. Jesus belonged both to the old covenant and functioned as an Old Testament prophet, as well as to the new covenant that He established by His death and resurrection. Then the church came into existence after His ascension, at Pentecost. It is characterised by the Gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus Christ, as a part of the new covenant. From then onwards prophecy, the core of prophetic ministry, has a different character. It became something that could be given to all believers, a fulfilment of Joel 2:28-29. It was not infallible anymore, but needed to be tested. In our study we have seen that prophecy is given to build up the Church and to lead it into mature love for God, each other and the people in the world. We have taken some more place to investigate prophecy as a gift and an office, to provide a better insight in how it is intended to be and what aspects are involved. The result seems to lead us to the conclusion that, in spite of all mistakes, it can function very well in the Church of Jesus Christ, and that this situation has not ceased, but that prophecy and prophetic ministry is still very actual.

Prophecy and prophetic ministry is used by the Holy Spirit to enable people to function as God's mouthpiece. Sometimes those messages are aimed at the future, but more often are they speaking in today's situations. It can speak directly in any situation, even in the secrets of a person's life. God uses the prophetic ministry to equip and build up the church into maturity, to encourage the people, to sustain the mission of the Church and to establish life according to His Kingdom here on earth. The situations that are mentioned in this chapter seem to reveal that prophetic ministry was fully relevant for the early Church, in spite of all its weaknesses. It provided direction and led to changes in many areas of church life, according to how the Spirit was leading them through revelations. This ministry is important for the Church of Christ and the world in which she is functioning.

After coming to this understanding of prophetic ministry according to the Old and New Testament we tried to examine the postmodern situation in the third chapter. It is a term that has a huge range of different definitions. In the way we understand it, we have seen that it is in many ways both reacting against, building on and related with modernism. The basic 'creed' of Postmodernity is that there is no truth. Keywords are relativism and tolerance; constructivism; pragmatism and experience; and pluralism. God

can be moulded as wished - He has become 'weightless' - while at the same time a strong religious consciousness is present. This all leads to individualism, authority-problems, little commitment, consumerism and pleasure-centred attitude. The world of a postmodernist has become fragmented and compartmentalized, dominated and filled by virtual reality and with relations that are very different from the long-term relations with family and a number of close friends. Finally, there is an emphasis on going back to what was, since we cannot do anything that is really new, to use fragments of it in a unique new compilation.

All those aspects of postmodernism seem to have influenced the Church more than that it has influenced its postmodern situation. It is heavily challenged by it, while at the same time great opportunities have been opened to reach the unreached in new or old ways. Challenges involve the communication of absolute truth, commitment to what comes from believing a certain truth and the style of communicating. Opportunities are present in the holistic Gospel of Jesus, which speaks to the postmodern experience and holistic worldview; in the promoted tolerance and equality of all opinions; in giving people a purpose to live for; and in providing a place to belong, a family-relation of a quality that they often do not have in other places.

In seeking its way between answering the challenges and making the most of the opportunities, it is the task of the Church to give a balanced diet that builds up the people. It should not necessarily be unattractive or distasteful. Good food can be prepared in a good and attractive way. In the same way, the presentation of the Gospel can and should be closely adapted to the postmodern culture, as far as it is not affecting the core values of Christian faith. But it should never render to the demands of the society in itself in order to reach it.

The third chapter provided a stepping stone to go to the fourth one. The general diagnosis of the Church that was given in relation to the influence of postmodernism made already many weaknesses to come to the surface. When we examined it some more, the need of the Church in this time became clear. The Church has lost its vision, witness and life and is in great need of renewal.

Then we argued that it is especially prophetic ministry that it should seek in such a situation. Both in the Old and New Testament is it functioning as God's tool to revitalize what is sleeping, to renew what is old, and to change and take away what is wrong, leading Israel and the Church back to its mission. In the same way prophetic ministry is supposed to function in our time. The situation of the Church is problematic in all four

areas in which we have studied the New Testament prophetic ministry. It has therefore no alternative than to resort to prophetic ministry. This ministry is significant for the postmodern situation of the Church.

The second part of chapter four tried to give insights in how prophetic ministry can be significant in our situation. It initiates a threefold movement in the body of Christ, upward to the Lord, inward to build the Church and outward to bring the Gospel of Christ and His Kingdom in all the earth.

Prophetic ministry works together with other ministries for the equipment of the Church of Christ. It is important in worshipping God and meeting Him. It has a role in restoring the truth and keeping the churches from false teachers and prophets. It is involved in setting the believers free and releasing them into the ministry that God has given them, as well as ministering to the leaders and appointing them in the right positions. Together with this, teaching and training is very important, since everyone needs to have a thorough foundation in the truth. Next to this, it is involved in encouraging people in a time of loneliness and troubles. It is an engine behind and a guide for missions and ministries of the Church, and it is active involved in bringing holiness and justice through the churches into the societies. This last aspect is very important for many churches who have neglected this part of being a Christian.

All those areas in which prophetic ministry can be actively involved to support it with its unique perspective are in continuous interaction with postmodern thought and action. The role of prophetic ministry has especially in this postmodern time more importance in those aspects, since the society and with it the community of believers has become so complex that everyone is losing the overview. More than ever are we in need of God's guidance through His word and through prophetic ministry in every specific area. He knows how to reach the hearts of those who do not know Him, and how to conquer the areas under demonic influence by the authority of Jesus Christ.

It is impossible to make use of all material and opinions that are available on this topic. Each chapter represents a whole area of knowledge in itself. But what we have seen developing is that prophetic ministry in all its diversity is a very valuable ministry for the Church, that surely should not be neglected. It has always been important for the Church, in spite of all dangers and abuses that have become visible, but our postmodern situation seems the more in need of prophetic ministry. The Church needs to be brought back to the

foundations and build in a thorough way, based on worship and knowledge of the truth. It needs to be equipped and guided into ministry. And it needs to be really relevant in its society, not only with words, but also with social action and a holy life, to restore justice and bring the reign of Christ.

This postmodern time offers many opportunities alongside with its challenges. Prophetic ministry is one of the things God has given to the Church to deal well with the challenges and make the most of the opportunities. This will sometimes involve radical steps and careful waiting for the Lord, according to how He leads the churches through the Bible, prophetic ministry and other ways. This thesis is not pleading for an unbalanced accent on prophetic ministry. But after exploring all the areas of prophetic ministry and its significance for the postmodern situation, a strong plea is made for the restoration and proper functioning of this ministry alongside with others.

5.2 *The Process of Embracing Prophetic Ministry*

As is said before, the Church needs to resort to prophetic ministry. We will now attempt to give some proposals how it can embrace prophetic ministry, and which challenges can be involved in doing so. This subdivision into several steps indicates an attitude and direction for approaching the process towards giving prophetic ministry its proper place. We do not have a specific church in mind for those steps. It can apply for a church that is organized worldwide, a denomination, or a small local church. What we try to communicate is a pattern that can help the Church to become prophetic again.

A first step is *awareness*. The Church needs to realize its situation before anything else can change. Many churches have not much insight in what they are lacking or are unable to define it. It appears that there is a widespread awareness that the church is in a difficult situation, but not that much consensus is found in what solutions are needed. Therefore this awareness should not only be growing about the situation of the Church, but also about the necessity to give prophetic ministry its proper place again. It can be helpful to have mature Christians from outside the church giving their opinion, since they will have a fresh look on the situation. This helps in the challenge to come out of being imperilled by immersion in the postmodern (church) context. Another challenge in this step is not to avoid the painful things. Self examining can be a process that is revealing things that we do not want to see. Even then we should not hide it, but face it. The best way to growth and healing is by going through the difficulties and solve them, instead of denying them.

Second is *evaluation*. Once a church has become aware of its needs and the necessity of prophetic ministry, it can move a step further into evaluating its situation. How much and in what areas is it mainly impacted by the society that it lives in? And how much is it impacting its environment? What in the church does really make difference in the world? Like the previous step, this one also requires honesty and probably the help of some others from 'outside'. The challenge of evaluation is to move into the depth and not to state only some general lines, as is done in this thesis. Time is needed to do this properly. Furthermore, evaluation should arrive at specific outcomes that provide a basis for further steps.

Third is *a biblical view of prophetic ministry*. It will be good to take time to study prophetic ministry in the Bible to get a clear picture of what it exactly is, how it functioned and what its results are. It is the leadership of a church that has to take the first step in this. Through the leaders all the other believers can be equipped. Education is an important aspect of giving prophetic ministry its proper place, since it provides the necessary understanding of the ministry and is preventing false teachings and wrong practises. Moreover, if people understand something they can see the value of it, and once they have seen the value, they can become committed to it.

The leadership has not only the task of initiating this change in education and training, it also has to revive the vision once in a while. Together with this, it has to have a lot of patience and wisdom to face the challenge of a process of bringing changes in a congregation. Some churches are flexible, but many will have difficulty in understanding and accepting the 'new doctrine'. The doctrinal background and traditions can make it look 'new' in the eyes of many believers, and there will always be a number of persons that discards it as 'unbiblical', or they will just say that they don't want any change.

A fourth step is *worshipping God*. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 111:10). Worship is love of God. Authentic worship is coming from a fear of the Almighty Sovereign God. He reveals Himself in a place of worship and changes us and our perspectives. It is therefore of great importance to approach the Lord and bring Him honour, glory and love. He is the centre of all prophetic ministry. His reaction by giving revelations and an outpouring of what is good and appropriate will lead to His glory and give direction in everything that is needed to implement prophetic ministry in church life.

Love the world without accepting what is wrong is step five. God asks us to bring hope to this world, not condemnation. The challenges and aspects of postmodernism make us sometimes to be too negative about it. God is different. He loved the world so much that He sent His Son, and He is still the same today. He sees the beauty in cultures, in societies and their varieties. How can we be relevant to our society if we don't have sincere love? The Old Testament prophets were very much connected with their people, even if they hated their idolatry and wrong lifestyle. It broke their hearts to see God's wrath coming closer to the nation and to watch how the people got lost in their iniquities. We need to have that same kind of heart. If we do not have such a love, we can ask the Lord to give love in our hearts and He will surely give it. Prophetic ministry is only possible with a loving, broken, humble heart, an awareness of our own shortcomings and dependence on God. Without it we will be condemning the world and miss God's purpose.

Ask the Lord what He wants the Church to do. This sixth step is the core of prophetic ministry. It is all about knowing what God's will is and to speak and work it out into everyday life. Our attitude should be a learning attitude. How does God want us to look at our situation and what does He want us to do to change it and to minister prophetically? It will sometimes be surprising how diverse His guidance can be. Some churches are led to a structure and forms that are very much adapted to the postmodern lifestyle, without compromising their message. Others are not going that far, but used in their position to reach others. The Holy Spirit knows best what is needed in a certain situation. The challenge for many churches is to be a relevant church without losing the message. This can be a real threat and it is one of the reasons that churches are losing their witness in this world. We need God's strategies to accomplish God's mission.

Listen and wait for God is the seventh important step in the process of being and becoming more prophetic as a church. No initiative should be done just by ourselves. Let God lead and wait until He has made His plans clear. A church needs to be active and act prophetically. It should be bold and never justify injustice. When action is needed, it should be done. There are many situations in which it is clear what is good to do, but it has always to be in dependence on God. Many other situations require the patience and expectation to wait for God's answer. A church can e.g. get involved social action, since the Bible speaks clearly that it has to do so. However, if plans for a particular activity or action have emerged, then it is good to wait for the clear indication of the Lord that it is His plan. Nothing that is good in itself should just be done because we like it. Both what action and when the action is needed is in God's hands. Good action at the wrong time will

have a wrong result. The challenge for us is on the one hand that we are not only engaged in prayer meetings without acting and on the other hand that we are not only planning our 'prophetic ministry schedule' without waiting for the Lord's guidance.

Discern true from false. Step eight is to stay alert and to be on guard against false influences in prophetic ministry. There can be false prophecies, human plans, wrong teachings, actions with a wrong attitude and so on. It is the task of all believers to test all things and keep what is good, under the guidance of mature leaders. We have been discussing false prophecy in chapter one and two. Those guidelines need to be maintained for a balanced ministry. Prophetic ministry in the Old and New Testament was functioning amidst counterparts in Israel and the Church and in the cultures surrounding it. A constant threat was to be deceived by false prophets, which would result in a wrong prophetic ministry. It is the responsibility and challenge of the Church to speak and act according to God's will, not to that of human beings or of Satan.

Careful radicality. Step nine is to be both careful and radical. When the need of the Church for prophetic ministry has become clear; it has been equipped and trained to understand it; has listened to God and discerned what He is telling, then it is time to be prepared for action. The Church needs to be careful, but also courageous. The prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist, Jesus, they all had to face suffering and difficulties because of the message they were bringing through their words and deeds. It was not a popularity contest. Their lives could even be at stake. This same radical attitude is needed in the Church in order to become prophetic. Even if our society does not like what God asks us to do, still we should do it. Carefully, but boldly. Humble, but without giving up. What is good has to be said and done. Once we have started to do what God asks us, we have to go for it and not give up. We must dare to be different in this world.

The challenge is usual to keep the balance. Sometimes we get so much scared by the opposition from others that we bring our message a little down to please them. Prophetic ministry loses its power in that way. Or we are so much 'on fire' for a certain vision or action that we run into it without the healthy amount of carefulness.

Act. Step ten is: If God points at something, do it! We need to take into consideration the previous points and act and prepare wisely. But do not make prophetic ministry into some big program like many others. Prophetic ministry is active in its nature, geared to the times and anchored to the Rock Jesus. It has to be *done*, not only theologized or programmed. It is an attitude. We have our responsibility in the world and

must not hide for it. This provides a big challenge for the Church's tendency to become institutionalized and to incorporate everything into a new part of the institution. The Church started as a movement initiated by Jesus. It has to keep the fire that initiated the movement, even if it changes into a more structured way of organizing.

As it is said before, those steps indicate only some aspects that are important for a Church to start reinventing its role by resorting to prophetic ministry. Much can be written about the details of such a process, but that is not the focus of this thesis. May all the words that have been written before inspire others to move on from this point or to lay a more thorough foundation, in order to restore prophetic ministry in the Church of today in her difficult situation in the postmodern world, so that it may lead to a new impulse for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If we hold on to the Word of God and restrain from running after experiences, if we test everything and keep what is good, and if we do what we profess, then prophetic ministry will bring the fruit that is seen throughout the Bible. Let us therefore seek the best for the whole of the Church and moreover, for this world, focused on Jesus, by strengthening the prophetic ministry in order to let it have its healthy and powerful role for which it is intended.

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