

THE PROPHETIC SPIRIT

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The whole community is involved in the exercise of the ‘prophetic spirit’, the ‘spirit of prophecy’: I, you, he, she, they.

Amid all the turmoil described in the book of Revelation as the context of the witness of the faithful church, there is one outstanding feature which characterises that community. It is presented in two aspects as the faith of Jesus and the prophetic spirit. It is specified in various passages: take two. The ‘saints’ have ‘the faith of Jesus’ (14:12). They bear witness to Jesus and manifest the prophetic spirit. John identifies himself with the witnessing community, with those who hold the testimony of Jesus’ He then identifies ‘the testimony of Jesus’ with ‘the spirit of prophecy’. Here he is speaking of something he holds in common with the whole community of believers. Both testify, i.e. bear witness to, Jesus Christ as the distinctive feature of their being. As he and that community bear witness to Jesus, they exercise the prophetic spirit (19:10). ‘for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ or ‘the prophetic spirit’: το πνευμα της προφητειας *to pneuma tes propheteias* As they testify, i.e. bear witness to Jesus they are exercising the prophetic spirit. This sets them apart from every other community. The whole community is involved in the exercise of the ‘prophetic spirit’, I, you, he, she, they.

So what is the prophetic spirit? The prophets were very influential in the later history of Israel. They criticised kings and so their influence was at times paramount. They criticized the actions of the extortionist and the unjust. They held up an ethical standard that had been grossly neglected and violated. They appealed to and threatened kings and people in the name of God. And even at times made predictions of the disasters to come as punishment for evil doing. They anticipated days of reckoning when the righteous would be vindicated and the wicked punished. Both within history and also in an ultimate judgment. But their essential contribution was to provide an understanding of God as merciful, of loving kindness (*hesed*) who demanded justice and faith from his people. That was their testimony, their ‘spirit of prophecy’, or in more modern English, their ‘prophetic spirit’.

According to Paul, special gifts are given to individuals within the church to profit the whole community in its witness. These all are to contribute to the exercise of the prophetic witness that the whole church exercises. No one gift is to dominate, although he prefers the more rational, the ‘prophetic’ because it enables the members to be reasonable and to avoid excess in their witness, and also promotes discussion as they speak to one another about issues the church faces in its witness. It also avoids the excesses of other ‘gifts’. These were the occasion of ridicule to the outsiders who witnessed them, for example the Corinthians exercise of the gift of tongues. ‘Will they not say that you are mad?’ (I Corinthians 14:23) .The irrational is a kind of madness. The church is to avoid such irrationality. For the charge of madness is also appropriate when other forms of excess manifest themselves and in doing so that prevent the exercise of the ‘prophetic spirit’, authoritarianism, prejudice and dogmatism for example.

This emphasis on the prophetic gift as the church witnesses (notice how repeatedly the two ideas are connected in the text) is important as it sets out the criterion for the authenticity of the church’s activity. Is its primary concern with its witness to Jesus Christ, to testimony? Is testifying to Jesus Christ the subject of its faith, community and activity? Or does some other interest take precedence, even to the

point that this basic testimony is relegated or even forgotten. Does concern over correct doctrine, or maintenance of the received traditions of teaching and practice occupy its major attention? Is administration more important than testimony? If so, these messages from Scripture issue a warning or even a condemnation for putting the secondary in place of the primary. Is the assertion of 'authority' more important than a simple witness to faith in Jesus Christ? If so, as the last book of Scripture reminds us, there must be repentance and change.