

Prophets in the Seminary: The Prophetic Function as a Means of Maintaining Missional Focus in Theological Education

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Abstract

Paul declares that the Lord has gifted some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). This article argues that prophets, as defined through a missional hermeneutic, are essential to theological education (TE) institutions maintaining focus on the mission of the Church. The article first reviews four different definitions of “prophets.” It then demonstrates the need for the prophetic function in TE institutions by describing two forms of institutional drift. Finally, the article recommends the role that individuals fulfilling the prophetic function may play in calling TE institutions to refocus on the missionary task.

Key Words: APEST, drift, Ephesians, prophet, theological education

Introduction

Prophets have fulfilled an important function among God’s people throughout history. While sharing a title with that of the Old Testament prophets (*nābī’īm*), New Testament prophets after Pentecost (*prophētēs*) were primarily concerned with bearing witness to Jesus (Hill 1979, 48). This new focus marks a fundamental distinction between the prophetic functions in the Old and New Testaments (Heb 1:1–2; Grudem 2000, 28–29 Merkle 2022, 106).

As witnesses to Jesus, prophets serve an important function in the context of the local church. Ephesians 4:11–13 is a *locus classicus* for describing the order of functions in the Early Church, especially as those functions relate to the mission of the Church (Barth 2008, 478). Theological education (TE) institutions, as partners with local churches in the mission of the Church, may benefit from incorporating all five (or four: see Merkle 2016, 127–128) functions into their faculty and administrative structures. More specifically, the prophetic function is particularly beneficial for TE institutions to provide missional focus and prevent institutional drift.

This article first reviews four different understandings of prophets in contemporary global theology and builds on the evangelical idea of “prophetic function” as opposed to that of the prophetic *role* or *office* held by traditional Pentecostals and the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). Second, two different forms of institutional drift common within TE institutions are briefly surveyed, demonstrating the need for the prophetic function in TE institutions. Finally, the potential impact for TE institutions will be assessed.

Prophets: Four Views

The discussion about prophets and the role of prophets in churches has been a resurgent topic in the last three decades (Hamon 1987; Wagner 1999; Grudem 2000). This conversation has often been unclear as individuals with different emphases and theological distinctions have brought their own definition of prophets to the table without explaining their meaning. The core of the conversation revolves around how “prophets” should be understood in the context of Ephesians 4:11–12: “And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.” At least

four branches of thinking have emerged related to the understanding of prophets: New Apostolic Reformation, traditional Pentecostal, and two different evangelical understandings. In evaluating these different views, it must be emphasized that the purpose of these gifted people is to prepare Christians to engage in various aspects of the missionary task. Ephesians 4:12 is clear that the various individuals are called to work together to build up the Church to prepare them to carry out the mission of the Church (Silva 2014, 270).¹ Furthermore, Ephesians 4:13–15 does not indicate any kind of hierarchy among these gifts. Instead, the individuals are called to work together in unity and love towards equipping the saints to fulfill the Great Commission.

New Apostolic Reformation

C. Peter Wagner insists that the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is “an extraordinary work of God at the close of the twentieth century, which is, to a significant extent, changing the shape of Protestant Christianity around the world” (Wagner 1999, 5). Wagner further insists that the changes are not doctrinal, “But the quality of church life, the governance of the church, the worship, the theology of prayer, the missional goals, the optimistic vision for the future, and other features, constitute quite a change from traditional Protestantism” (Wagner 2011). One of the defining features of NAR is a method of church governance based on Ephesians 4:11–12 with apostles at the top of a “divine order” followed by prophets (Hamon 1997, 54; Dent 2019, 24–26).

Wagner bases his understanding of the role of prophets on Amos 3:7 and 2 Chronicles 20:20. He explains that “Every apostle needs alignment with prophets and every prophet needs apostolic alignment” (Wagner 2011). In a more critical treatment, Geivett and Pivec explain that those who hold to the NAR view “affirm the existence of prophets comparable to the great Old Testament prophets and who possess extraordinary authority extending to individuals, churches, and nations. NAR leaders hold that these prophets govern the church and reveal new truths, which are often described as strategies for advancing God’s kingdom” (Geivett and Pivec 2014, 99).

Apart from arguing for a radical departure from traditional Protestant doctrine, the NAR understanding of prophecy raises at least one significant problem for theological education: prophets (and apostles) hold unquestionable authority when they speak. Even if a so-called prophet were to teach something that is in error or contrary to Scripture, the prophet is placed in a position of authority that cannot be corrected or even questioned. Haman explains: “One of the quickest ways to get in trouble with God is to falsely accuse one of Christ’s true prophets. When we do that, we are touching the very nerve of Heaven, and we are sure to receive a negative reaction. God says in His Word, ‘*Do My prophets no harm*’ (1 Chron 16:22)” (Hamon 1987, 160). Hence if NAR prophets were in a seminary classroom—either as a student or professor—their presence would significantly undermine the educational process which requires developing critical thinking skills, proper hermeneutical method, and contextual application. A prophet making authoritative declarations regarding the interpretation of Scripture allows for little or no room for critical thinking and raising crucial questions to the teacher. It is outside the scope of this article to completely refute the NAR understanding of prophets, but the NAR view of prophets would mean that prophets have no role to play in TE institutions in preparing students to engage in the missionary task.

Traditional Pentecostal

The traditional Pentecostal view noticeably differs from the NAR position, and many traditional Pentecostals have sought to distance themselves from the NAR (Prophetic Standards Statement

2022; NAR and Christian Nationalism Statement 2022). While Pentecostals similarly tend to see Ephesians 4:11 referring to specific ministry roles or offices, at least some assert that the emphasis in Ephesians 4:11–12 is on the work of ministry given to all the saints (Assemblies of God Position Paper 2001). Some Pentecostals also see a distinction between the office of prophet and gift of prophecy. For example, The Assemblies of God (AG) largely define the apostolic function as relating to what many would call missionary activity.

The traditional Pentecostal view is carefully nuanced. While there is a desire to remain open to the possibility of new direct revelation from God, there is also much more interest in focusing on the prophecy as proclamation of Christ. The AG position paper explains that “the theme of Acts is that every believer receives the power of the Holy Spirit to be a prophetic witness to the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8)” (Assemblies of God Position Paper 2001). Craig Keener further explains that the Book of Acts “portrays the broader activity of christocentric testimony (Acts 1:8) as inspired speech, undoubtedly one reason that ‘the word of the Lord’ in Acts, as in Paul, normally refers to the good news” (Keener 2012, 910).

This Pentecostal Christocentric focus on gospel proclamation has relevance for theological education. In particular, students receiving theological education need to see how each subject they study should propel them to proclamation of the gospel. Prophets may “bring correction, instruction, and directional clarity to the Body, but not independent of other leaders, and therefore different from the model of the independent Old Testament prophet” (Prophetic Standards Statement, 2022). This application of the traditional Pentecostal definition of prophecy is helpful for TE institutions, and it overlaps with some of the implications of the evangelical views below. However, the aspect of the traditional Pentecostal definition that allows for ongoing direct revelation from God has little relevance for formal theological education. Even if one holds to the traditional Pentecostal view, the revelatory function of prophecy primarily belongs to the context of the local church (Keener 2012, 910; Thiselton 2000, 1134). Since seminaries and Bible colleges are not churches, the revelatory function would be out of place in TE institutions.

Two Evangelical Views: Preaching and Function

A distinguishing characteristic of the evangelical view is that Ephesians 4:11 is a list of gifts rather than of roles or offices (Merkle 2016, 127). However, some Evangelicals differ on the specific nature of these gifts especially as it relates to the gift of prophets. Some Evangelicals hold to the view that prophecy in the New Testament is primarily related to expositional preaching. Dever draws this correlation asserting, “The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles were given not a personal commission to go and speak, but a particular message to deliver. Likewise Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God only so long as they speak his message and unfold his words” (Dever 2021, 46). MacArthur similarly argues that apostles and prophets continued to operate through the duration of the Church described in the New Testament, but “as they continued to serve the church, the evangelists and pastors and teachers did pick up the baton from the first generation apostles and prophets” (MacArthur 1986, 142). Despite some positive aspects to the arguments from Dever and MacArthur, other Evangelicals argue that expository preaching and prophecy are not synonymous (Knights 2018, 79).

An alternative evangelical definition is offered by Frost and Hirsch. They include the prophetic function within their APEST model. APEST is an acronym using the first letter of the five functions in Ephesians 4:11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (Frost & Hirsch 2013, 205–223). Within the model, they explain that the “prophetic function discerns the

spiritual realities in a given situation and communicates them in a timely and appropriate way to further the mission of God’s people.” Frost and Hirsch further indicate, “We would see a prophet as one who knows the mind of God on issues affecting the church and who speaks into the community eliciting transformation and growth.” Furthermore, they do not limit these functions to church leadership but emphasize that all five functions must be practiced by the whole church (Frost & Hirsch 2013, 210-211).

Specifically relevant for TE institutions is how someone fulfilling the prophetic function “disturbs the status quo and challenges an organization to move in new directions” (Frost & Hirsch 2013, 214–216). TE institutions need individuals on the faculty and in administration who fulfill the prophetic function to avoid drift from the missionary task. TE institutions tend to seek stability (e.g., financial, enrollment, faculty, administrative) and will usually resist change in favor of the status quo. The prophetic function may thus be as unwelcome in theological education as it often is in the local church. Frost and Hirsch reflect, “We know numerous highly talented (APE type) people who felt a call to ministry and were told that they had no future in ordained, local church ministry.... We need to reiterate our belief that our current decline and malaise is directly linked to this loss of missional-apostolic leadership” (Frost & Hirsch 2013, 221). One of the major strengths of the APEST model is that it is firmly established on the foundation of a missional hermeneutic (Payne 2021, 3). For their long-term health and existence, institutions dedicated to theological training need to find a place for the prophetic function within the APEST model to prevent losing focus on the missionary task.

Institutional Mission Drift

Individuals filling the prophetic function in TE institutions are necessary because every institution, including one providing theological education, faces the risk of drifting from its original purpose. Historically, many TE institutions have in fact drifted from their original purpose (Greer & Horst 2014, 15, 17). Other seminaries and Bible colleges have formally discontinued their religious affiliation, while some have remained formally affiliated but practically indifferent towards any religious affiliation (Finn 2018, 39–40).

TE institutions tend to drift away from a missionary focus in at least two ways. First, TE institutions tend to drift towards producing scholars as an end to itself. Second, TE institutions tend to drift toward an inward focus and institutional preservation.

Drift Toward Scholarship

Scholarship is not inherently bad. In fact, there is good reason for seminaries to produce scholars. Theological scholars have made significant contributions to both the global Church and global missions over the centuries. However, scholarship can never be accepted as an end to itself. The emphasis of theological scholarship must always, and first, seek to advance the mission of the Church. Martin Kähler insists that theological development originated in the missionary task (Kähler 1971, 190). As Christianity spread to different cultural contexts, new questions were raised within these contexts. Theologians responded to these questions not as an academic exercise speaking to an isolated community of scholars but as the front edge of missionary advancement.

Furthermore, Kähler argues that omitting missions from any expression of Christianity does significant harm (Kähler 1971, 106). TE institutions are simultaneously expressions of Christianity and transmitters of Christianity to a new generation of leaders. Each generation of leaders must

learn how to serve faithfully in its own ever-changing cultural context and then also equip the next generation to do the same. This process is disrupted when institutions merely seek to produce scholars that are primarily interested in speaking to others in the academic community. Relegating missions, evangelism, and apologetics to their own disciplines outside the traditional theological disciplines does significant harm to both theology and missiology. As discussed elsewhere, “Theological education should lead to missional engagement, which, in turn, should result in new and deeper theological reflection” (Hirt 2021, 174). Both emphases need to be held together for both processes to be complete.

Drift Towards Institutional Preservation

In the realm of theological education, financial challenges seem to be ubiquitous. The financial struggles are even more pronounced in the Majority World. Greer and Horst observe that the combination of funding pressures, bad leadership decisions, and poor mission management are sometimes major contributors to a drift away from an institution’s purpose (Greer & Horst, 2014, 68). Bellon similarly perceives that “Many theological institutions, strapped by financial pressure, operate under the premise that adding students alone will increase their revenue” despite the strong evidence that this presupposition is almost never true (Bellon 2017, 26). This volatile combination of factors leaves TE institutions particularly prone to drift towards institutional preservation at the expense of preparing students to fulfill the missionary task. TE institutions face the temptation of assuming that, because they may have received God’s blessing in the past, they will continue to receive God’s blessing despite shifting away from God’s plan for the nations to preserving their own institutional structures. God makes no promise to bless his people in these circumstances, and, in fact, he often withdraws his Spirit when institutions and their leaders refuse to repent (Hirt 2021, 171–172).

The Prophetic Function in TE Institutions

With the risk of drift away from a missional emphasis in TE, individuals fulfilling the prophetic function as defined by Frost and Hirsch could help TE institutions prevent drift and maintain their external focus at least three distinct areas. First, they can provide missional focus for the institutional leadership. As mentioned above, TE institutions tend to drift towards an inward focus of either an exclusive emphasis on scholarship or towards institutional preservation. Those fulfilling the prophetic function can urge institutional leaders to regain a central focus on preparing students to fulfill the Great Commission with an emphasis on gospel proclamation, discipleship, church planting, and leadership development. Institutional administrators may be tempted to drive the focus of theological education toward developing gifted scholars or to simply prepare pastors to serve in existing churches. The global Church needs people to serve in these important roles, but this emphasis alone is too small of a vision. Scholars, regardless of academic discipline, need to be aware of global missions and that the Great Commission is no longer being fulfilled exclusively by Western Christians. Christian scholars can no longer assume that they are speaking into a predominantly Western conversation. Christian scholarship is a global conversation involving issues of cross-cultural communication and contextualization. Institutions interested in training scholars need to have faculty and administrators reminding them about this global conversation that is happening in the context of cross-cultural missions. Institutional leaders can be served by those fulfilling the prophetic function speaking into matters of curriculum design and core competencies. If a TE institution is not consistently called back to an outward missional focus, the trend is for them to drift toward internal focus and institutional preservation.

A second area where the prophetic function may provide missional focus is among the faculty through inter-department dialogue. All areas of theological study are essential to the development of a robust orthodoxy in any context. A missional hermeneutic of Scripture is essential as every discipline engages in the theological process (Payne 2021, 3). One of the most significant ways that the prophetic function may urge various theological disciplines to retain a missional focus is by frequently asking the question “So what?” In other words, what are the practical and contextual implications of theological conclusions? Kähler observes that this practical element is generally lacking in systematic theology, and this oversight has been to the detriment of systematic theologians (Kähler, 105). A missional focus prompted by those exercising the prophetic function in TE institutions will help faculty in all departments avoid scholarly pursuits isolated from the missional context in which they are being developed. Furthermore, the various theological disciplines will be confronted with the real contextual issues that arise rather than pursuing theoretical matters that may not have any relevance outside of the academy.

The third potential area where the prophetic function can provide missional focus is by guiding students to be sharply aware of the global mission of the Church. TE institutions exist for the purpose of preparing students for service in the local church and global missions. While there is room for advanced scholarship, institutions must not lose sight of this primary purpose. To that end, students likewise need to be reminded that they are called to be engaged in the Great Commission regardless of whether they serve in a pioneer missions context or in an established local church. Ashford and Whitfield insist, “The purpose of [Christian theology] is to equip the people of God to know and love God and to participate in his mission in the world” (Ashford and Whitfield 2014, 3). Leading students to engage in the theological process should include teaching them that the theological process is not complete unless there is a missional focus and application.

Conclusion

While much confusion persists around the definition and function of prophets in the Church, significant clarity can be achieved when a missional hermeneutic is applied in the interpretation of Ephesians 4:11–12. The five functions listed work together to equip all believers to carry out the ministry and mission of the Church. They are called to “speak the truth in love” to encourage one another to grow in Christlikeness (Eph 4:15). Christlikeness includes seeing the world as he sees it—as a field ready for harvest in need of laborers (Matt 9:37; Luke 10:2; John 4:35). Individuals fulfilling the prophetic function in TE institutions can serve as a powerful means of resisting institutional drift while simultaneously providing vitality to the institution, faculty, and students.

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¹ *Ergon* in the Pauline Epistles often carries the connotation of the missionary task. The following verses use *ergon* in reference to the missionary task: 1 Cor 9:1; 16:10; 2 Cor 1:24; 9:8; Phil 2:30; 1 Thess 5:13; 2 Thess 1:11; 2 Tim 2:15, 21; 3:17; 4:5.