



QUESTION:
“Regarding Philip’s daughters who prophesied: would this imply that only unmarried females could prophesy in the Church?”



An interesting topic has been brought to my attention by a group of brethren who are studying the book of Acts, and I must admit that the question they have raised is one that I have never before considered.

The question is based on Acts 21:9, where we read that **‘Philip had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy’**. This is how the ‘Authorized Version’ reads. The rendering in the ‘Revised Standard Version’ is somewhat different. There we read, **‘He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophesy’**.

Their question is: **“Would this imply that only unmarried females could prophesy in the Church?”**

As you see, the verse reveals two significant facts about the four daughters of Philip.

First: They were ‘virgins’.

Now, the word *‘parthenos’* tells us not merely that they were unmarried. It reveals that they had *never been married*. This is the word that is also used to describe Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Luk.1: 27.

The use of the word ‘virgin’ *does not* tell us that it was their unmarried state that gave these four young women the authority, or the right, to prophesy – either in the Church or anywhere else, for that matter - but it *does* tell us something about their spiritual zeal and their commendable desire to serve their Lord.

Let me try to explain what I mean.

In 1st Cor.7: 34, Paul reveals that in the New Testament Church there were women who *chose* not to marry, in order to be able to devote themselves more fully to the service of the Lord. This was a purely voluntary act on their part, because there is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that to remain unmarried was either commanded or even approved by the Lord. On the contrary, the normal state was marriage, as the Lord implied when He stated that, because God created male and female, a man should leave his parents and ‘cleave’ - (*‘kollao’* = be joined to) - his wife Matt.19; 4-6.

It is the fact that the daughters of Philip the evangelist *chose* to remain ‘virgins’ in order to be able to serve the Lord without being restricted by the inevitable responsibilities and duties of marriage, which reveals that their dedication was exceptional, because, in Jewish society, marriage was considered a sacred duty, so important that any man or woman who remained unmarried after attaining what was regarded as ‘marriageable age’, was looked upon as failing to achieve life’s purpose. Jewish teachers said that a man who did not have a wife was *‘less than a man’*, and was said to *‘diminish the image of God in the world’*.

Therefore, only in very special circumstances, and for a very special reason, would a devout Jewish man or woman remain unmarried. This is why, in 1st Tim.5: 14, Paul declares that the younger women should marry and become good and faithful wives and mothers.

There is also reason to believe that these ‘virgins’ - these women who, for religious reasons chose to remain unmarried – performed useful service in the life of the early Church. I have recently been reading the letters written by Pliny to the Emperor Trajan, during the two years of his governorship of the province of Bithynia, which would be about 103 A.D., and in Letter

10, paragraph 6, Pliny mentions that certain women whom the Romans described as '*ministrae*', were 'serving' among the Christians.

This does not mean that they had any 'official' role in the ministry of the Church. They were simply Christian women who gave help wherever and whenever it was needed, and in whatever way they could, and it reveals the wonderful spirit of fellowship that existed among Christians, in an age when, even in Roman society, there was no real care or concern for the poor and needy.

No Ready-made Organisation.

We must bear in mind, that, in the first years of its existence, the Church had no regular, established or formal organisation. It did not come into the world equipped with a ready-made system of government. Several years passed after the Day of Pentecost, before the Holy Spirit, by means of the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus, gave instructions for the appointment of Elders and Deacons, and directed that they should be appointed in every church (see Titus 1:5).

What could be more natural, therefore, in the years of the Church's infancy, before there were Elders or Deacons, than that the devout daughters of Philip the Evangelist should remain unmarried in order to dedicate themselves to helping their father in his work of preaching the Gospel and establishing congregations of believers? It is with this background that we should consider the second fact revealed about these four young women.

Second: They 'prophesied'.

Incidentally, you may be interested to know that Eusebius, who lived in the 3rd century A.D, in his "Church History", quotes another early writer who states that the daughters of Philip '*were buried in Heirapolis, where Philip himself is buried. And they were 'prophetesses'.*

Now, many people struggle with that word '*prophesied*', because in the popular mind, it has to do with predicting, foretelling or forecasting future events. And *that* is a serious mistake, because amongst the Old Testament prophets there were some whose writings contained no predictions of future events.

The word '*prophetei*', which gives us the word 'prophesied' – simply means '*to speak forth*', and, when it is used in a religious context, it means '*to speak forth on behalf of God*'. All of the words in the family of words, 'prophet', 'prophecy' and 'prophesy', have to do with the act of 'proclamation' rather than 'fore-telling', so that the prophet was a forth-teller, rather than a fore-teller

If we look at the Hebrew words that are translated 'prophet', we find that he was one who spoke on God's behalf. This fact marks the difference between a priest and a prophet. Whilst the priest spoke from Man to God, the prophet spoke from God to Man. Or, again, the priest was the mediator on Man's side, whilst the prophet was the mediator on God's side.

Furthermore, the prophet was a man who spoke under divine compulsion. The message he delivered was God's message and not his own. I use the word 'compulsion' because, in the example of Jeremiah (ch.20; 7-9), we see that he found himself unable to contain the message God had given to him. He could not refrain from speaking. He had to speak because the message was like a fire in his bones.

Hence, the Hebrew word, '*nabi*', prophet, means '*to bubble up*', and it reveals that he was a man in whose heart the message 'bubbled up' so that he found that he had to speak, regardless of the consequences..

Therefore:

- A 'prophet' was *one who* 'spoke forth' for God.
- A 'prophecy' was *the message* 'spoken forth' by the servant of God who spoke as he was given words to speak by the Spirit of God.
- And 'prophesy' denotes *the act* of speaking for God.

All of these words cover both *delivering* the message of God - (that is, preaching) - and *teaching* God's Word.

In the case of the daughters of Philip, we should understand that they were enabled to speak on God's behalf. They had been granted the gift of prophecy, and we should not be surprised at this, because, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter reminded his hearers that Joel had spoken of the coming of a time when: **"Your sons and daughters shall prophecy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams"** (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28).

The crucial question is simply this; where, and when, did the daughters of Philip exercise this gift of 'speaking forth'? Certainly they did not speak in the assembly, because even those women upon whom the Holy Spirit had bestowed spiritual gifts were not allowed to exercise their gifts when the Church met together. The rule that governed the conduct of *all* women in the Church is explicit. **"As in all the churches of the saints women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak"** (1st Cor. 14:34). **"I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."** 1Tim 2:12. Note that the reason for this prohibition follows in the next verse. (These quotations are from the R.S.V.)

Of course, as I have indicated, this rule applies to the occasions when the entire Church comes together and there were no exceptions. But! There was nothing - THERE is nothing - to prevent a woman from teaching other women, or from teaching non-believing men, for that matter!

The conclusion.

Therefore, we conclude that these gifted daughters of Philip had dedicated themselves to the Lord's service and, in the early days of the Church's history, exercised their ability to '*speaking forth*' for God by speaking to, and teaching, other women. In so doing they contravened no law laid down by the Lord, but rendered perfectly acceptable service.

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Our Deepest Fear

Our deepest fear is not that we are
inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are
powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you *not* to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightening about
shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure
around you.

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates
others.

By Marianne Williamson.