

Would That All Were Prophets

BY TRACEY MARK STOUT

Israel's prophets are enigmatic, eccentric characters, who shock us with disturbing preaching and bizarre behavior. Eccentricities aside, we ought not to dismiss them or their message. By drawing on their tradition, today's prophets continue to build up the church to become a prophetic voice to the culture around it.

The prophets in the Old Testament are some of the more peculiar and fascinating biblical figures. With their preaching and bizarre behavior they hoped to jar and awaken their hearers. Isaiah walked around Jerusalem naked and barefoot to appear as a prisoner of war. Jeremiah bought a clay jug and, after gathering some elders and priests, he smashed the pot to the ground. This, he told them, is what God had in store for Judah. Ezekiel took prophetic strange actions to new heights, digging through the wall of his house and shaving off his hair and beard, piles of which he chopped or burned or threw to the winds.

It is doubtful that anyone asked a prophet home for supper more than once.¹ Not only the prophets' actions, but also their imagery was shocking. Amos angrily referred to the wealthy women of Israel as fat cows from the fertile region of Bashan. Micah called the leaders of Judah cannibals who stripped the bones and ate the flesh of their subjects. No wonder that many people see the biblical prophets as enigmatic, eccentric people. Yet, we should not let these curious actions and pronouncements cause us to dismiss the prophets who brought them. The church cannot afford to ignore the prophetic tradition in Israel.

MESSENGERS FOR GOD

The Old Testament prophets often are misunderstood to be tellers of the future, in a category with Nostradamus or Jean Dixon. Though they may seem cryptic, they were not primarily fore-tellers. The prophets were messengers who spoke for God; they brought a divine message to the people of Israel that was needed for a particular time. Since these histori-

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cally particular oracles have been accepted as authoritative Scripture, their messages have become prophecy to each new generation.

The prophets consistently linked right worship with right living, and idolatry with injustice. They reminded the people of Israel of their responsi-

bility under their covenant with God, that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable. The words of the prophets echo the statement of Samuel to Saul: "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). This statement encapsulates the heart of the prophetic tradition. God wants fidelity and obedience, not merely religious zeal to cover our mistakes and omissions. This insight into the relationship between what one worships and how one lives resounds throughout the prophetic books.

As a messenger for God, Hosea told the Israelites, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). Amos's tirades against the apathy of the wealthy and the oppression of the poor are the epitome of the prophetic critique of a religiosity that has become an end in itself and disregards justice and righteousness. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-22a, 24). Micah warned that God does not require burnt offerings or rivers of oil, but "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6-8). To the prophets, the religious life was inherently a moral life.

The righteous God of Israel expected righteousness from the people. God wanted Israel to form an egalitarian society, different from that of

the Egyptians or the Canaanites who had a monarchy that survived by the toil of the peasants. The law given with the covenant sought to prevent an accumulation of wealth and power by one group. When the people disregarded the intention of the covenant, their treatment of the poor and the powerless—the orphan, the widow, and the stranger—were indicators of the disease of their society.

The prophets used harsh imagery and bizarre actions to penetrate the numbness and satiation of the wealthy, comfortable members of society. Their critiques were biting and vehement when the obligations of the covenant were ignored.² Courageous prophets like Nathan and Elijah stood up to the royal families, insisting that even powerful kings like David and Ahab must obey the covenant.

The prophets, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has pointed out, were iconoclasts who challenged the comfortable beliefs and religious pretensions of the people.³ Jeremiah stood up in the Temple in Jerusalem and attacked the belief that it was inviolable. He spoke against the popular, cherished notion that nothing could happen to the Temple regardless of the people's unfaithfulness to God. The people adopted "The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord" as an invocation for their own safety (7:4); in another time they could have made "Temple of the Lord" bumper stickers or "TOTL" bracelets and t-shirts. Jeremiah was almost killed for crying out against these pretensions. Many prophets were lonely people who stood opposed to the kings, religious leaders, and sometimes the common people. Yet during the exile some biblical prophets brought a message of hope and comfort to war-torn and exiled Judah. When the need in Israel changed, the prophets modulated their tone.

We should remember that the prophets were representative of the task assigned to all Israelites, who, as God's people, were to be a kingdom of priests mediating between God and the rest of the world. The Book of Numbers contains an interesting account of seventy elders who were chosen to help Moses bear his burden of leadership over the Israelites. The people were complaining about their situation in the wilderness, particularly their boring and steady diet of manna. After the newly appointed elders received the divine spirit, they prophesied in the wilderness; two other men who were named as elders but remained in the camp also prophesied. Joshua urged Moses to rebuke them and retain a unique position as prophet or spokesperson for God, but Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them" (Numbers 11:29). Joshua was worried about Moses' leadership in the face of these others prophesying; Moses was concerned for the community's obedience to the Lord. Moses desired that all God's people be able to speak to one another regarding their obligations as people of the covenant.

JESUS AS A PROPHET

The Gospels present Jesus as the greatest of the prophets.⁴ Jesus is more than simply a prophet, of course, but he is nothing less. His critiques of the religious leaders of his day clearly reflect the prophetic tradition of Israel; he urged them to make their lives match their devotion to the Lord. Using strong imagery in the prophetic fashion, he called them “white-washed tombs” and “a brood of snakes.” Quoting Jeremiah, Jesus drove the merchants out of the outer court of the temple because they disrupted the Temple’s witness to the Gentiles (Mark 11:17). His prophetic stance against religious and political leaders resulted in his death.

Jesus’ teachings, too, were prophetic utterances. His vision of the kingdom of God, for instance, is grounded in the Old Testament prophetic vision of the restoration of creation. The book of Isaiah envisions a future time of peace and righteousness, when all creatures will be reconciled, at peace with one another and with God (Isaiah 11:1-10). Jesus likewise described the kingdom as a great reversal of rivalries—of great and small, rich and poor, and servants and masters. His was a prophetic vision of God’s future meant to speak to the present day.

The kingdom of God, Jesus announced, was close at hand for all the creation. Some in Jesus’ day expected one who, like a great Davidic king, would restore the nation of Israel, right the wrongs done to them, and establish a kingdom of justice and peace. Jesus accepted this messianic expectation, but gave it a new character. He preached peace rather than violent assault on his enemies. Often Jesus used images from the farm and home to describe the growth of God’s kingdom: it will be like a sprouting mustard seed, yeast that causes a loaf to rise, or seeds scattered on the arable ground. In these agrarian metaphors the kingdom comes by God’s mysterious working, and not through human improvements.

Jesus instituted a new social order. Those who follow him are to serve one another, and not to rule like the tyrants and lords of the Gentiles. To be great in the kingdom is to serve, not to dominate. As the greatest of the prophets Jesus revealed to us God’s intention for the formation of a new type of community.⁵ As a new Moses, Jesus instituted a new society; he placed high moral demands upon those in his new covenant, not in order to receive salvation, but to express the salvation they were receiving from God.

PROPHETS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The apostle Paul includes prophecy with ministry, teaching, exhortation, leadership, giving, and compassion as spiritual gifts given by God to members in the church (Romans 12:4-8; compare 1 Corinthians 12:8-11). Just as the human body has many parts which function differently, all to achieve the health and well-being of the whole body, likewise the church, which is the body of Christ, has many members with varied gifts to build

up and keep the church healthy. A similar list in the book of Ephesians states that some people in the church are to be prophets (Ephesians 4:11-13). The saints must be equipped for their common ministry, and prophets are among those who work to achieve that end.

“Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts,” Paul urges all of the church members at Corinth, “and especially that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1). Prophets speak to the believing community for “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (14:3). Because prophecy is meant to edify the entire community, it is a greater gift than speaking in tongues, which is meant for individuals. Five intelligible words of upbuilding and encouragement are better for the community than ten thousand private words, Paul says, so church members should be eager to prophesy to one another.

What did these prophets say? Did they, like the Epistle of James, teach that pure religion in the sight of God is to visit orphans and widows and to keep oneself unstained by the world (1:27)? In James’ insistence that works must always accompany true faith we hear echoes of Amos’ and Jeremiah’s critiques of Israelite religion.

We can glimpse specific prophets’ roles within the early church in the story of Judas and Silas, who as prophets in the Antioch church “said much to encourage and strengthen the believers” (Acts 15:32). When another prophet, Agabus, warned them to prepare for a coming time of famine, the Antioch believers began saving money to send to the Jerusalem church (11:28-30). These prophets, like those in the Old Testament, called their community to its mission and obligations as God’s people. Church members accepted them as authoritative voices as the church discerned how it should act as the body of Christ.

In addition to designating specific people as prophets, the New Testament also portrays the entire church as being a prophetic voice to the world.⁶ Paul, when he told the Corinthians that he would like to see all of them prophesy, was endorsing Moses’ wish that all God’s people be prophets. The recognition of particular individuals within the church who are gifted to serve as prophets should remind all church members of their calling to a prophetic ministry.

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WHO ARE THE PROPHETS TODAY?

Are there people, either on the national scene or in local congregations, who are prophetic voices for the Christian community today? Who is calling the church to appraise the relationship between its worship and its life?

I am not identifying those who are the prophets in the church today, since that is something for congregations to discern within their life to-

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gether. Christians are to "test the spirits," to examine in their communities each prophet's words (1 John 4:1; compare 1 Corinthians 14:29). We must listen to the voices we hear around us and search for those who have a finger on the pulse of the church, can read the signs of the times, and

will call them back to the God whom they met in Jesus Christ.

As we deliberate together in church about how to live, prophets call us to fidelity to Christ and keep us mindful of what he expects of his people as we make decisions and face difficulties. They shake us into wide-eyed awareness of the needs of the present hour. They question the religious pretensions that cloud our judgment and expose the idols that we place before God. Those with the gift of prophecy help us to understand our situation in light of God's new way in the world.

The prophets, as Paul emphasized, build up the entire church to become a prophetic voice to the culture around it. Jesus established and made possible, by his life, death, and resurrection, a new way of being in the world. With his life and his cross as our paradigm, the church lives in the Spirit, in the way of Jesus. Thus, the life of the church should serve as a prophetic word to the surrounding community.⁷

Though the Old Testament prophets spoke primarily to the Israelites, they also brought oracles against the surrounding nations for their sins. Yahweh is not simply a tribal deity, they claimed, but is the only true God of the universe. Likewise, Jesus depicted God's kingdom as made up of all nations, peoples, and tribes. As a provisional representation of that kingdom, the church is also to be one body which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnicity. In our dispersed existence, Christians are still learning that God's concerns cannot be identified with the concerns of any single nation. Indeed, this is one reason that Christians in North America need to listen to the prophetic voices from the churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

With Moses and Paul, we yearn that all God's people be prophets. My Christian tradition speaks often of the priesthood of all believers, which means that all members are to intercede for and aid one another. We also should speak of the *prophethood* of all believers. All people in the church—whether pastors, deacons, or Sunday school teachers, grandmothers or youth, theologians or novelists—have opportunities for putting the church back on track when it wanders into peripheral paths and issues.

As believers, we should prophetically proclaim the truth in love and hold one another accountable to our obligations. Let our prayer be that all may be prophets, concerned for the life of the people of God as a witness to the world.

NOTES

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 73.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 5-46.

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, volume 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 10-12.

⁴ Theologians speak of the three-fold offices of Christ. Jesus was prophet, priest, and king. Unfortunately Jesus as prophet is often overlooked out of the fear of implying "just" a prophet.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume 4, part 3.2, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 895-98.

⁷ Yoder, 185-87.



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