

Schola Prophetarum: Prophetic Preaching Toward a Public, Prophetic Church

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Abstract: *Prophetic preaching has for much of the last century been dominated by a classically liberal, Lone Ranger view of Hebrew Bible prophecy that is both a distortion of the past and increasingly problematic in the present. In this article, the author reconsiders the social shape of Hebrew Bible prophecy and joins to it the unusual contours of New Testament prophecy and its accompanying ecclesial practice of "discernment." These become resources for rethinking prophetic preaching theologically as an ecclesial task for a disestablished church desiring to move beyond post-liberal "resident alien" models and embracing prophetic preaching as a public form of shared ecclesial engagement for the sake of the world God so loves. In doing so, he seeks to connect with models of prophetic preaching as a shared, public task articulated most recently by scholars such as McClure, Andrews, Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ramsey.*

There is a telling inscription on the cornerstone of the Divinity Quadrangle at Vanderbilt University. It reads: "*Schola Prophetarum*," or "School of the Prophets." For many of us who passed through that institution in the 80's and 90's, it was a foundational notion of our theological education. On the one hand, there was the history of the place. The Divinity School had been involved in the Civil Rights movement in Nashville. Stories of lunch counter sit-ins and the response to the controversial expulsion of student James Lawson were part of the celebrated lore of the institution. On the other hand, there was during those decades the vision that the Divinity School was devoted to developing "ministers as theologians" who could help the church deal with its own "collapse of the house of authority" and yet face unflinchingly the problematics of a wider world marked by gender inequality, socio-economic exploitation, the ecological crisis, and racial injustice.¹ Vanderbilt was and would be a "school of the prophets," a place of preparation for those sent out as theological prophets into the church and the wider world.²

¹ In many ways the ethos of the Divinity School was shaped by its theologians in particular: Edward Farley, Sallie McFague, and Peter Hodgson. The curriculum was heavily influenced by Edward Farley, whose work on unpacking the limitations of the scripture principle and the naming of the "collapse of the house of authority" were exceedingly important in *Ecclesial Reflection* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Some of Farley's categories went on to shape a widely used theology text, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, co-edited by Peter Hodgson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). Prof. McFague's works were instrumental in placing feminist and other liberationist concerns in the center of the theological agenda and, in turn, the ethos of VDS, e.g., *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), and *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

² The idea of prophetic preaching has been a matter of concern in recent homiletical literature. Some call for a renewal of classic views of prophetic preaching and invite preachers to exhibit greater prophetic courage: Marvin McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone: Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006) and Mary Alice Mulligan and Rufus' Burrow, Jr., *Daring to Speak in God's Name: Ethical Prophecy in Ministry* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002) exemplify this. Some postliberal understandings of prophetic preaching argue that more communal views of the church are key. Their concern here is not public "issues," but rather the identity of the church and the need to articulate a vision of a sectarian church as an alternative community over against culture. Some of the chief representatives of this view might be Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). In contrast with the neo-Barthian views of the latter group, I am aligning myself

As a middle-aged, white, Vanderbilt-trained pastor and homiletician, the memory and vision of the “school of the prophets” still shapes me profoundly. I am convinced as ever that a theological view of prophetic ministry is a key element to the church’s life and renewal and its relationship to the world that God so loves. To that end, I struggle with the fact that the mainline church out of which I come, in which I still participate, and for which I now help shape future prophetic pastors is so different from the vision that animated me as a Divinity student and later as a doctoral student at Vanderbilt. Some of it I can grasp. Pastors and churches, especially mainline ones, are as resistant as ever to prophetic claims. We mainline White, male, abled, heterosexual pastor types may be animated by such visions, but we are also privileged and minister in privileged yet declining denominations which, when they die, will still at least have intact pension plans and sufficient resources to bury the remaining members and pay the last utility bill before turning out the lights. In other words, the prophetic vision meets with resistance in part because of our own corruption and complicity in injustice. Yet prophetic preachers in mainline churches may also struggle to implement this vision for another reason: the vision of the school of the prophets itself. We have perhaps incorrectly assumed that we can form prophetic theologians at a Divinity School and then parachute them into an alien world called “the church.”³ In other words, part of the problem may be the perceived shape and scope of prophetic ministry itself.

While I have no magic wand with which to make the recalcitrance of preachers, church, and world to God’s prophetic Word disappear, I can help to identify the limitations of that old prophetic vision which nurtured me and discern the outlines of a new one. To that end, I wish to view our vision of the *schola prophetarum* in light of three contexts: 19th century liberal scholarship about Hebrew Bible prophecy, a more contemporary view of the development of the same in all its pluralism and change, and a look at the rather different vision of New Testament prophecy, through which contemporary Christian communities might “re-read” the prophetic task theologically. My contention is that an appreciation of the development of prophecy actually opens up new theological vistas for thinking about the shape of prophetic ministry in our own context, for me, an increasingly disestablished mainline North American church. Thus, at the end of my essay, I will offer some modest proposals that will relocate the vision of the “school of the prophets” from oak and ivy confines of the Divinity Quadrangle to pluralistic communities of faith set in a pluralistic world that God still “so loves.”

The Individual Genius of the Prophet: Hebrew Bible Prophecy in 19th Century Scholarship

with those who argue for an increasingly public and dialogical sense of the gospel in prophetic preaching that engages the wider world communally. Such a notion of public theology for preaching generally was first articulated tentatively in John McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 18-19. A clear sense of prophetic preaching as a kind of public engagement that moves beyond exhortation to an understanding of the gospel in connection with the wider world is found in an article by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, “Jesus as Prophetic Preacher: Patterns of Prophetic Engagement in the Gospel of Luke” *The Academy of Homiletics: Papers of the Annual Meeting 2004* (Memphis, TN: December 2-4), 288-97. Lee Ramsey articulates a potential communal sense of the prophetic in his vision of the prophetic pastoral church in *Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 131-33. Most recently, Dale Andrews has begun developing a book on prophetic preaching along similar lines. Some early thoughts can be found in his article “Global Conflict and the Preaching Tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 6:1 (Spring, 2008), 61-63.

³ Homiletician Tom Long begins to unpack this problem in his text book, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: WJKP, 1989) 10ff.

Many of us tend to think of the prophets in terms of some of the great Biblical scholars of the twentieth century: Hermann Gunkel with his form-critical approach which linked the prophet's experience with various "forms" in life; Sigmund Mowinckel and the rise of tradition-criticism which boldly related prophetic materials to cultic life; and the great Gerhard von Rad, the second volume of whose *Theology of the Old Testament* was devoted to understanding prophecy as the product of multiple traditions and cultic centers. Long before these giants of interpreting the prophets, however, there were two important figures for understanding the prophetic: the nineteenth century scholars, Julius Wellhausen and Bernard Duhm.⁴ While their views no longer hold sway in the history of scholarship (form- and tradition-criticism of the prophets has now given way to redaction- and literary-critical approaches, among others), these two giants of Old Testament scholarship still have a hold on how preachers imagine the prophetic task.

Wellhausen's accomplishment in putting the prophets at the center of Old Testament scholarship is hard to overestimate. Although Wellhausen's own writing was focused primarily on the development of the Pentateuch, Wellhausen articulated a conception of the prophets that made them central to thought about Israelite religion. For Wellhausen, the prophets are the "true pioneers of Israel's faith" and the "founders of ethical monotheism" and thus represented a kind of religious genius.⁵

Unlike Wellhausen, Bernard Duhm not only picked up on this idea but also developed it in his own treatment of prophetic literature in books and commentaries. Following the perspective of the day, Duhm believed that the complex of law in the priestly documents was actually later than the prophets. As such, he could treat the prophets apart from what he thought were later written traditions. In doing this, he could interpret the prophets on the internal evidence of their works alone without reference to the ideas and institutions behind them. In his book *Theologie der Propheten*, Duhm therefore portrayed the prophets as religious innovators. The title of Duhm's work is telling. The prophets were idealists, offering theological ideas that broke with the past and laid down basic principles. These ideas were then used to critique the cult and the magical thinking that often accompanied it. In the end, most of the prophets contributed to this idealism by emphasizing the "primacy of morality in religion," as well as the direct relationship of the individual to God.⁶

As someone trained in homiletics and New Testament, I find Ronald Clements' description of their scholarship very reminiscent of the debates around the historical Jesus of the

⁴ For a more in-depth placement of Wellhausen and Duhm's work on the prophets within the history of scholarship, see Ronald Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 51-56. The material that follows is a summary of Clements' history of scholarship.

⁵ Clements, 51.

⁶ According to Clements, 52-56, this view of Duhm's received much critique, and so in subsequent work he refined his thesis. In his later commentaries on prophetic texts Duhm noted, for example, that the prophets communicated primarily in poetry and did so not so much as rational theologians, but as recipients of ecstatic emotional experiences. On the basis of his research of their poetry, he claimed to be able to separate the authentic from the inauthentic material in the prophets. In using these literary-critical tools of metrical analysis of prophetic poetry, he could get behind the inauthentic material of the text to the authentic prophet. As a result, in 1916 Duhm would publish another work, *Israels Propheten* in which he held to many of his views, but revised others. For Duhm, the prophets were no longer the creative geniuses he first proposed. Instead, Moses now stood at the head, not so much as the giver of the law that preceded the prophets, but as the first among the prophets, whose tradition extended through Elijah and Elisha and into its eighth-century flowering with Amos et al. Alas, the prophet as individual religious genius apparently did not even hold up well in Duhm's own scholarship!

time. Could it be that scholars of the period created a view of the prophets that, unwittingly, replicated the very perspective of the reigning liberal theology of the day? If so, the problem with the view may not simply be that scholars of any age too often project their own values onto the objects of their scholarship, but rather the persistence of such views into the present. This view of prophecy presupposes that the prophets were individuals of great genius and insight, single-handedly engaging their religious context and transforming it. Not only that, they were the champions of ethical monotheism: a universal principle of religion that was applicable across time and space. Here we have a basic tool of a prophetic, liberal Christian ministry: our focus is public ethics, our means is the principled individual who could speak liberal truth to power.

Discerning readers will note a bit of a leap here. Lurking behind the careful scholarship and its application today are myths. These myths are not simply those of an ancient worldview, as Bultmann described so clearly.⁷ The myths here are in modern minds. The modern myth has to do with the individual who, with the proper mindset and dedication, is capable of such genius and innovation as to redeem primitive systems and traditions. To be shaped by this “school of the prophets” is to be trained to change intractable traditions as an outsider become an insider in order to redeem them.⁸

In my judgment, this individualistic view of the prophet, although not current in Biblical scholarship, is alive and well in the way many mainline preachers think implicitly about the task of prophetic preaching. The operative vision is something akin to the Lone Ranger. As a prophetic preacher, one adopts a stance of disconnection with the hearers and tries to convince them of a need to adopt a universalizable liberal principle. The issue here for me is not the validity of the ethical claim, but the image and stance of the prophet. The prophet is the righteous individual trying to reform the primitive system. Prophets are moral geniuses and religious innovators. They speak a word of individual insight in the hope of redeeming a corrupt social grouping.

The Evolution of Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible

Part of the allure of the myth of the prophet as religious genius is that it glosses over the true history of prophecy as a development. Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible is not the same in all time and places. Even if the essence of, say, classical eighth-century BCE prophecy were “ethical monotheism,” not all of prophecy can be reduced to that single period. When we speak of the prophetic, therefore, we must do so with some discernment.

One might start, for example, with the view of prophecy in the early monarchical period. Here the prophetic ideals are not Jeremiah and Amos, but Elijah and Elisha in I and II Kings. The prophets in this early period are sometimes understood as parts of ecstatic communities (1 Sam 10:10-12, 19:19-24). The most famous ones are viewed under the rubric of the “man of God.” To be a prophet was not to speak in the forms of oracles which Gunkel and later Westermann made famous; instead, it more likely involved the doing of miracles and the performance of prophetic acts.

The classical prophets, by contrast, are more familiar to us, and closer to the norm of what we think about when doing “prophetic preaching.” Whether late monarchy or shifting into the exile, here we have the great tradition of prophetic oracles. Still, prophetic materials from

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribners, 1958), 11-20.

⁸ This myth is also alive and well in the movies. Just about any Kevin Costner film from the 90’s will do.

this period are not just oracles either: there are biographical pieces about the prophets and editorial additions about their prophecies in the anthologies as well (e.g., Amos 9). It is these prophets of classical period who come closest to our Lone Ranger model.

Nonetheless, the view of even these great classical prophets as individual religious geniuses is itself distorted. In actuality, the prophets need to be understood in relation to communities. If Gunkel is right, the forms in which they articulate their oracles are drawn from life settings of the people. Assuming the prophets were speakers rather than writers, the prophets themselves owe a debt of gratitude to those who wrote down and preserved their words. It was communities, after all, who collected and edited what they said for posterity.

In late prophecy, of course these communal emphases are accentuated all the more. The late prophets typically reinterpreted traditions, sometimes repeating and/or reworking the oracles of earlier prophets. Here one can speak, for example, of an Isaianic tradition that extends from the Assyrian period (I Isaiah) into the exilic period (II Isaiah) and into the post-exilic period (III Isaiah)—all within the confines of one prophet’s “book.”

If our view of prophetic preaching is dominated by such an idealized liberal view of the individual prophet in the classical period, we not only misrepresent that one period, but disregard the varied shape and full-orbed legacy of Hebrew Bible prophecy as a whole. Our modern, nineteenth-century “lone ranger” myth of prophetic preaching has made it harder for us to see the prophetic task as the communal one that it was. If it takes a village to raise a child, certainly it takes a community to be prophetic—at least in the traditions of the Hebrew Bible.

Prophecy in the Context of the New Testament

Within the period of New Testament literature prophetic speech is revived. The New Testament bears several marks of prophetic speech. Most, of course, will point to the book of Revelation which calls itself a prophecy (Rev 1:3). Yet the prophetic does not concern itself solely with what we consider the apocalyptic fringe of the New Testament canon. The Gospel according to Luke freely draws on prophetic elements in its portrayal of several of its characters in Luke and Acts (Zechariah, John the Baptist, Simeon and Anna, Jesus himself, Agabus, and others). In fact, Luke even thematizes the return of the prophetic Spirit, focusing on its role in relation not just to individuals, but the Jewish-Christian community in Pentecost Jerusalem (Acts 2). Prophetic portrayals are also found in other gospels and prophetic language and forms show up in Paul’s own letters.⁹ The New Testament canon as a whole, though not of a single mind, seems to presuppose a prophetic task that belongs not just to isolated individuals, but to individuals in communities, and reciprocally, to communities in relation to individual prophets.

This community-oriented conception of the prophetic is manifested in several ways. First, the prophetic spirit is given to the whole community, as we’ve mentioned with our Acts reference above. This is not to say that everyone in the community is a prophet.¹⁰ On the other hand, prophecy is anything but a private possession. Prophecy was something to be exercised in and with the church.¹¹ Second, with prophecy in community there came the need for a shared

⁹ David Aune’s work in particular is helpful for identifying prophetic forms within the NT in his book *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983) esp. 247-290, 317-338.

¹⁰ Aune is very careful to say that such statements are more theologically programmatic than empirical or historical, 200f.

¹¹ Scholars like Eugene Boring and David Hill argue in their definitions of the phenomenon of early Christian prophecy that the church/Christian community was a constitutive part of it. Eugene Boring highlights this as a key

role in “discernment.”¹² Prophetic preaching was not an end in itself, but was rather an opening for the ongoing discernment of the community. Paul speaks of this with respect to two particular texts: 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Thess. 5:19-21. The task of critical evaluation of prophecy was *part of the prophetic task*. Third, the prophetic Word was viewed in relation to other pneumatic activities. These might include teaching and other charismatic gifts as exercised in the church. E. E. Ellis argues that prophecy and teaching worked together in developing a kind of pneumatic hermeneutic that helped make sense of texts and traditions in connection with the prophetic Word.¹³ Fourth, the natural locus of this prophetic Word was the worshipping community.¹⁴ Prophets were not simply free agents; they exercised their gift within the warp and weft of the worshipping community. Fifth, prophetic activity was not simply the exercise of a kind heavy-handed moralism or scolding. Rather than simply telling people what to do as with a classically liberal-theological undifferentiated ethical monotheism, prophets in the New Testament viewed their task as also *pastoral* in nature. The form this frequently took is that of *paraklesis* or encouragement.¹⁵ In this way the stance of the prophet was not simply the “lone ranger” over against the community, but the prophet engaging this community both “prophetically” and “pastorally” at the same time. Finally, when the prophet spoke, the prophet spoke not simply in his/her own voice, but in the power of the risen Christ and/or Holy Spirit.¹⁶ As such, their task was a gospel-oriented task. In Christ, through the Spirit, they spoke of Christ to the gathered community. Prophecy was not their work, but Christ’s work through them through the power of the Spirit. What made prophecy theological, therefore, was the idea that its word was the Word in the Spirit: Jesus Christ. This is to say, it names a specific Word of God into the world.

Beyond the Romance: Prophetic Preaching toward a Public, Prophetic Community

feature in his article, “Prophecy (Early Christian),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:501. David Hill defines the prophet thusly: “A Christian prophet is a Christian who functions within the church, occasionally or regularly, as a divinely called and divinely inspired speaker who receives intelligible and authoritative revelations or messages which he is impelled to deliver publicly, in oral or written form, to Christian individuals and/or the Christian community,” in *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1979) 8-9.

¹² Theologian R. W. L. Moberly draws a fascinating theological-ethical line between the test of true and false prophecy in the Hebrew Bible and the relationship of prophecy and discernment in the NT in his work *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For Moberly, such matters are key for determining what is a true “word of God.”

¹³ E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978).

¹⁴ Eugene Boring highlights this as a key feature in his afore-mentioned article, 5:501. For an interesting treatment of what this might have looked like with respect to various apocalyptic texts, see Paul Minear’s *New Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 36f..

¹⁵ David Hill views *paraklesis* in the context of Paul’s own view of prophecy as both an offer of comfort and a kind of “pastoral instruction,” 131.

¹⁶ Behind this wording is Bultmann’s claim that some of the NT portrayal of Jesus is actually the voice of the risen Jesus speaking through prophets to the church now retrojected back into historical remembrance. This view has been championed by Eugene Boring in his book *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Most other commentators on NT prophecy dispute Boring’s contention and view prophecy primarily as a specifically divinely inspired or Spirit-endowed activity. My wording of this point merely acknowledges that both views are found in the scriptures. Interestingly, Boring’s latest definition includes references prophecies which “*could be*” expressed in the voice of the risen Jesus in “Prophecy (Early Christian),” 5:501.

This brief recovery of the prophetic tradition from the first stirrings of ecstatic prophecy at the time of the early monarchy to the New Testament communities of Jewish and Gentile Christians is clearly diverse. Yet it, too, can become the object of a kind of romantic fantasy if we leave off our task here. It is important to remember that this revivification of the fires of prophecy in first-century communities eventually led to the dying embers of the rules for prophets in the *Didache*. In that document rules are laid down for prophetic activity—rules designed to limit the place of the exercise of prophecy and the limits of tolerance for its welcome.¹⁷ Even in the later pastorals of the canonical New Testament it becomes clear that prophecy is now more of a distant memory (1 Tim 1:18). If the church at one time was a prophetic community, with lots of different people exercising different and complementary pneumatic roles, over time these gifts (and the authority that goes with them) are now delegated to persons exercising offices: especially bishops.¹⁸ As a result, to whatever degree contemporary prophetic preaching wishes to take on the mantle of prophecy, whether individually or corporately, it cannot do so solely on the basis of a retrieval of the past. The lines of continuity are, at best, dotted lines, ellipses that while not granting us the same authority of Hebrew Bible and New Testament prophets, more invites us to preach *prophetically*.

Literary theorist Alistair Fowler gives us some guidance for thinking about the transition.¹⁹ He argues that literary genres are constructed from the formal vestiges of earlier genres and constructed again and again as new genres. Eventually, genres die. No one, say, writes a true, classical epic any more. Yet even dead genres persist as modes. As Fowler himself says, “genre tends to mode.” So when the classical epic as genre dies, it lives on in a kind of literary afterlife as a mode. Thus we may enjoy reading a novel, a modern genre, that uses allusions, turns of phrase, and characters that evoke the ancient epic as a mode. When an author does this we call it a “heroic novel,” that is a novel that uses the perduring mode of the epic, which we designate with the modal adjective used as a noun, “the heroic.”

When we speak of prophetic preaching we are doing so in an analogously complex way. The institutions of prophecy, whether in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, are long gone. The “genre” of prophecy, as it were, is not a ready and available option. In fact, we are more likely to confuse it with everything from the Nostradamus-like headlines of a supermarket tabloid to the political prognostications of television pundits. Such contemporary phenomena, even in the church, are a far cry from the Biblical contexts we have described. However, even if the direct line of prophecy is no longer available to us as a “genre,” it is true that the “prophetic” as a mode of preaching is still with us. While we cannot in good conscience draw a straight line from Micah, Amos, or John the Baptist to mainline preachers like ourselves (we are, after all, “religious professionals” in ways they would have never envisioned!), we rightly do see our task of preaching the sermon with respect to the prophetic mode that their Word makes possible for us.

A key step, however, is for us to be honest about our context. We do not preach in prophetic communities that can assume that all power is held in the hands of a single monarch whose kingship is bound up with a single Temple. For that matter, whatever authority prophetic

¹⁷ Some of the unique features of this text’s claims about prophecy in relation to the communities of its time are explicated further in Aune, 208f.

¹⁸ Bernard Cooke traces the shifting locus of the prophetic through his development of the ministry of the Word in *Ministry to Word and Sacrament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), part II.

¹⁹ Two works of Fowler’s are especially helpful here: “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” *New Literary History* 2 (1971), 199-216 and *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). What follows is a summary of Fowler’s view.

words can have is not bound either to a unified and centralized religious tradition. We preach in an age of relatively dispersed power and in religious contexts where mainline voices are *disestablished* and are now located in a public square of multiple religious perspectives. While the world of New Testament prophecy would need to be viewed against the religious pluralism of the cities of the Mediterranean world, even then the shift in context is marked. The early church never had prior positions of power; we mainliners, by contrast, did and have begun to lose them. When we preach prophetically, therefore, we do so in ways that publicly must take account of our “being-disestablished” in a pluralistic world. What this invites, to my mind, is a public, prophetic articulation of the gospel that not so much thunders an ethical-monotheistic “thus says the Lord” to the monarch and his minions, but humbly and prophetically “names God into the world” in a way that makes connections with others—whether Christian, non-Christian religious, or even “free thinkers”—for the sake of the world God so loves.

This view calls for a different kind of theologizing than we’ve been doing about prophetic preaching. Since its focus is on prophetically “naming God into the world” as an extension not of the lone ranger’s moralistic scolding, but on a communal, public articulation of gospel, its starting point can vary. Sometimes this word emerges out of a wrestling with a Biblical text and articulating its gospel claim with respect to a situation. Other times, however, it may start from a situation that demands our attention and in addressing a prophetic, gospel word to it draw on the scriptures as part of its theological task. On another level, this theologizing can also vary in context. Normally, this prophetic articulation of gospel happens as an in-church phenomenon. In the warp and weft of our common life, our prophetic communities continue to engage in speaking and in hearing, in prophecy and discernment, the gospel that names God into the world. On some occasions, however, it may also be necessary for the prophetic church to engage the wider world. In those moments, we engage in a decidedly public-theological task of out-church preaching—again, naming God into the world to engage different others in acts of public naming and discernment. What this requires, as I described above, is a vision of public prophetic preaching that dares to name God in the world from a standpoint of a humble disestablishment that bears witness to a fired passion for the world God still so loves.

A New Schola Prophetarum: The Public, Prophetic Church-in-the-World

The thoughts above are merely early sketches of what prophetic preaching can look like that takes the richness of Biblical traditions seriously, focuses on the public-theological task before us, and takes the peculiarities of the ecclesial and public contexts seriously. I would like to propose, therefore, that prophetic preaching be revisioned along the following lines:

- 1. Prophetic preaching should enable the prophetic engagement of the whole people of God.** The “lone ranger” view of the 19th century is not only inadequate from the standpoint of Biblical criticism; it is problematic given our theological task and context. In enabling the prophetic engagement of the whole people of God, it not only draws on rich communal traditions of the “prophetic” mode that we preach in, but also opens up new vistas for shared engagement. The White, mainline church in North America has too often settled for less.

2. Prophetic preaching involves the whole community in the discernment of God’s Word for the sake of the world. The shift here is subtle. Prophetic preaching involves a community in hearing/discerning God’s gospel Word in light of this text and in the face of this situation.²⁰

3. Prophetic preaching should be closely tied to the encouragement of God’s people, their *paraklesis*. This requires something far different than pulpit moralism. In many ways it speaks profoundly to the conflicted state of many of those in mainline North American churches since we both benefit from the blandishments of power and yet recognize its dehumanizing force in ourselves and others. Walter Brueggemann began to articulate this when he talked about the prophetic imagination as crossing between the prophetic and the pastoral.²¹ In his work *The Word Before the Powers*, Chuck Campbell also identifies the same way in which the lines between the pastoral and the prophetic are blurred when we see how “the powers” hold us captive—to help us recognize our complicity and identify how God’s redemptive Word is at work through “exposing” and “envisioning.”²² The NT view of the prophetic and the place it gives to *paraklesis* can be a help for us here. The prophetic is not so much the opposite of the pastoral, but drives us deeper into solidarity by means of pastoral *paraklesis*.

4. Prophetic Preaching should be viewed in light of the proclamation of the gospel in which the Spirit is given with the Word that is Christ for the sake of the world. Prophetic speech articulates the prophetic Word “in Christ.” As such, it understands this Christological focus not in the self-enclosed world of ecclesial identities, but for the sake of the world God loves. After all, Christ’s own incarnation begins with self-giving kenosis (Phil 2), reaches its fullness in a public act of crucifixion, and sees its eschatological *telos* in the Son’s handing over of the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28). The Son does not hold on to identity over against the world, but eternally gives it away for the world to the “end” of the glory of the Father. The Spirit likewise attends this prophetic gospel Word not for the sake of the church and the centripetal perpetuation of its identity, but as a pneumatic act of new creation. Theological ethicist James Childs puts it this way: “The Spirit makes alliances.”²³ It entails the articulation of the gospel in such a way that the lines of solidarity between God and all creation are deepened and made manifest in light of that Word.

Conclusion

Prophetic preaching in our day and age may well require a renewed emphasis on the idea that animated the inscription at Vanderbilt’s Divinity Quadrangle so many years ago. Yet the

²⁰ Art Van Seters et al. have made a powerful case for the relationship of preaching to wider social realities in his edited volume, *Preaching as a Social Act* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988). For a more specific treatment of the congregation’s role in ethical theological reflection see his *Preaching and Ethics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 130-33.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann argues for a perspective on the prophetic that tries to penetrate the “numbness” not so much by indignation and anger, but grief and lament in *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 111. In my view Brueggemann’s argument allows us to see the relationship of the prophetic and the pastoral as joined in a more profound sense of solidarity than the view of the prophet as “religious genius” would seem to afford.

²² Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: WJKP, 2002), 92.

²³ James M. Childs, Jr. *Preaching Justice: The Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 40. In this part of the book Childs is speaking of the Spirit of Pentecost in relation to ecumenical alliances. I view it as part of the Spirit’s ongoing creative task in the world, in connection with the Word, to create alliances with others across religious lines, too.

real “school of the prophets” is not found on bucolic campuses that draw us away from our churches and surrounding neighborhoods. The “school of the prophets” is, however, a good enough metaphor for the life of the church in the world. If we are prophets, we are prophets among the prophetic community, given a self-effacing Word in Christ, and drawn together in the Spirit’s tether toward the world God still so loves.