

**The Failure of the Prophet:**

**A Theological Critique of the Prophethood of All Believers**

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Prophecy has always been a hallmark of the modern Pentecostal movement. The day of Pentecost signals for Pentecostals the arrival of the prophethood of all believers. The ability to prophesy is deeply connected with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17), the proclamation of the gospel to all nations (Acts 17:26), and the gifts of the Spirit available to all believers. However, the realization that prophethood is no longer limited to select individuals has produced a myriad of problems among Pentecostals ranging from prophetic ministries that issue false or misleading declarations, biblical interpretations ignorant of the established hermeneutical traditions, conspiracy theories and doomsday proclamations, and support of occult practices, to physical and financial abuse of the prophetic office. These experiences have discredited both the Pentecostal movement, in general, and the credibility and accountability of its prophetic ministry, in particular.

In a preceding essay, I have shown that prophetic behavior can both reveal and conceal the presence and power of God. An aesthetic reading of the prophetic behavior at Pentecost shows that the perception of prophethood is rooted in both the conventional properties of prophetic behavior and in the aesthetic response evoked by those properties.

Because human behavior is integral, not accidental, to the Christian ability to be a genuine prophetic witness, the ground for discernment of inappropriate behavior lies not in the nature of prophethood but in the character and identity of the prophet. The correction of prophetic abuse in the Pentecostal movement requires attention to its core belief in the prophethood of all believers.

This chapter responds to the challenge by offering a theological investigation of the image of the prophet operative among Pentecostals. I argue that responsible for the problems of contemporary prophethood is an image of the prophet that is inconsistent with the prophetic

character portrayed in the Gospels and manifested in the prophetic identity of Jesus. More precisely, while the Gospels confirm normative expectations of a stereotype of the prophet, Jesus contradicts and corrects those expectations. I proceed therefore by exploring the consistency of public expectations regarding the material, physical, and social dimensions of the prophet with the prophetic identity of Jesus. I begin by outlining the normative expectations of the prophet invested in the history of interpretation of Moses, then identify Jesus' response to these expectations and his counter-portrayal of the prophet, and conclude with a case study of prophetic behavior in the church following the day of Pentecost. The results offer a model of the prophet grounded in Pentecost that yields neither a triumphalist anthropology of glorified human nature nor a realist anthropology that surrenders to human sinfulness. The Pentecostal image of the prophet struggles with both extremes as expressions of the human transformation and redemption that is exemplified in the life and character of the prophet.

### **THE NORMATIVE IMAGE OF THE PROPHET**

The central position of Jesus in Peter's speech at Pentecost highlights the Christian view of Jesus' place in the messianic hopes of the prophets and Jesus' own character as 'a prophet mighty in deed and word' (Lk. 24:19), who was identified by others predominantly as a prophet (Mt. 16:13-14; Mk 8:28-29; Lk. 9: 8, 19-20; Jn 7:40-41; Acts 3:22) and who viewed both himself and his followers as prophets (Mk 6:4; Mt. 13:57; Lk. 4:24; 6:23; 13:33-34; Jn 4:44). Peter's distinct attribution of 'signs and wonders' to Jesus and the overwhelming application of this phrase to legitimize the authority of Moses (see Deut. 34:11-12) further specifies expectations of unparalleled prophetic ability. The apostolic portrayal, public perception, and literary connection

of Jesus with Moses provides strategic insight into the anthropology operative in the normative image of the prophet.

Moses' power is publicly nowhere more visible than in the wielding of his staff during Israel's exodus from Egypt, particularly the lengthy narrative of the plagues, the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, and the ensuing battles against Israel's enemies. After calling Moses at the burning bush, God causes the staff of Moses to transform into a serpent (Exod. 4:1-5) and instructs Moses to confront the Egyptian oppressors with 'this staff, with which you shall perform the signs' (Exod. 4:17; 7:15). In turn, Pharaoh instructs his sorcerers to match the transformation of the staff as though it were an act of magic. Yet, when the Israelite's staff swallows up the magicians' rods, a distinct separation arises between the sorcerer's abilities and the acts of power of Israel's prophet. Moses proceeds to use the staff to deprive the Egyptians of all their drinking water (7:19) and curses the same waters to bring forth frogs that cover the whole land (8:5). God instructs Moses to use the staff to produce gnats on all the inhabitants of Egypt (8:16). Again, the Egyptian 'magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not' (v. 18). Following various other miraculous performances similarly unmatched by the Egyptian sorcerers (Exod. 9:1-12), Moses uses the staff to produce further plagues (9:23; 10:13). The exodus concludes with Moses lifting his staff to divide the Red Sea for a safe passage (14:16) and to return the waters which defeat the pursuing Egyptian army (v. 26).

The significance of Moses' staff for the public perception of prophetic acts of power in Israel cannot be overestimated. God's specific instruction to take the staff in response to Pharaoh's demand to 'perform a wonder' (Exod. 7:9), and Pharaoh's attempt to replicate the miracle by his sorcerers (v. 11) identify both that the prophetic act was intended as a demonstration of divine power and that it was perceived as a presentation of magic. The repeated

reference that Moses' actions were understood and emulated as magical rituals, and Moses' deliberate use of 'the staff of God' (Exod. 17:9) at his own determination, underscore the exceptional display of power available to God's prophet. Unable to match the 'magic' of Moses, the Egyptians are defeated by the powers of the prophet, and the Israelites are convinced and ensured of the divine power at the disposal of their prophetic leader.

Moses' exceptional status in early Judaism finds expression in his literary characterization as the prophet. His dramatic ascent to Mount Sinai, widely read as a mystical ascent or translation into heaven, has served further to elevate his prophetic image to angelic and even divine-like status. The prophet speaks with God face to face—a contact with the divine that alters Moses' very body so that the prophet's face shines in reflection of the divine glory, while Israel is afraid to come near him. The radiant face and the veil Moses' wears to cover it become a reflection of his prophetic status and further distinguish the prophet from ordinary humanity. The difference between the Moses of history and the prophet of Israel's memory tends to blur in favor of a normative image of unrivaled prophetic power. It is this image that pervades many of the problematic perceptions of prophetic power among Pentecostals today. Correcting the abuse of prophethood requires a correction of the normative image of the prophet.

### **JESUS AND THE NORMATIVE VIEW OF THE PROPHET**

The exceptional embodiment of prophetic power by Moses, and Israel's expectations that God someday will raise up a prophet 'like' Moses from among them (Deut. 18:18), casts its foundational image also on Jesus. From the beginning, Jesus was recognized by his disciples as 'him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote' (Jn 1:45), and Jesus himself acknowledged to be the one of whom Moses spoke (Jn 5:46; Lk. 24:27). Yet, despite all

expectations, Jesus also publicly resisted, criticized, and corrected the image of Moses and of the prophet who was to be like Moses. While Jesus reflected the Mosaic pattern in the public perception of his prophetic behavior, his own comparison and portrayal of Moses reveal significant disagreements.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus compares himself with Moses' act of power when raising up a bronze serpent in response to Israel's rebellion and God's subsequent judgment. When Israel 'spoke against God and against Moses' (Num. 21:5), God sent a plague of poisonous serpents among the Israelites, yet the prophet intervened on behalf of the people. In response, God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent on a pole that would deliver anyone bitten by a real serpent (Num. 21:4-9). In comparison, Jesus explained, 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (Jn 3:14-15). The contrasts with Moses are numerous: the comparison is focused on the shared act of lifting up, yet while Moses raises a bronze serpent, Jesus is himself the one lifted up; the result of Moses' act is the physical restoration of the one bitten by a real serpent, yet the result of Jesus' uplift is not temporary restoration but eternal life; in the wilderness the bronze serpent is unaffected by the prophetic act, yet the effect of Jesus' act is achieved only by his own death. As much as the normative view sees in Moses' instrumental use of the serpent an act of magical prophetic mastery, Jesus' act proceeds through self-surrender and the death of his own body. Jesus is not confronting the dying with a lifeless artefact but gives life through the death of his own self, thereby replacing the magic power of the prophetic act with the instrumental power of the prophet's self-surrender.

The feeding of the multitudes (Jn 6:1-16) provides the most provocative opportunity for Jesus to correct the public perception of his prophetic identity. Whereas the crowd demands from

Jesus a sign comparable to Moses' feeding of Israel with the 'bread from heaven' (v. 31), Jesus again re-configures the power of the prophet: the bread does not come from Moses but from God (v. 32). Jesus concludes with the shocking insufficiency of Moses' bread, for those who ate it are now dead (v. 49). In stark contrast, Jesus claims repeatedly that the bread he will give leads to eternal life (v. 47, 58). Even more provocative is Jesus' claim that this act of power relies not on an external provision of bread but that—unlike Moses—he is himself the bread from heaven (v. 35, 38, 41, 42, 48, 51), and the bread that Jesus gives is his own flesh. Paradoxically, the sign of the prophet is not the prophet's power to multiply the bread but to be the bread, in other words, both to give away and to be the commodity given away for others. The power of the prophet is the death of the prophet, and the death of the prophet is the power of life.

Two particular instances trigger a further clarification of Jesus' startling prophetic image, both associating the prophet with the power of healing. At one of his controversial acts of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus invokes Moses as the giver of the Law and the Jews as those who are actually breaking the Sabbath (Jn 7:19). He proceeds to compare his healing on the Sabbath to the Jewish custom of circumcision: 'Moses gave you circumcision . . . and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath' (v. 22). The problem is that this reconciliation of the performance with the Sabbath law is not applied to Jesus: 'If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the Sabbath' (v. 23)? That Jesus emphasizes he had made the man 'entirely well' underscores the public misunderstanding of his prophetic identity, and by implication of its relationship to Moses and the Sabbath. The power instrumentalized in Jesus' prophetic act finds its embodiment in the complete salvation of the man. The instrument of the prophetic act is its

intentional performance on the Sabbath thereby setting free the authority of God in the power of the prophet from the authority of the Law.

On yet another Sabbath, the context is formed by Jesus' healing of a man born blind (Jn 9:1-12). Again, the power of the prophetic act is found not merely in the physical restoration of sight but in 'that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind' (v. 39) applied equally to the blind man and to the observing Jews. When the healed man presses his inquisitors whether they want to become Jesus' disciples (v. 27), it becomes apparent that they are now the ones who have become blind (v. 40-41). In their response to the man's ironic question, the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish authorities is posed in terms of a contrast between Jesus and Moses: those who believe in Jesus are his disciples, but those who reject him consider themselves disciples of Moses (Jn 9: 28-29). The Pharisees choose to remain faithful to their normative view of the prophet, and by rejecting Jesus pose an insurmountable chasm between Moses and the prophet like him.

The repeated and increasingly intensifying contrast between the prophetic identity of Jesus and Moses sheds light on today's disagreements of prophetic ministry and authority. Jesus' rejection of the normative image reveals that the power of the prophetic act lies not in the prophet's exceptional quality or physical ability but in the way the power is directed and in the manner in which it is received. In this sense, Jesus suggests that the result of the prophetic act lies not in the possession of the prophet, but that the power of prophethood lies in the prophet's own self-surrender, sanctification, and obedience to the will of God. The resolution of today's conflict of prophetic authority is tied to the startling choice to either abandon the normative image of the prophet in favor of continuity with Jesus or to abandon the proclamation of Jesus as the crucified prophet.

## RECONFIGURING MOSES AS THE PROPHET

Jesus' reconfiguration of the prophetic image calls for a re-evaluation of the normative view by drawing attention to the weakness of Moses' prophetic acts. Indeed, the wielding of the prophetic staff represents a particular burden on Moses, and the difficulty becomes apparent immediately following the exodus narrative (Exod. 17:8-13) in the battle against the Amalekites. A critical look at Moses' bodily performance shows that the prophet struggled significantly with the act of power. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel was victorious, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 'But Moses's hands grew heavy' (v. 12) and a stone is placed under him for support, before Aaron and Hur lift up his hands, 'one on either side', so that with both of Moses' hands held high Joshua eventually defeats the enemy. Although the act of power is successful, Moses is unable to perform the prophetic act without help. While the devastating effect of lowering his hand indicates that the power of the act depended on his embodied performance, Moses' body succeeds only in weakness. The use of the staff as symbol of Moses' prophetic and divine authority is challenged by the physical performance of the prophet, evidently shifting hands initially before having to use both hands for the act. Contrary to the pattern of the exodus narrative, the prophetic act is not manifested magically in the power of the prophet but in his weakness. That Moses alone cannot determine the outcome of the battle confirms Jesus' contention that the source of power is not the prophet alone, or the instrument of dramatic performance, but God who chooses the prophet and places him amidst a prophetic community.

The difficulty embroiled in the divine choice of the prophet appears dramatically in the Moses' embodied act of power at the waters of Meribah (Num. 20:1-13; see Exod. 17:1-7; Ps. 106:32-33), which eventually determines the prophet's own destiny. In response to the

complaints of the people who lacked water in the wilderness, Moses and Aaron are instructed by God, 'Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water' (Num. 20:8). Initially following the instructions, Moses takes the staff and assembles the people but then proceeds to speak to the congregation, 'Listen, you rebels; shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' (v. 10) and continues to strike the rock twice with his staff. Although 'water came out abundantly' (v. 11), God is angered by Moses' performance and does not allow him to enter the promised land. A number of solutions have been offered for Moses' failure, all emphasizing the neglect to follow God's instructions in his disastrous bodily performance, including the neglect of prayer, his speaking to the people, avoiding a verbal command to the rock yet using the staff, and using it repeatedly, his outburst of temper, timidity, insensitivity, doubting God, or attributing the ability to produce water to himself. The problem with regard to the prophetic performance is that Moses endorses the instrumental power of the prophet exclusively, whether by re-enacting his performance with the staff from the past or re-inventing its use, and thereby directing the attention of the act to the magical behavior rather than to God.

Nevertheless, the outrage of Moses' act is that the prophet succeeds despite his disobedience, that is, the power of the prophetic act is not determined by Moses' righteousness. The irony of the Pharisees' division over Jesus' prophetic power (Jn 9:16) is that their concerns about the prophet's sinfulness are misplaced in the case of Jesus but justified in the case of Moses, yet they choose to remain followers of Moses instead of becoming disciples of Christ. In its extreme contrast, Jesus therefore acts prophetically more so when he is rejected as a prophet: in his everyday confrontation with political and religious authorities and customs, association with sinners, meals with social outcasts, healing of the stigmatized, exorcism of the demon-

possessed, embrace of the marginalized, and above all, in his own suffering and death. Equally conflicting, Jesus' reconfiguration of the prophet who is like Moses demands an analogous application to today's prophet who claims to be like Jesus.

### **PROPHETIC POWER AFTER PENTECOST**

The repeated focus on prophecy in Peter's speech at Pentecost suggests that he intended to correct the elements of the Christian performance which had offended the audience, including the public failure to recognize them as prophets, so that the Christian witness should indeed be understood as a prophetic consequence resulting from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit albeit patterned after the prophetic model of Jesus. An immediate example follows with the healing of a lame man by Peter and John (Acts 3:1–4:4) and the subsequent responses by the people and Jewish authorities, all constructed to illustrate the continuity with the events of Pentecost, and thereby with the debate on the prophetic identity of Jesus.

At the entrance to the temple, Peter and John are confronted with 'a man lame from birth' (Acts 3:2) who was laid each day at the gate of the temple to ask for alms from those entering. The apostles' initial response is an intent look at the man before commanding him to look at them (v. 4). Correcting the man's expectation to be given money, Peter speaks, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk' (v. 6). The apostle continues by taking the man's hand and raising him up, 'and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong' (v. 7). In turn, the man begins to stand, then walk, jump, and, finally, leap into the praise of God (v. 8). Those recognizing 'the one who used to sit and ask for alms' (v.10) are filled with wonder and astonishment.

The startling invocation of the name of Jesus raises immediate memories of Jesus' numerous healings of the crippled and paralytics, including the extensive observations of the severity of the condition, the verbal command to rise up and walk, and the miraculous recovery, all of which confirm the efficacy of an act summarized by the apostle (again in a manner reminiscent of Jesus) as the man's complete 'wholeness' and 'perfect soundness' (Acts 3:16, 4:10; KJV). The emphasis is placed not only on the physical health of the man (v. 7) but that the whole man received strength (v. 16) and was made complete in every respect. The apostles' act of power confirms normative expectations yet also quickly departs from them in ways deliberately patterned after Jesus' resistance to normative image of prophetic power.

Peter recognizes that the crowds gather because they were surprised that the once lame man now by his own strength is clinging to Peter and John (v. 11). Luke emphatically identifies that the public perception of the source of power resulting in the people's 'astonishment' (v.11) and 'wonder' (v. 12) is directed at the apostles. Yet, Peter (who had previously commanded the lame man to look directly at them), directs the stare of the people away from the Christians with the question: 'why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?' Without denying that an act of power had taken place, the apostle explains that this power was not their own but the power of God given through 'his servant Jesus' (v. 13). More precisely, in an unusual variation of emphasis, the act of power was performed 'by faith in his name', it is 'his name itself [that] has made this man strong' and 'the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health' (v. 16). The question of the origin of this power comes to a head after the apostles are imprisoned and questioned by the 'rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem' (Acts 4:5) who inquire 'by what power or by what name' (v. 7) the apostles had performed the healing. The authoritative view clearly identified the apostles as the

origin of the ‘notable sign’ (v. 16) performed with the healing of the lame man. The Christian resistance to these expectations sheds light on how their prophetic image stands in continuity with the prophetic identity of Jesus.

The prophetic performance is again far from being without struggle: Peter’s intent stare betrays a lack of certainty about the extent of the confrontation or on how to proceed, and although he takes the lead, Peter directs the man to focus on both apostles, while his verbal command to walk seems insufficient to bring about the desired result: Peter has to take the man at the right hand and raise him up. The weakness of the performance readily confirms the public mindset emerging with Pentecost that ‘these Galileans’ (Acts 2:7), represented above all by Peter and John, ‘were uneducated and ordinary men’ (Acts 4:13) who should not be able to perform such an act of power. Not by disregarding the weakness of the performance, but by emphasizing the low view of the prophet, Luke reports that nonetheless the lame man’s feet and ankles were ‘immediately’ restored (v. 7), that the power given to the man extended beyond his ability to walk, and that ‘the one who used to sit’ (v. 10) now ‘clings’ to Peter and John at his own accord and enters with them into a jubilant performance of praise. Even more dramatically, in his own explanation to the crowd, Peter indicates that ‘perfect health’ had been ‘given’ (v. 16) to the man, and in his justification before the elders and rulers of Jerusalem, the apostle echoes the response of Jesus to those who criticized his healing on the Sabbath by shifting the observation from how this man had been healed (Acts 4:9) to the declaration that the man had been made whole in every respect.

Peter’s repeated justification of the prophetic performance with reference to Jesus’ name follows closely the manner in which he identified Jesus in his speech at Pentecost. Peter’s assertion that Jesus was attested ‘by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs’ (Acts 2:22)

serves as the foundation for claiming the name of Jesus as the source of power for the apostles, and consequently for the restoration of the man. That the Christians have access to this power, yet do not 'own' it, highlights the source rather than the instrument of power. The prophetic act is successful not because of an individual performance of power by the prophet located in an individual's authority but because both Peter and the man are joined in 'the faith that is through Jesus' (v. 16). As they together act out the struggle of the redemptive act, what emerges publicly is a corrective Christian image of prophetic power and identity.

Both Peter and the lame man become witnesses to the power of God through a shared prophetic act of giving and receiving. Both Peter and the lame man step out in faith against the uncertainty whether the healing would be successful. Both Peter and the lame man offer ecstatic prophetic performances. Both Peter and the lame man become the ones who dream dreams of healing and restoration that encourage each other and extend to those around them. The apostle's act of faith incites the man's faith, and the man's ecstatic transformation from crippled to jumping and leaping incites (and confronts) communal visions of social and religious reintegration eventually among 'all the people [who] saw him walking and praising God' (v. 9). The wonder and astonishment (literally, the ecstasy) of the people (v. 10) is a response to both Peter's act of power and the man's series of empowered actions. This shared participation in the prophetic and charismatic enactment of Jesus' name directs the attention back to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. The prophet's identity emerges clearly only within and on behalf of a prophetic community. More important than insisting on the prophethood of all believers, the continuity of any prophetic ministry with the prophetic image of Jesus encourages the idea of a prophethood for all believers.

If we call the Christian community 'prophetic' then this must be understood as a contrast to the deceptive and self-serving exercise of magic but not to the sacrificial exercise of charismatic power. The church functions as a prophetic community only if it is a charismatic community empowered by the Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Christ on behalf of the salvation of the world. Hence, if we call that community 'charismatic' then this must not be misunderstood as a contrast to prophetic witness or a glorified focus on the gifts of the Spirit. The former too narrowly defines the prophet (in the normative view), while the latter domesticates the power of the Spirit (in the footsteps of magic). The discernment of the proper use of spiritual gifts must show how the prophetic agency of Christians functions communally through the charismatic embodiment of ordinary humanity. Any view of the prophetic office that upholds an individual's authority perpetuates a normative image of the prophet that is inconsistent with the image of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. The continuity of the church with the prophetic image of Christ lies not in its possession of extraordinary gifts but in the giftedness of ordinary humanity, that is, like Jesus, in the human empowerment both to give away and to be the commodity given away for the salvation of others.

## **CONCLUSION**

The prophethood for all believers is a witness to a new humanity that receives the gifts of the Spirit not for the sake of possessing the power of God but for the sake of giving it away. Hence, any prophet recognized only in possessing wonders and signs amidst provocative prophetic behavior leads to 'distress' (Acts 4:2) and 'fear' (Acts 5:11) resulting in 'reluctance' (v. 13) to associate with the prophetic community. Although the world is attracted by the provocative behavior and the power of the extraordinary, it is converted by the testimony of

ordinary lives to a redeemed community that is not operating in its own power but in weakness as a testimony to the power of God. The prophethood for all believers is consistent with the prophethood of Jesus precisely because it resists the claim of divine power for oneself. If Pentecostals continue to maintain the prophethood of all believers, such claims must resist any demands of power as one's own right or possession, and therefore the elevation of divine empowerment above ordinary humanity, which threatens the continuity with the humanity of Jesus by domesticating the power of the Spirit and placing it in the service of one's own ambitions, institutions, and regulations. The prophethood for all believers is a hallmark of Pentecostalism when it functions as a corrective of any individual self-serving and authoritative claims of power that deny the weakness of the prophet exemplified in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ and the community that follows him. The prophethood for all believers is rooted in ordinary human self-giving, which is the reason why all believers can be prophets and why prophethood remains one of Christianity's greatest challenges.