



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Prophet as Storyteller
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 75-81)

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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The Prophet as Storyteller

With stories, prophets can slip past our mental defenses, stimulate our moral imagination, and deliver unexpected emotional jolts. From the prophet Nathan to Flannery O'Connor, their storytelling reaches into our hearts, not just our heads.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Samuel 11:27b-12:7a

Responsive Reading

Lord, we confess to you,
in the presence of our sisters and brothers,
we have sinned.

**We hide our sins from ourselves.
just as we hide them from each other.**

Forgive us, Lord,
for we have marred the picture of fellowship
and misheard the melody that helps us dance closer to you.
Lord, hear these words of repentance:

Send your Spirit

**into eyes to see visions of the people we can be,
into hands to help lead us back onto the path,
into voices to sing songs enticing us to holiness,
and even into us, that we might grow to know your love.**

Amen.

Reflection

Nathan used "his prophetic imagination in order to stimulate David's moral imagination." Rather than *tell* the moral truth, Nathan *pictured* it. He employed the subversive power of storytelling to slip past the King's mental defenses and penetrate his emotional callousness. The prophet out-flanked David's rationalizations and trumped his spiritual apathy.

Nathan understood that often we need more than knowledge of right and wrong. "As individuals and a society we become numb to the bad choices we have made and are no longer able to see our sin," Bieber notes. "Prophets understand *how* people change. They understand 'the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life.' In other words, prophets know that we do not need better understanding—we need a jolt."

Twentieth-century writer Flannery O'Connor's profound fiction embodies two characteristics of biblical prophecy:

- ▶ *Defamiliarization*. We overlook personal and social sinful distortions when they look ordinary; "That's just the way the world works," we say blithely. Nathan got David to see clearly by putting his sin in a different context, on another sort of character in the story. O'Connor used "the grotesque to make what is truly perverse actually *appear* perverse."
- ▶ *Identification and Discovery*. O'Connor told one story more than any other, the journey of the hardheaded, misguided character who uncovers, like David, the unsettling truth of who they truly are. The key to prophetic storytelling is to shock audiences with the jolt of self-revelation. "To the hard of hearing



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Matthew Schobert, Associate Director of The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, is the author of this study guide. He serves as the Associate Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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you shout," remarks O'Connor, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, O'Connor critiqued contemporary America through the degraded fictional city of Taulkinham, whose people worship only their "own desires as reflected in America's newest God: capitalism." A flashy peddler, Onnie Jay Holy, hawks his church of cheap grace that you can join for a dollar: "It's based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends," Holy says, "You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted." The protagonist's name, "Hazel Motes," points to the story's central theme, Bieber writes: "he has a mote in his eye, but his story will reveal the plank in our own." Hazel proclaims a "Church Without Christ," in order to escape his (admittedly misguided) Christian upbringing and to embrace a life of sin like everyone else. This reluctant prophet, however, cannot rid himself of Jesus: "Haze's 'wise blood' teaches him that how he lives and what he believes does matter, and that this is not a world where anything goes."

Hazel needs an emotional jolt to knock him out of sin's complacency and the numbness that consumerism cultivates. Often the reality of death is the shock O'Connor uses to awaken her characters, and her readers, to their jeopardy.

In O'Connor's story "Revelation," we recognize ourselves in the character of Ruby Turpin, "a southern white landowner who is proud of her property and her social standing," Bieber writes. She is "so self-satisfied and self-serving that she cannot see anything wrong with herself but can easily dole out judgments on others." An eye-opening message from God delivered by an unlikely prophetess shatters Ruby's self-righteousness.

Imagination enables us to see by analogy who and what we are in reality. Prophets and storytellers understand this. They tell stories "to displace us in order to put us in our place, to remind us that we are the *created* and not the *Creator*."

Study Questions

1. Review Flannery O'Connor's description of 1940's and 1950's America (pp. 76-77). What spiritual sickness does she note? To what does this sickness lead?
2. In *Wise Blood*, through characters like the religious salesman Onnie Jay Holy and Hazel Motes, O'Connor took critical jabs at American Protestantism. Do you share her concerns?
3. When characters face death in O'Connor's writings, it becomes a moment of revelation for them or redemption for others. How can facing death sometimes deliver the emotional jolt we need to see ourselves rightly? How can it open up the possibility of our conversion?
4. Identify other prophets in the Bible or church history who use stories to communicate a message from God. Which contemporary writers are prophetic storytellers?

Departing Hymn: "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing"

The Prophet as Storyteller

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) |
| Question 1 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To discover the prophetic power of narratives to communicate divine truth.
2. To identify literary devices prophetic storytellers use to engage our ethical imagination.
3. To recognize that some writers of fiction are also contemporary prophets.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage 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 Quote

Read the lines Christina Bieber quotes from renaissance English poet Sir Philip Sidney's "Apology for Poetry." She introduces Sidney's apology with the comment, "Sidney defends the poet from the charge of lying..." (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 75).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. End by asking God to give us the eyes and ears that we might discover ourselves in the works of contemporary prophetic storytellers.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Samuel 11:27b-12:7a from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

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

Reflection

Stories can be dangerous to our self-righteousness and self-deception. After being caught up in their dramatic unfolding, we discover, usually too late, that we are not reading the stories so much as being read by them!

The lesson begins with the well-known account of Nathan's prophetic confrontation with King David. God often directed prophets to speak harsh words to kings and priests, military leaders and wealthy persons, and sometimes the entire community. Occasionally these prophetic messages were heard and heeded; more often they were ignored and the prophets were threatened or killed.

Bieber points out that the means by which prophets announced God's word is often as important as the content of the message. Direct approaches typically engender *interpersonal* conflict, tension between the messenger and the hearer; indirect approaches, such as stories, provoke *intrapersonal* conflict, tension within the hearer. We can note examples of prophetic storytelling in Scripture.

Fiction writers, like Flannery O'Connor, can be insightful and provocative prophetic figures today. Her many short stories and two novels may strike readers as peculiar, hinting that something significant lies waiting to be discovered. She possessed an astute theological mind and explored theological themes of sin, repentance, and redemption in her characters' actions.

Bieber's commentary on O'Connor provides an excellent starting place for exploring this writer's prophetic giftedness. The group might consider working through *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, a popular collection of O'Connor's short stories, for a future study.

Study Questions

1. O'Connor identifies three driving forces in America's deepening spiritual sickness: (1) nihilism, the rejection of human values and meaning; (2) a loss of divine transcendence, or the sense of God's otherness and distinctiveness from human beings; and (3) and the vaporization of religion, substituting individual moral convictions for theologically substantive beliefs about God. Invite members to explore these causes, noting examples in addition to the ones O'Connor points out.

Following O'Connor's trajectory, Bieber says rampant consumerism, which is evident in our worship of and enslavement to our boundless desires, is a symptom of this sickness.

2. O'Connor perceived in Protestant Christianity some very serious shortcomings. Chief among these is the tendency to privilege personal interpretations of Scripture apart from, and sometimes over against, the community of Christian faith and its theological heritage. She also objected to rendering baptism and Holy Communion mere arbitrary symbols, emptied of God's grace and presence. Encourage the group to discuss O'Connor's criticisms as observations from a Christian friend, rather than to defend certain Protestant beliefs or practices.
3. Society numbs itself to death; therefore, as Walter Brueggemann points out, the prophet must proclaim through concrete imagery that death "hovers over us and gnaws within us." When confronted by death, our frailty and finitude come sharply into focus, and we can hear the biblical witness that we are creatures. As with Ruby Turpin, once we are "put in our place," we become open to fresh revelations from God.
4. J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are well known; others are Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, John Milton, Herman Melville, Dorothy Sayers, and Walker Percy. Members may mention other writers of popular fiction. Ask members to comment briefly upon the prophetic dimension in the work of the authors they cite.

Departing Hymn

"In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" is on pp. 51-53 of *Prophetic Ethics*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.