I love teaching undergraduates. In spite of days when glazed eyes dampen my enthusiasm, there are those special moments, epiphany-like occasions, when out of the mouths of college students come questions and observations that make me pause and silently exclaim, “And I get paid for this!”

One such moment occurred in a class I taught for twenty-seven years at Taylor University, a class called “Hebrew Prophets.” As an introduction to the general phenomenon of Hebrew prophetism, I briefly sketch the history of this fascinating movement. After discussing the full flowering of prophetism during the era of the so-called “classical prophets,” the writing prophets of the Old Testament, I point out the cessation of prophecy around the time of Ezra and Malachi. A long period of prophetic silence ensues until, suddenly and dramatically, prophecy revives in the Jesus movement and the early church.

I highlight the epochal significance of John the Baptist’s ministry. At long last, a prophet in Israel lifts up his voice and echoes the words of Isaiah 40:3: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” I typically pause a moment to let that sink in. But on this particular occasion, a student—a male student—raised his hand and asked a very short question. “What about Anna?” I started to say something, but nothing came out. I was left speechless. My epiphany moment unfolded and hit me with an unforgettable impact. It had been there right in front of me all those years and I had completely missed it! And I was not alone. In fact, all my teachers in college, seminary, and graduate school—all of them men—had never seen it either, because none of my class notes had ever mentioned it, nor had textbooks and authoritative encyclopedias on the subject. Here is a sample from the prestigious Anchor Bible Dictionary: “The first prophet described in the New Testament is John the Baptist, whose career was contemporary with, and in some respects like, that of Jesus.”

But this is patently incorrect. Anna was a prophetess (prophetis), and she prophesied some years before John the Baptist broke the supposed four-hundred-year period of prophetic silence. A woman beat him to the punch!

This is not to minimize the significance of John the Baptist’s role in redemptive history. John did excite the Jews “with an awareness of the return of authentic prophecy.” Jesus himself bestows high praise upon John (Luke 7:24–28) and declares that he marks the end of an era and the beginning of another (Luke 16:16). But, in giving John his due, one should not overlook the presence of a woman like Anna who actually exercises the prophetic gift well before he even began his public ministry. “As a prophetess, she was the first to tell the good news of the redemption of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 40:2).” I finally replied to my student, “My friend, I’m revising my notes as of today.”

Anna, the aged prophetess and widow, is present at the Second Temple at the very hour Mary and Joseph redeem Jesus, their firstborn son, and offer a sacrifice for Mary’s ritual purification after childbirth (Luke 2:36–38; cf. Exod. 13:2, 12; Lev. 12:1–8). Also present on that occasion is a “righteous and devout” man named Simeon (Luke 2:25). Arriving at the temple courts, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, he is expectant; the Holy Spirit has revealed to him “that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (Luke 2:26). When Simeon sees the child, he pours out his heart in prophetic praise (Luke 2:28–35). This hymnic passage, now sung at night prayer in the Divine Office, is called the Nunc dimittis after the first two words of Luke 2:29 in the Latin Vulgate (“now [may you] dismiss”). For her part, Anna the prophetess speaks “about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel” (Luke 2:38). To call this something other than prophecy is mere quibbling. There can be little doubt that this proclamation was prophecy. I. Howard Marshall has it right: “Simeon’s words were confirmed by the arrival of Anna, who prophesied that God would bring deliverance through Jesus to the Jewish people.”

A careful reader of the New Testament may stop me here and point out that Luke’s gospel indicates that, even before Anna, Zechariah prophesied. To be sure, the earliest appearance of the verb “to prophesy” does occur in 1:67: “His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (éprophēteusen),” I concede the point. But all has not yet been said. In Luke 1:41–42, prior to Zechariah’s prophecy, we read that “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” She utters a blessing upon Mary and a confession of Mary’s key role in giving birth to the promised Messiah. Though the verb “prophesy” is not used, one can scarcely deny that this utterance also springs from the gift of prophecy. Gary Smith is correct: “The first instances of NT prophecy occur in the Lukan birth narratives. Filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:15), Elizabeth prophesied concerning Mary and her unborn child (1:41–45), Zechariah prophesied at John the Baptist’s naming (vv. 67–79), and Simeon prophesied at Jesus’ purification [sic] (2:25–35); at the latter event Jesus was also recognized and proclaimed by Anna the prophetess (vv. 36–38).” A pattern is beginning to emerge.

The theological importance of the Anna episode began to dawn on me—Joel the prophet was right. He had said that, when the Spirit is poured out in the latter days, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . . both men and women” (Joel 2:28–29). That

What About Anna?

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prompted me to reread carefully Luke’s opening chapters of his gospel. His narrative makes clear that, when Jesus was dedicated, there were in fact two prophets present: Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:21–38). Just like Joel had said, “both men and women.” This episode is a sort of microcosm of God’s dealings in the last and greatest phase of redemptive history. The age of the Spirit is marked by a twofold witness. Both genders are summoned to herald the new redemption and unity in Christ. And, as we have just seen, prior to Simeon and Anna, we have another female/male tandem of prophets: Elizabeth and Zechariah. In fact, N. M. Flanagan points out that no fewer than thirteen times Luke pairs a man and a woman in his two-volume work, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. This is hardly an accident. Both genders join in proclaiming this new era of redemptive history, and in so doing they realize the original, divine intent so clearly articulated in Genesis 1:26–28: “so that they may rule over . . . all the creatures.”

Sadly, the post-apostolic church stifled this breakthrough in redemptive history and charted a retrograde course. Instead of celebrating equality of life and ministry together, a less than intended functional subordination became enshrined and honored as “the biblical pattern.” Surely, a new millennium affords a golden opportunity to realize now what we shall experience when our Lord returns at the end of the age. The Magna Charta of Christian existence (Gal. 3:28) cries out to be actualized in the “now” of salvation history. Unfortunately, for the most part, the church has dug in its heels and insisted: “not yet!”

So, what about Anna? Why have men typically overlooked her? Not to belabor the obvious, men read Scripture through male eyes. We have blinders that at times prevent us from seeing what is really there. The remedy is to read Scripture in the context of the entire community of faith—women and men who share a conversion experience and a commitment to authoritative Scripture. I need to hear how my sisters in Christ read and interpret Scripture. This helps me “see” things that otherwise I might simply pass over. The converse is also true, of course, but since the male point of view has been the prevailing one throughout church history, we need to redress this imbalance by consciously listening for the feminine voice in Scripture.

The upshot is like the introduction of 3-D into movies. (Yes, I’m old enough to remember when this occurred and still recall the sensational effect it had!) A new dimension to redemptive history emerges. We suddenly “see” female characters and their contributions that had virtually dropped off our male radar screens. In my own situation, it was in fact a male student who asked me the provocative question. I take heart in this. In my opinion, the younger generation is less oblivious to the female presence in Scripture than my own. At least I hope so. At any rate, I am trying my best to raise the consciousness of my male students, and my female students, since many of them have also been so conditioned by the male perspective that they have al-

most lost sight of the female presence in Scripture. Furthermore, many female students have adopted the prevailing male perspective on how women should function in church and society as the truly “biblical” view.

We need to recover the impetus of Pentecost. The way forward is to let female voices be heard at all levels of the church—yes, even as pastors and leaders. That the female voice is truly there has been eloquently and convincingly argued in the pages of a number of scholarly publications. My plea is for the church to hear the Scripture read and expounded by gifted women who love the Lord. The whole church will be the beneficiaries. For the kingdom’s sake, let the Annas of our day be heard!

Notes


7. See, e.g., Priscilla Papers 21:1 (Winter 2007); Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995); and Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Discovering Biblical Equality (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), among many others.