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November 22, 2010

Prophets and Pastors



Who should lead the church? For most Christians, the answer is obvious. Those who have been duly appointed, - the pastors, priests, ministers - are the visible leaders of the church. But it was not always that simple. There are periods of church history when the church also had apostles and prophets, who had not been appointed by men but called directly by God.

The early Christianity and early sabbatarian Adventism are two movements that were led in part by prophets. In early Christianity, [Didache](#) reflects a situation where it was possible if not common for there to be more than one prophet in a local congregation. By contrast, early Adventism came to recognize the ministry of just one prophet, [Ellen G. White](#).

As illustrated by the expulsion of the Montanists and Ellen White's years of exclusion from the [Review and Herald](#), prophets and pastors do not always get along. There is a tension between the type of authority they have that can lead to conflicting motives and goals in their church leadership.

The Authority of Pastors and Prophets

If we think of authority as circle, we can imagine the pastor as someone who has stepped into that circle. The circle is called an office. The office represents a set of related functions that need to be fulfilled in the church, and it exists whether or not there is someone in the office fulfilling the role. In fact, there is really nobody who can fulfill all the functions associated with the office, but nevertheless, when the person is appointed to that office, he or she becomes a pastor, priest, minister, etc.

These offices are part of the institutions of the church (the structures that support church life), so we may say that the person who has entered a church office has institutional authority. Their authority is derived from the decision of other church leaders to give them the degree of authority associated with the office.

Prophets, on the other hand, do not receive institutional authority from appointment to office. Their charismatic authority is derived from the recognition of their gift (charism) from God. Therefore, according to our circle of authority analogy, the prophet does not step into the circle, rather the circle enters them.

Where an office exists regardless of whether or not someone is currently filling it, the gift only exists where God has chosen to give it. In the case of a pastor, there is a set of functions that are deemed necessary to be fulfilled followed by a search for someone with at least the minimal level of spiritual gifting to fulfill that role. In the case of a prophet, God gives a spiritual gift that creates its own function.

Why would God do this? It seems fair to reason that the reason God sends prophets is to tell us things that we don't want to hear, for if we had wanted to hear them, they could be communicated some other way. The perception that a prophet is speaking directly for God means that their speech is privileged in a way that a pastor's is not (e.g. the lengthy prayer allowed the prophets in Didache), and this allows the prophet to say things that are able to move the church beyond its status quo (e.g. Ellen White's health message).

This is threatening to pastors not only because the prophet seems to have more authority, in that their messages are perceived to come directly from God, but also because the way in which a prophet's messages are intended to move a church are disruptive to the inherent purpose of institutional authority which is to provide stability. An interesting example comes from Ellen White's attempt, along with James White, to implement an organizational structure within the sabbatarian Adventist movement, which was resisted because many Adventists considered the absence of organization to be one of the principles which would keep the movement true to itself. In other words, anti-institutionalism had become an institution.

In the end, Ellen White's charismatic authority helped give James the credibility he needed to organize the Adventist movement. Likewise, the Apostle Paul used his charismatic authority to appoint officials, thereby establishing offices, in his churches.

One might conclude from the above that charismatic authority is the dominant form of leadership in the church, but the history of the early church and sabbatarian Adventism tells otherwise. It turns out that where God has given powerful prophetic gifts, he has usually given them briefly. But the institutions those prophets help create form the basis of leadership that has the most lasting impact and, therefore, the last word.

Prophecy Institutionalized

The problem with prophecy is that, as far as we can tell, the counterfeit is more prevalent than the real thing. Distinguishing true from false prophets is not a matter of simple observation, because of the internal nature of charismatic authority. It is obvious when a pastor enters his office. It is not immediately clear when and to whom God has given the gift of prophecy.

So while a pastor is appointed by the church, a prophet needs to be recognized by the church. The question is Who will lead out in this process of discernment? And the answer Paul gives to this questions is those with institutional authority - those whose job it is to safeguard the church. Therefore, pastors are those who have the power to exclude those whom they deem harmful to the church, including false prophets.

But what happens when this power to exclude is turned on true prophets? Irenaeus warned that this could leave the church bereft of prophetic guidance, and Ellen White, when she experienced such exclusion, feared that her gift might be removed in response. It seems no coincidence that in early Christianity (by the early third century) and sabbatarian Adventism (after 1915), the gift of prophecy was removed when their institutions became strong enough to adequately lead their churches.

However it is difficult to know whether this is because the gift was no longer wanted (as Johnston concluded) or whether it was simply no longer warranted (i.e. God only sends prophets during crucial periods.).

Early Christianity and sabbatarian Adventism both reacted to the fading gift of prophecy by institutionalizing it; but, both being influenced by the secular governance models of their time and place, did so in very different ways. The early church concentrated spiritual (and secular) authority in the office of the monarchical bishop, combining institutional and charismatic authority in what was called the charism of truth. The charism of truth was said to prevent the bishop from teaching doctrinal error, and was essentially the gift of prophecy minus confirming supernatural manifestations or the ability to move the church from its status quo. However, it conveyed the sense that the bishops were speaking directly for God, and thus for hundreds of years the pastors of the church had no check on their authority except their own sense of the tradition to which they owed their existence.

Sabbatarian Adventism institutionalized Ellen White's gift, not in an office, but in her body of written works. Within her own lifetime, these works were functioning somewhat like case law within the democratic, representative governance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To this day they are able to function as a check on the authority of pastors in the Adventist church.

The difficulty with Ellen White's writings was always that they had to be interpreted. When Ellen White herself was alive, she was often available to interpret her material, but now that the Adventist Church has no recognized prophet, it is up to the pastors to interpret her work. And as with all institutions, her writings have the potential to hold back the forward movement of the church, but this depends on how they are interpreted.

An Appeal

I believe to maintain the prophetic quality of Ellen White's writings, the pastors and officials who work in the [Ellen G. White Estate](#) should direct their institutional focus on stability towards maintaining the dynamic and counter-cultural quality of Ellen White's messages in their interpretations of her writings. They should guard against the co-opting of her work to support the status-quo, and promote her writings that continue to say things that we might not otherwise want to hear.

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on November 22, 2010 in [Adventist Studies](#), [Church History](#), [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Amidst the authoritarian clamour of an institution's man-made controls such as dogma, regulations, programs, measures of pastoral success, pastor-centric congregations, and legitimacy via human approval; if prophets of God were among us would we even be listening?

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [November 27, 2010 at 02:46 AM](#)

Interesting conclusion and appeal. Are the EGW estates too closely dependent on the mainstream institution and structure (appointments, funding etc)?

Posted by: [Anthony MacPherson](#) | [November 28, 2010 at 12:41 AM](#)

Anthony, I'm not in a position to answer that question. I do know that for their day to day function, the EGW Estate branch offices are very dependent of General Conference institutions. On the other hand, the Estate successfully resisted an attempt to make it a department of the GC.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [December 04, 2010 at 10:47 AM](#)

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