

Where Have All the Prophets Gone? by Phil Strickland

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“Where Have All the Prophets Gone?”

By Phil Strickland

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“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various tongues ... ”(1 Cor. 12:27-29).

Prophets! I thought we got rid of them a long time ago. Actually, I haven't seen many around lately. Where have all the prophets gone?

You may remember the Pete Seeger song made popular by Peter, Paul and Mary—*Where Have All the Flowers Gone*. Well, I think we need new words to that tune. On any given Sunday morning in a Baptist church there are plenty of flowers in front of the pulpit, but not a prophet to be found behind it.

Where have all the prophets gone?

Lord knows we need them. Consider:

-One half the world is living on \$2 a day. But that's the other half, right? They are used to that;

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-25% of our Texas children living in poverty. But that's other people's children, right? Figure that's the way God thinks of them?

-Religious liberty is being lost without our seeming to notice. It's oozing away through our fingers like a fist full of sand until we open it all too late to discover there is not much of it left in our grasp;

-And then there's the dramatic and continuing shift of the world's wealth away from the poor and the middle class to the largest corporations and the wealthiest people. But not to worry, we can trust them to do the right thing with all that money, right? After all, the marketplace evens everything out in the end. Isn't that where we can depend upon the "invisible hand" of God to work? Or was that just Adam Smith's hand?

-Environmental regulations are disappearing every day. But we are given by God the right to have dominion over all the earth, aren't we? Well, something like that;

-And what about another tax cut of \$70 billion dollars that will be funded by \$50 billion dollars of cuts to children? That proposal will probably be passed by the House this week and is supported by the administration. 300,000 people will lose food stamps and another 300,000 will lose access to daycare. The bill cuts Medicaid by \$45 billion when we already have 45 million people who have no health insurance. Something tells me that's not

what Jesus meant by “Suffer the little children”

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Have they all disappeared? Or is it possible that some of them are around but aren't doing their job? Is it possible that God is still appointing them, but not many of us want the job? I mean, we know what happened to Jonah, and the belly of a whale doesn't sound like fun, does it?

Walter Brueggemann is one of our best Old Testament scholars. In books like his wonderful work, *The Prophetic Imagination* (and *Finally Comes the Poet*), he doesn't let us relegate prophecy to biblical times. Prophets are not obsolete, although they seem rather rare these days, despite the great need for them in our churches and in our world.

I want to suggest that pretty much all of us are called to have an element of the prophet in us. Yes, I understand that is not the primary role for many of us, but I'm thinking that being overcrowded with prophets is not our problem right now.

I'm suggesting that for pastors, for example, as we call them to the role of pastor/preacher, we might also want to add the word prophet —pastor/preacher/ prophet. Such pastors will value our values and will fight for them. The title of prophet might even apply to laymen, or, God forbid, to a denomination! These groups, with a little prophetic imagination, could become the cutting edge of the prophetic in our society, rather than the six to eight “prophets” we hear on TV whose prophetic imagination is limited to Armageddon. These genuine prophets would be ready and willing to confront the principalities and powers, whether they be school boards, city councils, the legislature, Congress, or even our own Baptist institutions.

But seldom do I go to churches and hear prophetic, or even strong ethical preaching. And the brave pastors that want me to preach for them often say a word to me before I go. It goes something like this: “Now, Phil, our

church is not really in a place where it can deal with anything controversial." Which tells me that they don't want to do anything that involves risk. Which tells me that no prophecy is happening there since prophecy always contains an element of risk!

Back to our \$70 billion tax cut being currently being considered, funded partially, as I said, with \$50 billion being cut from programs that are used for poor children. If the pastor as prophet wanted to point out the injustice of that, how would that go over with some of the members of the church?

Well, I think I can answer that for Phil. They would cry "Politics!" They would suddenly become strict church-state separationists. Of course, what they really are saying is that they don't want God and government to go together if it's not their brand of politics. I'll also tell you that there's a widespread feeling in many church pews that has to be challenged. People think government is by nature always bad and needs constraining. They think government is lousy at caring for the poor and that that's really the church's business. But I can tell you that I have never once seen a line of those folks forming at my door begging for ways to give the church more money to care for the poor or eager to start new ministries that would do it better than the government.

So what is happening to prophetic voices? What is the juggler that trumps the pastoral voice? Is it lack of courage? Or ambition? Courage and ambition seldom hang out together. Or is it just the desire not to rock any boats?

When John F. Kennedy was in Berlin in 1963 for the birth of the German Peace Corps, he cited a passage from Dante's *Inferno* in his speech. "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintained their neutrality." It was actually a liberal paraphrase. What Dante actually singled out were "those disembodied wretches who were loth when living, to be either blamed or praised." He said that Heaven cast

them out for fear of losing its beauty; and Hell didn't want them either, lest the wicked should glory over them. (Canto 3.)

Prophecy requires the capacity to grieve about injustice, to quit pretending that things are all right, to imagine that things could be different, and courageously to say so to the people, risking the consequences. It requires confronting the principalities and powers.

For compassion to move to action requires an alliance of love, power, and justice. As Paul Tillich said: "In both interpersonal and political relationships, love, power and justice are inseparable. Without love, power becomes tyrannical and justice is only a name for the rule of strong. Without power, love is reduced to sentimentality and justice to an impotent ideal. Without justice, love is a perverse dance of domination and submission."

Always, the prophet must be imaginative. One does not prophesy about what is but about what ought to be. Which usually makes prophecy sound absurd to the common ear.

Let me give you an example. A pastor mentioned to me that he did not like the beginning of our CLC flyer, that it could cause controversy in his church. Here are the words, aptly authored by Joe Haag, so I'll brag about his work:

"To follow Christ means that we allow his life to gain leverage against our lives. Against our lust for power, he endures the cross. Against our pride and arrogance, he washes the disciples' feet. Against our upward mobility, he preaches good news to the poor. Against our self absorption, he has compassion on the multitudes. Against our tight circles of family and friends, he reaches out to strangers. Against our safe noninvolvement, he confronts the powers. Against our violence and hatred, he demands that we love our enemies. Against our self righteousness, he welcomes sinners.

Against our bigotry, he tells us about a Good Samaritan. Against our frenzy, he invites us to trust God. Against all the lies which enslave us, he tells the truth which sets us free. How can we be transformed into the image of Christ? One answer is that as we surrender our lives to God's purposes, God changes us."

That pastor did not like the words "our pride and arrogance" or "against our self absorption." He said, "I'm not going to say either one of those about America." Which means, what, that he accepts the Lordship of America? Who will be left to speak a word for the Lordship of Christ?

I was amazed yesterday to meet one of our church's first time messengers in hallway outside the meeting. She was running to and fro trying to find a way to resolve her anger. She is Iranian by birth and has been in this country only seven years. She is a Christian convert from Islam and is now in seminary. She asked me breathlessly, "Did you see it? Did you see that flag processional? Can you believe they brought the American flag in ahead of the Christian flag and all the other flags of nations after that? And the American flag was higher than the Christian flag. That is idolatry!" She is right, and I am embarrassed that it took someone so new to the faith and to our country and to us Baptists to even notice. She didn't know whether she needed to bring a resolution or a motion, but since a motion calls for action, I hope we move that that never happen again in a Baptist meeting.

We need more laypeople like that. Mercy, is there any possibility that this prophecy notion might even apply to them? What's happened to those laity with a prophetic word? What is trumping the laity's ability to discern the differences in the present culture and the Kingdom of God? Could it be that we are so consumed by consumerism that we have little power to believe or to act. Do we live in this cultural imagination rather than a Kingdom imagination?

Consumerism, the thing that tells us to go shopping to solve all our

problems, must be addressed in our churches. The barnacles of consumerism grow on us day after day until our hope of hearing Jesus' words, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God," is slim indeed.

Now here I need to start with confession time. The boat is used and the motorcycle is several years old, but I do not lack for toys. This applies to all of us.

And we need to remember that for many of our Baptist brothers and sisters, consumerism is not the issue. It's survival. Like the fellow we met outside the Dixie House where we had just had dinner with our friends Bob and Judy Coleman. He was asking in his wheelchair how to find the nearest homeless shelter. People like these are often invisible to us. We have to intentionally put ourselves in places where we can see them. Prophets have that kind of vision. They see things and people we otherwise do not see, and they tell us about them.

We desperately need a "theology of enough." We are stewards, not owners, of what we have, at least in Christian teaching. So do we have any walls around what we will spend on ourselves? Do we have any sense of enough for ourselves? That's where the prophets will emerge.

Ah, but what about one more—denominations. Should they take risk and speak prophetically or declare that the only real role of the denomination is meeting the need of the churches who are a member of the BGCT? To me the answer is easy. Meeting the will of churches, vital as it is, comes in behind one other: listening for and meeting the will of God.

What trumps the prophetic role in denominations is fear of financial loss, and the lack of understanding what crosses they are willing to die on, if any. What is so compelling that a denomination will stand there and ignore the consequences? Do we know the answer to that question? The question

must be asked of laypeople and pastors and churches.

A half century ago in this very city some of the brightest lights of Baptists shone in church pulpits. One of the brightest was Blake Smith, pastor of the University Baptist Church. One Sunday morning he stood tall in that pulpit and declared that it was past time that the University of Texas open its doors to all Texas citizens. The time for integration had come. What's more, he said to his all-white church, the time had come for University Baptist Church to open its doors to all for whom Christ died.

Well, right after the benediction the predictable took place. An emergency deacons meeting was called for that afternoon. For hours those men grumbled on about what the preacher had said that morning, about whether he had the right to say those things, about the autonomy of the local church to decide who would and who would not be its members, about whether Blake Smith ought to be their pastor at all. After all long while, the moderator looked to the back of the room where an old respected judge was sitting quietly. The man said, "Judge, we haven't heard from you on this matter. What do you think?" The judge rose to his feet and said solemnly, "Well, boys, you know I don't like what our pastor said this morning any more than any of the rest of you. But I think Jesus liked it a lot." Motion to adjourn.

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