



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Would That All Were Prophets
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 9-15)

What do you think?

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Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Would That All Were Prophets

The New Testament, in addition to designating specific people as prophets, portrays the church as a prophetic voice to the world. What role should prophets play in the church's communal practice of moral discernment?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29; 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-33.

Responsive Reading

Come, Holy Lord, Fire and Fountain,
Through the power of your Spirit,
help us to worship you in spirit and in truth.

Help us to hear the words of truth.

Help us to speak the words of love.

Inspire us, move us, shine within us.

We open ourselves to you; you know all, see all, and love all.

Make us instruments of your peace. Amen.

Reflection

The prophets of Israel "consistently linked right worship with right living, and idolatry with injustice. They reminded the people ... that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable," Stout observes. In this way they were "forth-tellers," messengers who spoke for God to the people of Israel, more than they were foretellers of future events.

The prophets were representative of the task assigned to all Israelites, who were to be prophets to each other and before the world. "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets," Moses replied when Joshua worried that others' prophesying might undermine Moses' authority (Numbers 11:29). Moses wanted all the people to remind one another of their obligations under God's covenant. Furthermore, the Israelites were called to become "a priestly kingdom and holy nation" announcing God's love and judgment before all of the nations (Exodus 16:5-6).

The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of prophecy among the people of God. Both individuals and the church are called to prophetic ministries:

- ▶ The Gospels present Jesus as a prophet, as well as Messiah and Savior. "As the greatest of the prophets, Jesus revealed to us God's intention for the formation of a new type of community [in the church]," writes Stout. "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."
- ▶ Prophecy is a spiritual gift from God to members in the church (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; cf. Ephesians 4:11-13). "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy," the Apostle Paul urged all the members at Corinth, in order to "build up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:1-4). When several prophets speak, church members should listen in an orderly way and collectively "weigh what is said ... so that all may learn



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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and all be encouraged” (1 Corinthians 14:29-31; see similar passages in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 and 1 John 4:1-3a).

- ▶ Individuals in the Antioch church were designated prophets. Judas and Silas “said much to encourage and strengthen the believers” (Acts 15:32). When Agabus warned members to prepare for a coming famine, they saved money to assist the poorer congregation in Jerusalem (11:28-30). “These prophets, like those in the Old Testament, called their community to its mission and obligations as God’s people,” Stout notes. “Church members accepted them as authoritative voices as the church discerned how it should act as the body of Christ.”
- ▶ In the heavenly worship overheard by the prophet John, “a new song” exalts the Lamb of God for making the church to be “a kingdom and priests serving our God” (Revelation 5:9-10). This song echoes Israel’s covenant in Exodus 16:5-6. The entire church is to be a prophetic voice to the world. “My Christian tradition speaks often of the priesthood of all believers, which means that all members are to intercede for and aid one another,” Stout concludes. “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.”

Study Questions

1. Are there people, either on the world or national scene, who are prophetic voices for the Christian community today? Who is calling the church to appraise the relationship between its worship and its life?
2. Are there individuals in your congregation who frequently are prophetic voices for your Christian community? How do they communicate their message, and how does your church weigh their announcement?
3. What concerns do you have about the church relying upon prophetic guidance? Are these concerns addressed in the New Testament passages in this study?
4. Acts 21:7-14 offers an extended look at prophecy in the early church. What do we learn about prophets and evaluating their prophecy, or “testing the spirits,” in this passage?
5. Discuss Stanley Hauerwas’ view of the church’s prophetic role: “Prophecy is no longer solely the role of specific individuals, although individual prophets will, I hope, still be present. It is the community itself that is now prophetic, for it is a community formed by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, which means that it cannot be what it is without understanding itself to be accountable to the great prophets of Israel” (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 62).
6. How does the hymn “Come Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire” (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 45) portray the role of the Holy Spirit and prophecy in the church?

Departing Hymn: “Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire”

Would That All Were Prophets

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)

Teaching goals

1. To survey how the New Testament welcomes prophecy.
2. To consider who might be a prophetic voice in the world today, calling the church to examine its worship and actions.
3. To explore how the church is called to have a prophetic witness in the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“Sometimes church-life might be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.... We were debating a committee’s proposal to build a new sanctuary. One member stood up in the back and announced: ‘The Holy Spirit has told me this week that we should not build this sanctuary, for if we do, the church will grow and we will lose touch with one another. Our fellowship is too precious a gift to risk in this way.’ There was silence for half a minute. Then a member right in front rose to speak: ‘I’ve been praying about this decision too,’ she reported, ‘and the Holy Spirit has spoken clearly to me. We must build this sanctuary in order to extend our ministries to our growing town.’ Now everybody was talking at once.... Fortunately I am equipped with a reasonably loud voice, so as loudly as I could I urged: ‘The Holy Spirit speaks to *us* collectively as a church, when we patiently listen to and carefully weigh these prophecies.’ Actually, we did need to hear both prophecies, for the church needed both to build more space and to heed the counsel to not mistake mere physical growth for spiritual vitality” (Kruschwitz, “The Wild Goose,” *Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 41-42).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will discern the prophetic voices that are speaking to their group and to the church today.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29 and 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-33 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This lesson highlights two important links between Israel’s prophetic tradition and the church: (1) just as the people of Israel were to be prophets to one another, the New Testament welcomes the guidance of

prophecy in the church; and (2) the church, like Israel, as the gathered people of God, are to be a prophetic witness to God's love and judgment before all the world.

What's the point of the story of Joshua and Moses in Numbers 11? The people misunderstood and complained about God's guidance. Moses could not bear the burden of answering their complaints and relating God's intentions (11:12-14). God provided for seventy prophets to assist Moses. Part of Joshua's concern may be that the two prophets began prophesying without going first to the "tent of meeting" (11:16), the place where God regularly met with Moses. The story highlights that God's Spirit touched them where they were, in the camp.

Briefly highlight four themes from the New Testament materials: (1) the Gospels present Jesus as the greatest prophet, as well as Messiah and Savior [this theme was developed in the first study guide, "Jesus as a Prophet"]; (2) prophecy is a spiritual gift from God to members in the church; (3) some individuals were designated as prophets, perhaps because they exercised the gift of prophecy often or in memorable ways; and (4) the church as a community should be a prophetic voice to the world.

You might use the study questions to explore only one or two of these themes.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention Christian leaders or politicians, writers or musicians, missionaries or evangelists who are prophetic voices. Some, like Mother Theresa, might be relatively uncontroversial; others who are mentioned might spark disagreement. Ask members to discuss whether a prophet is likely to be uncontroversial, even among committed people of God. Some members may mention non-Christian voices that the church needs to hear. Could the Spirit of God be speaking a word to the church through these individuals?
2. Members may name individuals who have spoken words of wise counsel on important issues, or who offer guidance as they counsel, teach, or preach. Are their prophetic messages discussed formally in church business session or by an appointed group or committee, or more informally among members in the church?
3. Prophecies might be difficult to interpret, seem to disagree with one another, or be clear to only some members. Some prophets may be better 'talkers' than 'listeners,' and they fail to appreciate what others have to contribute. The later New Testament writings warn that "false prophets" may mislead and misinform intentionally in order to gain control or power. Others, who think they are speaking a prophetic word, may themselves become confused about God's message. The New Testament calls for careful communal evaluation of the prophecies presented to the church.
4. Members might mention the prominence of women prophets in this passage, the prophetic *symbolic action* by Agabus, and Paul's careful evaluation of Agabus' action.
5. Since Jesus' ministry and teaching were continuous with the great prophets of Israel, so his new community, the church, has a responsibility to embody those prophetic concerns before the world. How can your church, as a community, do prophetic actions or make prophetic statements? Are congregations always correct when they attempt to speak or act on God's word? How do we "test these spirits?"
6. The hymn celebrates the Holy Spirit, the "source of the old prophetic fire," for inspiring us to understand and apply Scripture, revealing to us our sin and bringing light to our "disordered spirits," and revealing to us the depth of divine love. The prophetic voice has these tasks in the church and before the world.

Departing Hymn

"Come, Holy Ghost, our Hearts Inspire" is reprinted on pp. 45-46 of *Prophetic Ethics*. The suggested tune, AZMON, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.