

Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell

Edited by

Antony Billington

Tony Lane

Max Turner

Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995.

ISBN: 0-85364-676-7

© The Editors and Contributors 1995

Reproduced by kind permission of Paternoster Press

**Prepared for the Web in September 2009 by Robert I
Bradshaw**

<https://theologyontheweb.org.uk>

The Prophethood of all Believers

Mary J. Evans

The 'priesthood of all believers' is widely accepted, particularly among evangelicals, as being, if not precisely at the heart of the Christian faith, nevertheless a doctrine which is an important accompaniment to the gospel message. It is my suggestion that this doctrine should be complemented by another affirming the 'prophethood of all believers'. Neither of these phrases actually occurs in the Bible in that form; however, I would suggest that the second, just as much as the first, finds considerable support in Scripture. We will consider the meaning of such a doctrine and its potential basis in the prophecy of Joel. The broader biblical evidence will then be explored. Finally, we will look at some of the implications of the view that all believers share in prophethood. For any genuine theology is more than just propositional truth, it involves action and lifestyle.

What then does this suggested doctrine of the prophethood of all believers mean? Joel 2:28-32 speaks of the time to come, and there is very little doubt that his 'afterwards' refers to eschatological events in what might later be described as the introduction of the Christian era. Luke certainly understood it that way when he describes Peter quoting from this passage in Acts 2. Joel foretells that in this new age, God will pour out his Spirit on all people – sons and daughters, young and old, male and female slaves. All of these will be involved in hearing directly from God and speaking out for God. Because most slaves were foreigners it may be that Joel also had those from other nations explicitly in mind. Peter seems to pick up this implication in Acts 2:39, although his primary reference is probably to *diaspora* Jews. Joel cannot simply mean that in the new age both men and women or both young and old will be able to prophesy,

because that was already true and had been throughout Israel's history. We know the names of many more male prophets than female, but there seems to have been no prejudice at all against the idea of a woman or a young person speaking on God's behalf, even on significant occasions. Deborah and Huldah are the obvious examples of women speaking out for God, and Jeremiah of a young person. Is it possible, then, that Joel is suggesting that something will happen which will affect not just some men and some women, but all men and all women who form part of the covenant community? Could it be that the prophetic gift, which up to that time had been restricted to only a few specially anointed people, was really envisaged as being available to most, if not all, of God's people?

The priesthood of all believers is an attempt to articulate the view that every believer, again regardless of sex, age, social status, or race, is able to enter freely into the presence of God without the need for any other mediator than Jesus Christ himself. Thus although Christian teachers, pastors and leaders can be ministers of God's blessing in a number of different ways, they do not stand as a mediator between God and the Christians they lead. Any Christian leader or minister who suggests or implies by their behaviour that their role is mediatorial and that they stand in some way between the believer and God, or that the believer needs to go through them to reach God, is usurping the role of Christ and the Spirit, and in danger of misrepresenting God rather than standing as his representative.

A concept of the 'prophethood of all believers' would suggest that just as every believer can come freely into the presence of God in a way that previously had not been possible, so every believer can, as it were, come from the presence of God recognising and speaking his word. The activity of the Spirit, poured out on all people, enables two-way traffic to take place, coming to God and hearing from God. Is this a possible, or a fair interpretation of the Joel passage, and if it is, is it supported elsewhere in either the Old or the New Testaments?

The first question to ask is, Are the 'prophecies', 'dreams' and 'visions' of Joel 2:28 separate activities to be undertaken by the different groups of the community as described, or are they parallel terms referring to a general manifestation of spiritual activity? In some ways, the question could be seen as irrelevant, because each member of the community is a son or a daughter and therefore the first phrase on its own could be seen as referring to the whole community. This may be why many commentators do not deal with

this issue, although Wolff does argue that they are synonymous.¹ In any case, even if they are not referring to identical activities they all involve what Stuart call 'revelatory functions associated with God's Spirit',² and therefore could come under the broad title of prophecy. A more significant consideration is whether Joel's meaning is that in the new age, prophecy would be widespread with prophets coming from every section and stratum of society or whether he really envisages that prophecy would be universal, attaching to every believer as an individual. It seems certain that the pouring out of the Spirit on all people is intended to be universal. It is not just that God's Spirit will be often found among the eschatological believers, but that every individual believer participates in the outpouring of God's Spirit. There is also no doubt that the prophetic activity of different members of the community is meant to be an illustration of this universal pouring out of the Spirit. But can we legitimately go on to argue that this means that all of God's people are expected to participate in prophecy?

Commentators are not united on this issue. G.S. Ogden sees 'all flesh' as 'every member of the restored community of Judah'.³ He considers that the salvation of 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord' (v. 32) originally meant deliverance from the current national crisis, but he also observes that Paul in Romans 10:12-13 uses this verse and sees salvation as 'the opportunity across every national barrier, for people to enter into fellowship with God'. It is not inconceivable that Joel also intended that interpretation. If the salvation is for all, is it not possible that the prophesying also relates to all? Calvin, writing rather earlier, states that Joel means 'the whole people would prophesy, or that the gift of prophecy would be common and prevail in a new and unusual manner'.⁴ This appears to suggest two possible interpretations. However, Calvin goes on to conclude that it does not mean that every single individual would be a prophet but just that it would be a very widespread phenomenon. Craigie sees prophecy as 'the declaration of the word of God to the people of God, in various modes' and suggests that 'the implication is that as a consequence of the abundant declaration of God's word in prophecy, new life would be breathed into the people as a

1 H.W. Wolff *A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 66.

2 Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 260.

3 G.S. Ogden and R.T. Deutsch, *Joel and Malachi*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 37.

4 John Calvin, *The Book of Joel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 82-83.

whole'.⁵ Wolff views prophecy in this instance not so much as proclamation or evangelism but rather as perception. He links this passage in Joel with Jeremiah 31:31-34 where 'everyone will stand in a relationship of immediacy to God', not just having the Torah but 'the prophetic certainty of the coming acts of God on behalf of his people'. According to Wolff, Joel teaches that 'the new people of God no longer recognise privileged individuals... [and]... before the wealth of such an outpouring all distinctions (i.e. of sex, age, status) recede completely'.⁶ Leslie Allen links this prophecy to Moses' desire that all should prophesy (Num. 11:29) and states: 'The prophetic privilege of standing, as it were, among Yahweh's council and hearing his word at first hand (Jeremiah 23:18) would be the personal experience of every member of the religious community... Distinctions of age, sex and social class would be swept away in this common spiritual endowment.' He picks up also the parallel to Galatians 3:28 and states: 'Important though these natural distinctions remained in the rest of life, in the sphere of spiritual capacity, they would not be relevant.'⁷ Douglas Stuart assumes universality of ministry: 'In the new age, salvation will not only be available to all who turn in faith to the true God, but there will be no distinction of spirituality on the basis of age, gender or social status... Those who live in the age of the Spirit cannot expect God to restrict any ministry of the Spirit from anyone simply because he or she is old or young, male or female, or of high or low standing socially. Where churches attempt to do this, they risk missing the fullness of God's blessing.'⁸

In general, then, there is agreement that the prophetic ministry is seen as relating in some way to the whole people of God and that the potentiality of prophecy is there for every individual. However, there seems for many, a slight unwillingness to go as far as to say that all will be prophets, even though there is nothing at all to suggest that this is not a feasible interpretation of Joel. To decide whether we can move from saying that it is feasible that Joel envisaged every believer having a prophetic function to asserting a general 'prophethood of all believers' obviously involves a consideration of what the rest of Scripture says on this point.

5 Peter C. Craigie, *The Twelve Prophets Volume 1*, DSB (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1985), 40.

6 Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 67.

7 Leslie C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 99.

8 Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 262.

One clear fact, and possibly the reason for the reticence of some of the commentators on Joel, is that in the New Testament church there was a gift and a ministry of prophecy that was not exercised by all. Paul's question 'Are all prophets?' in 1 Corinthians 12:29 demands the answer 'No'. And there would be no need to explain that Philip's four daughters prophesied, for example, if this was not something that was distinctive (Acts 21:9). Thus if there is a prophecy for all, it is something other than the gift exercised by these and other specified prophets. This would simply mean that terms were being used in two different ways, a phenomenon by no means rare in Scripture and indeed in any kind of communication. It is not the concern of this paper to discuss the different ways in which the specific gift of prophecy has been understood and applied in the life of the church throughout the centuries. The concern here is to investigate the nature of any prophetic function which can be ascribed to those believers who do not necessarily have any distinctive gift of prophecy. It is perhaps worth considering that the difference between the specific and distinctive gift of prophecy and any general ability or responsibility to prophesy might be related to the difference between the specific and distinctive gift of evangelism and the general ability and responsibility to evangelise, or the gift of teaching and the responsibility of all to share their knowledge.

Is there anything in the future hope presented in the rest of the Old Testament to support the view that prophethood, at least in one sense, will apply to all believers? Jeremiah 31:34 does envisage a time when there will be no need for teachers to explain what God is like because everyone, 'from the least to the greatest', will have personal knowledge. Isaiah (54:13) tells us that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea', and that 'all your sons will be taught by the LORD' (the context having nothing to indicate that this means sons as opposed to daughters!). John 6:45 quotes this verse and goes on to talk about everyone listening to the Father and learning from him. Zechariah 3:9 has, 'Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.' None of this is conclusive, but it certainly supports the idea that there will be within the new covenant community a universal hearing from God, a universal ability to discern what it is that God is saying.

In the New Testament, Acts 2 of course quotes Joel and reinforces the universal receiving of the Holy Spirit: 'The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off.' Titus also possibly picks up the Joel promise in 3:3-5, 'At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved... But he saved us... through the

washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously.' The pouring out of the Spirit thus reverses foolishness and deception – presumably by providing understanding and knowledge. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:10-15 says: 'God has revealed it to us by his Spirit... We have received the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us... we speak... in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God... The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment.' In 1 Thessalonians 4:9 we have, 'About brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God.' 1 John 2:26-27 states: 'I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real not counterfeit... remain in him.' It may be that in some of these instances the reference could be to the corporate understanding of the whole community rather than to individual discernment. But the individual reference is in every case feasible and I would argue, in many cases the more natural reading.

There seems, then, to be a consistent underlying idea that the possession of the Spirit which is pictured as the birthright of all believers, involves at the very least, some kind of ability to hear directly from God and to understand directly what it is that God is saying to his people.

M. Eugene Boring considers that the two witnesses who exercise a prophetic ministry in Revelation 11:3 should be seen as representing the church.⁹ He thinks that John was 'concerned to communicate that the prophetic ministry is not confined to persons like himself who receive dramatic revelations'. 'John too believes that the Spirit that inspires prophecy functions within the whole Christian community, not just in an individualistic manner in special persons such as himself.' 'All Christians receive the Spirit at baptism (Acts 2:38) and thus inherit the promise that the gift of prophecy will be distributed to the whole believing community (Acts 2:17-18 quoting Joel 2:28-29).' Boring's picture of the whole church as 'the eschatological prophetic People of God' and his conviction that John 'affirms "the prophethood of all believers"' may again be applied to the church as

⁹ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1989), 142-43.

a corporate unity rather than to each individual believer though he certainly does not preclude the latter.

1 Corinthians 14:29-31 is more explicit, 'Two or three prophets should speak [presumably this means on any one occasion] and the others should weigh carefully what is said... For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.' Earlier in v. 24 we have, 'if an unbeliever... comes in while everybody is prophesying he will be convinced by all.' The testing of prophecy involves the assessment of whether or not what has been said is in accord with the Spirit of God, and each believer is able to take part in this assessment because the Spirit of God indwells each one. But is each believer able to speak out what they have learned from God? The passage certainly seems to imply this. Gordon Fee says of vs. 24-25 that the passage 'in particular implies that prophesying is *potentially available* to all believers since all are Spirit-people. That is, Paul does not say, "If the prophets all prophesy..." but, "If all prophesy... the unbeliever will be convicted by all... and he will be judged by all." The nature of this argumentation seems to exclude the option that this gift was limited to a group of authoritative people who were known in the community as "the prophets".¹⁰ Fee goes on to state: 'Again, as with tongues, it does not mean that Paul expects everyone to prophesy; it does imply the extensive involvement of the whole community in the worship, especially in the Spirit manifestation of inspired utterance.'¹¹ Like Fee, Wayne Grudem argues consistently and cogently that the prophetic gift is potentially available to all and actually available to many. But also like Fee he holds back from suggesting that all can be seen as prophets. 'Another great benefit of prophecy is that it provides opportunity for participation by everyone in the congregation, not just those who are skilled speakers or who have gifts of teaching. Paul says that he wants "all" the Corinthians to prophesy... This does not mean that every believer will actually be able to prophesy, for Paul says (1 Corinthians 12:29), "Not all are prophets, are they?"... But it does mean that anyone who receives a "revelation" from God has permission to prophesy (within Paul's guidelines) and it suggests that many will.'¹² However, if one

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 244, his italics.

¹¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 244.

¹² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 1060. Cf. Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1988), 198-204, and Wayne

sees Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:29 as saying that not all have the specific gift of prophecy and distinguishes between this and a general, somewhat weaker, ability to hear God and on occasion to speak out what has been heard, then perhaps Grudem's reluctance could be overcome.

Having said all this, there does then seem to be a general assumption in Scripture that each believer, whether old or young, high or low in social status, male or female, Jewish or Gentile in origin, has participated in the outpouring of the Spirit of God. This participation means that each believer is able to hear the word of God for her or himself, to convey what they have heard to others, and to discern when and whether what others say is genuinely in accord with the Spirit of God. It is important at this stage to recognise that this potential ability to hear from and speak for God shares in the general fallibility which applies to all human gifts and functions. Believers can get it wrong! The New Testament makes it clear that it is quite possible for the believer, prophetically gifted or not, to mishear, to misunderstand or to misinterpret. The need for corporate discerning of prophetic speech of all kinds remains clear. But if we accept that there is a genuine doctrine of the prophethood of all believers then what do we do with it? How do we carry out our responsibilities? What difference does it make to the living out of our daily lives?

Firstly, it has implications for the way individual believers should be treated and valued, for the kind of respect given to all. If God can speak through any individual member of the covenant community, then there must be a genuine respect for and a genuine willingness to listen to every member of that community. Of course, it is theoretically accepted that the value ascribed to ourselves or to other people should not come from whether we or they are old or young, female or male, employer, employee or unemployed, rich or poor (old rich or new rich!), educated or uneducated, or even whether a particular spiritual gift is possessed. We know that our value and the only meaningful status we have comes from the fact that we are created as human beings by God and also because through his grace and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been made holy and enabled to become children of God, part of the covenant community. But it seems all too possible for those who know these things in theory to follow the example of the recipients of James' letter and say to the person of lesser significance in our

particular society, 'Sit on the floor by my feet' (2:3). It is easy to take it for granted that we do have a genuine spiritual respect for all and to assume that we would never write off the insights of other believers; but how often does it simply never cross our minds that a particular person could ever be given an insight by God? A real recognition that any believer can stand in the presence of God and may have something to say from that context is a challenge to all of us. We should not be surprised that a newcomer, a young person, an old person, an uneducated person or a woman should have some particular insight which may bring benefit and blessing to others or to the church as a whole. The church is greatly impoverished if it is only able or willing to hear what God has to say through its specifically gifted and officially appointed teachers and leaders who, in a British context at least, are usually older, educated, white, males.

Secondly, the doctrine of the prophethood of all believers should give all Christians a clear measure of confidence. God, through his Spirit who indwells believers, has given the ability to hear what God is saying and to discern whether or not what someone else is saying is in accord with that Spirit. If that is so, then although it is indeed important to listen to what God is saying through others, there is no need for any believer to be over-awed or threatened by them.

Thirdly, it should give Christians humility. A recognition of the privilege and the responsibility that belongs to all should lead in no sense to pride or arrogance but only to a humble, awed wonder that God should choose to communicate with and relate to us in this way. Also there needs to be humility in the recognition that any individual understanding of what God is saying may be wrong. If the right balance can be achieved between confidence and humility then believers are probably on the way to being the kind of people that God wants them to be.

Fourthly, and perhaps most significantly, this teaching brings with it a tremendous responsibility to every believer. If God has given each one the privilege of being able to listen to him and to hear from him, then there is a responsibility to listen properly, to take note, to share with others what the individual Christian senses God may be saying to them or through them, and to let others share the responsibility of checking whether or not that sensing is right. Alongside this is the responsibility of every believer to study the Scriptures so that the God who reveals himself through his Word may be known and that the Christian may be aware of the concerns and interests God makes known there. Certainly any concept of God speaking through struggling and fallible believers today must

always be subjugated to the clear and authoritative revelation in Christ and through Scripture.

Fifthly, the danger must be avoided of either trivialising or unhelpfully elevating any prophetic function. It is possible to be very cynical about people bringing 'little messages' such as, 'God loves you', or other affirmations of basic biblical truth – not recognising the possibility that that may be just the simple encouragement that God wants to give at that particular time. Certainly the prophetic function can include the specific application of the Word of God. On the other hand, some modern church groups have so elevated prophecy and the prophets that there is an almost Gnostic approach – 'some of us have special knowledge that is hidden from the rest of you; we can say "the Lord has said" and you had better listen!' If this 'big-deal' attitude to prophecy was removed then it would be possible for any believer to reply, 'Yes of course if God has spoken we must listen, but I'll just check first, in Scripture and through my own awareness of God that that is what he really is saying in this situation at this time.' The recognition that all can hear from God takes away from any over-emphasis on or even fear of, the words of other believers and lessens the possibility of manipulation.

In conclusion then, I would argue that the concept of the prophethood of all believers is something which is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. Furthermore, I suggest that the working out of the implications of this doctrine could and should have a profound effect on the life of the church. Being the kind of prophets that God intends all of us to be, taking seriously our responsibilities, having confidence alongside humility, and having a real respect for and willingness to listen to others, will better enable us to be the kind of people, the kind of Christians, that God wants us to be.