

Fallibility and Female Prophets

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:4–5

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In my last article, I started to address John Piper's comments in [episode 215 of the Ask Pastor John podcast](#). In interacting with his interpretive claims, that post was getting a little long; I decided to show mercy to the reader, bring that article to a close, and pick up here where I left off.

To bring you up to speed, here's how John defined the gift of prophecy in episode 215:

I take [the gift of prophecy] as something that God spontaneously brings to mind in the moment; and because we are fallible in the way we perceive it, and the way we think about it, and the way we speak it, it does not carry that same level of infallible, Scripture-level authority.^[1]

As I pointed out before, that is a radical departure—both from the Old Testament definition of prophecy, and from the church's historic interpretation of the nature of prophecy. The Bible has portrayed the gift of prophecy consistently, from Genesis to Revelation, as always verbal, propositional, infallible, and authoritative. But continuationists like John Piper and Wayne Grudem modify the definition of prophecy, evidently believing that the Holy Spirit gave the church a lesser gift consisting in spiritual impressions that are ambiguous and non-authoritative.

John points to three passages in support of his view. I addressed the first passage (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21) in my previous article. In this post, I'd like to consider his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:4–5. Next time, we will address 1 Corinthians 13:8–13.

In 1 Corinthians 11:4–5, Paul writes, “Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head.” Piper says this about that text: “I don't see how women prophesying in the assembly fits with an infallible, Scripture-level authority when Paul forbids that kind of authority to be exercised over men by women in the church in 1 Timothy 2:12.”^[2]

Admittedly, the scenario in 1 Corinthians 11 raises some interpretive questions that are not easy to answer, not just because of the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12, but also in light of what Paul says a few pages later:

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, ESV)

So, are women permitted to prophesy in the assembly in chapter 11, but forbidden to do so in chapter 14? How do we reconcile these statements?

Continuationists like John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and D.A. Carson believe that 1 Corinthians

14:34–35 should not be viewed as a prohibition on women prophesying in the church, since they seem to be practicing that with Paul’s approval in 11:5. Rather, they say 14:34–35 is a prohibition on women prophets *judging* prophecies. In other words, Paul is teaching that women can’t judge the prophecies of male prophets since that would be “exercising authority over a man” and would violate 1 Timothy 2:12.[\[3\]](#)

The obvious question in response is, “How could women *prophesy* and not be teaching and exercising authority over a man?” And their response is to infer, without any explicit textual warrant, that this gift of prophecy must be a watered-down version of the historic gift of prophecy—no longer infallible and authoritative, but a mere sharing of advice that is inferior even to teaching.

But again I ask: Is the *only* legitimate answer to infer such a radical redefinition of the gift of prophecy, especially without a single explicit comment from any New Testament author? Is there another interpretation, which fits *all* the biblical data, does not depend on inference, and requires less explaining away of explicit prohibitions? Indeed, there is a still more excellent way.

Outside the Assembly

I believe the simplest answer is that the prohibition for women to speak comes in a specific context, namely, “in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34). In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul does not begin addressing the Corinthians in the context of their local assembly until verses 17 and 18. Verse 18 says, “For, in the *first* place, when you come together as a church . . .” The *first* matter that Paul addresses as it regards the gathered assembly is the issue of division, and that doesn’t come until 11:18. Therefore, especially in light of 14:34–35, it’s very likely that Paul’s reference to praying and prophesying in 11:4-5 is not intended to be understood in the context of the corporate gathering. Women were able to exercise their authoritative, instructive gift of prophecy outside the assembled church.

It certainly was not unheard of for New Testament prophets to prophesy outside of the assembly, as in the case of Agabus (Acts 21:10–11). And even today, we who believe that women should not teach or exercise authority over men in the church nevertheless make every opportunity for gifted women to teach children and other women (Titus 2:3–4). Teaching in a children’s ministry or leading a women’s Bible study does not violate 1 Timothy 2:12, and nor does their prophesying. There is no reason that the Spirit could not have provided some women with the same gift of prophecy he gave to men, and yet limited its use to outside the gathered assembly.[\[4\]](#)

Old Testament Prophetesses Did Not Undermine Complementarianism

Besides this, we have explicit biblical evidence that a woman exercising an authoritative, Scripture-level prophetic gift does not undermine biblical complementarianism. Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Anna (Luke 2:36) were all prophetesses in the Old Testament era. This means they exercised the standard Old Testament prophetic gift—namely, infallible, authoritative prophecy.

Piper would not say that men’s and women’s roles changed from egalitarianism in the Old Testament to complementarianism in the New Testament. But he is forced to this undesirable position if he wishes to maintain his objection to infallible prophecy on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:12. If both men and women in the Old Testament could prophesy with an infallible and authoritative prophetic gift, *and*

not violate the gender roles established in the created order, why should we assume that would have changed in the New Testament?

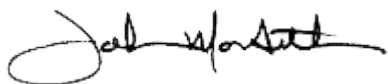
“Your Sons *and* Your Daughters Shall Prophecy”

What’s more, when Peter announced the inauguration of the Spirit’s ministry on the Day of Pentecost, saying, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: . . . your sons and your daughters shall prophecy” (Acts 2:16–17), there is no indication that these daughters would receive a radically redefined prophetic gift. On the contrary, Peter explicitly identifies the Old Testament gift with the New Testament gift. As an Old Testament prophet himself, Joel couldn’t have been referring to anything but Old Testament prophecy, which we all agree was infallible and carried Scripture-level authority. And it is precisely the *New Testament* gift of prophecy—received by both men *and* women—that Peter cites as the fulfillment of that promise. The conclusion is inescapable: Women exercised an infallible and authoritative prophetic gift.

Conclusion

Therefore, if New Testament prophecy is infallible, authoritative, and on par with Scripture, as we claim, then 1 Corinthians 11:4–5 does not contradict Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12. These texts harmonize without having to radically redefine the gift of prophecy.

Next time I’ll address John Piper’s comments on 1 Corinthians 13, which many continuationists see as one of the most important texts in the continuationist/cessationist debate. Be sure to stay tuned.



[1] [Ask Pastor John](#), Episode 215, 1:04–1:37.

[2] [Ask Pastor John](#), Episode 215, 3:49–4:09.

[3] D. A. Carson, “Silent in the Churches: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), pp. 140–53.

[4] See John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 1984), pp. 256–57.

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