I was sitting in an anthropology class at my Christian college listening to the musings of the professor. She had been speaking about globalization, feminism, and Christianity when she suddenly posed the controversial question, should women be allowed to be missionaries? I was shocked by her question, because until that point, I had never doubted the legitimacy of female missionaries. Although I grew up in a complementarian household, I had been raised on stories of women like Gladys Aylward and Amy Carmichael, both of whom fought for women’s rights and social justice while spreading the word of God.

Confused, I searched for an answer to the professor’s question, and I was dismayed by some of the responses that I found. Some Christians say that only in rare situations can women preach to groups containing both women and men. Nevertheless, they believe that these women should try to train men quickly so that the men can take over and become the leaders of the church. Moreover, some assert that women should avoid becoming missionaries unless their husbands or other men and women accompany them. Ironically, these Christians justify their beliefs by saying that there is rampant misogyny “in other countries.” Finally, some of the Christians that do believe women can be missionaries stipulate that these women should only teach other women or children.

These articles base their reasoning on passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. I will not spend time addressing these two Bible passages; rather, I will focus on the often-neglected biblical prototype of missionaries that appears in both the Old and the New Testaments: the prophet.

In the Old Testament, male and female prophets performed various duties. They foretold future events (like Deborah in Judges 4:9) and acted as God’s official spokespeople by giving instructions and warnings (like Huldah in 2 Kings 22:16–20 and Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1–15).

The Macmillan Dictionary of the Bible also notes that “[t]he prophets’ task was basically to explain to their contemporaries the meaning of God’s covenant, its demands as well as its promises.” Therefore, a prophet, whether male or female, had to understand the Law in order to explain it to others.

Due to their infrequent appearances in the New Testament, some may believe that prophets were mostly an Old Testament phenomenon. However, Joel 2:28–29 states:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters...
shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (ESV)

Through the prophet Joel, God promised that the Holy Spirit and the gift of prophecy would be dispersed indiscriminately to all believers, regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic status. This prophecy is fulfilled in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts fill the people who had gathered for Pentecost. Peter realizes that the Holy Spirit’s presence fulfills Joel’s prophecy and reacts by preaching the gospel to all of the onlookers (Acts 2:14–42). Peter’s sermon is an accordance with the final mandate of Jesus, who stated, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In summary, Joel 2:28–29 predicts that the miracle of Pentecost will result in the Holy Spirit and the gift of prophecy being distributed equally among men and women. Moreover, after Jesus predicted that his followers would receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, he commanded them to perform missionary work. Therefore, one of the strongest support verses for missionary work, Acts 1:8, must necessarily include women.

Of course, the terms “missionary” and “prophet” are not identical. Nevertheless, missionaries bear a strong resemblance to prophets. While missionaries cannot necessarily see into the future or hear the voice of God directly like prophets, they can share the promises and prophecies that God has given us through Scripture. More importantly, missionaries, like prophets, must be able to accurately explain God’s Word. Therefore, while different denominations dispute the existence of foreknowing prophets in modern times, most can agree that missionaries perform at least some of the duties that were formerly entrusted to prophets in Scripture.

There are a few specific examples of prophetesses who performed missional activities in the New Testament. One of the most prominent New Testament prophets was a pre-Pentecost prophet named Anna. Anna was an eighty-four-year-old widow who spent all of her time worshipping God at the Temple (Luke 2:36). When Anna sees Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus to God at the temple, she approaches them and then “began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38, emphasis added).

This passage is significant for three reasons. First, there is nothing in the passage to suggest that Anna prophesied only to women. She was in a public area that included both men and women, because she speaks to both Mary and Joseph in this place (Luke 2:38). Moreover, she spoke openly to all who waited for the Savior, and as there were presumably men who waited for the Messiah, it is reasonable to assume that Anna prophesied to men, too.

Second, Anna’s story is paralleled to that of Simeon, another person who received the Holy Spirit pre-Pentecost and prophesied about Jesus at the Temple that day (Luke 2:25–34). The gospel of Luke is noted for its inclusion of social outcasts, such as the poor, Gentiles, lepers, tax collectors, and women. Thus, this passage also could be demonstrating the equal distribution of God’s enlightenment between both sexes.

Third, Anna had no husband, so there is no reason to assume that female prophets needed husbands before they could prophesy.

The New Testament also has two other brief mentions of prophesying women. First, Philip the Evangelist has four unmarried daughters who are prophets (Acts 21:9). These women are only mentioned in passing; however, they are significant because they represent women who preach and prophesy without husbands. In the other passage, Paul confirms the fact that there are women who “pray and prophesy” (1 Corinthians 11:5). Therefore, early Christians knew and supported women—both married and...
unmarried—who informed others about God’s words.

This study has significant implications for female pastors and ministers today. If it is possible for a complementarian church to accept female missionaries, then why are these churches so resistant to the idea of female pastors? What is it that a pastor does that a prophet or missionary doesn’t, that makes it unacceptable for a woman to be a pastor?

Say there is a woman walking in a park. She meets a man who is not a believer, but there is no other male believer present who can share the gospel with the unbeliever. What should she do? Can she share the message of God’s love with this man? If the answer is yes, then can she share with two men? What about ten or twenty?

When does it become inappropriate or sinful for the woman to share God’s word? Would she be sinning if she came back each week in order to explain God’s word to the men? Would it be shameful if the men were sitting while she was standing? What if she used a microphone?

What if she were near a church, but not inside it? What if she were in the foyer, but not in the sanctuary. The point of my questioning is this: where is the line? If the line is drawn at a church building with a proper, clean sanctuary where the woman can receive a salary for speaking to a large group of people, then so be it; women will not be deterred. Women will continue to share the gospel in the rain and in the snow, in the jungles and in the deserts, in the East and in the West.

Gladys Aylward once humbly declared:

I wasn’t God’s first choice for what I’ve done for China. There was somebody else . . . I don’t know who it was—God’s first choice. It must have been a man—a wonderful man, a well-educated man. I don’t know what happened. Perhaps he died. Perhaps he wasn’t willing . . . And God looked down and saw Gladys Aylward.2

May we all be as willing as Gladys Aylward to serve God, despite the obstacles that society and culture may put in our way.

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