

SUNDAY MORNING PROPHETS

by *Stephen Barkley*

WE CALLED THEM ALPHA AND OMEGA

When it came to Sunday morning prophecy, Alpha took the lead. As the music slowed, her voice increased in volume (and, strangely enough, in pitch). Before long it was a shrill siren call: “My people, My people, there is a river ...” These words signalled the start of her prophecy just as certainly as “Once upon a time ...” signals the start of a fable.

Omega, as you might have guessed, spoke last. With her, timing was key. If there was only one prophetic word ahead of her in the service, she would leave a respectful amount of time before she began. If another speaker followed Alpha, however, Omega was quick to jump in with prophecy number three. She took Paul’s caution in 1 Corinthians 14:29 very literally and was not about to be left out!

While we chuckled at the nicknames, we all understood there were times when the Spirit of God spoke clearly and insightfully through them both to the life of the church. It was the pattern that bothered me.

Why should God have to wait for the sweet spot in a song service before inspiring His people to speak? Why do people need to be emotionally worked up to speak up?

My discomfort with the traditional routine increased when I started reading the Hebrew prophets. Can you imagine Amos patiently waiting in the temple courtyard for his opportunity to speak? We wouldn’t even want Ezekiel in the building before he washed the scent of his cookfire out of his clothes! Why has the exercise of prophecy become so domesticated?

Pentecostals, of all people, have a natural affinity to prophecy. After all, it was the prophet Joel whom Peter called on to explain the spiritual phenomenon that amazed and confounded so many people on that first post-Resurrection Day of Pentecost.

And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.¹

What do you think Joel envisioned? Did he imagine a mild group of people in a worship setting or something greater?



Part of the reason we are here is our love of routine combined with a healthy dose of nostalgia. Many of our most intense experiences of the Spirit and prophecy have happened in a worship setting. It's natural to want to keep returning to those good old days. But how long should we watch reruns when God launches a new season?

What if God wants to speak in new ways to our evolving culture? What if God wants us to do more than simply share a brief message in the fleeting moments between the end of the singing and the start of the preaching? Could we be limiting God's desired impact on our culture by falling into old patterns?

Prophetic speech is our birthright as children of the last days. I think it's time to explore the Hebrew prophetic tradition in order to expand our idea of what the gift of prophecy really entails. Two people have helped me to see prophecy in a new light: Abraham Heschel and Walter Brueggemann. Their deep understanding of the Hebrew prophets opens living possibilities for understanding and exercising the gift of prophecy in a Pentecostal context.

ABRAHAM HESCHEL & THE PATHOS OF GOD

Rabbi Heschel (1907-1972) lived a difficult life. He was educated in Berlin, only to be deported by the Gestapo, escaping Poland for London weeks before the Germans invaded. He spent the bulk of his life in America, where he took up the cause of justice. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965 at Selma. Later, he spoke out against the Vietnam War. He lived the life of a prophet. For Heschel, "The prophets were not simply biblical figures [to study], but models for life."²

Theologians describe God according to His various qualities: goodness, justice, love, wisdom, etc. These conceptual categories, while true, lead the seeker to a concept of God, not the living God Himself. The prophets drew closer. They didn't just develop ideas or theories about who God is. "To the prophets, God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present."³

Heschel described this relationship with the concept of the divine pathos. This is how God relates to His people. Pathos is "not an

idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but an outgoing challenge, a dynamic relation between God and man; ... no mere contemplative survey of the world, but a passionate summons."⁴

The prophets did more than just extrapolate from what they believed about God; they experienced the pathos of God in the moment. This is important because while God's character (love, justice, holiness, etc.) never changes, the pathos of God does. God relates His essential nature to His creation in manifold ways.

Consider Nineveh. Jonah was sent with a message: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"⁵ That is a decisive example of God's justice in action—but as we know, it's not the end of the story. The king of Nineveh repented and called his people to repentance. Then "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."⁶

God's character never changed—His pathos did (which is precisely what His prophet, Jonah, was afraid would happen).

Consider what the pathos of God might mean for us today. I once led worship in front of a crowd of people who were distracted and disengaged. I'm the furthest thing from an emotional person, but in that moment I experienced the pathos of God. I experienced the pain of being ignored, of being rejected. I was near the end of my set list, but all I could do was stand and weep in front of the congregation. Like Nineveh, the entire situation shifted. I croaked out what I understood of God between sobs, and the church repented and worshipped.

Heschel writes that "The prophet hears God's voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message together with its logos."⁷ Mere logos—a dissertation about God—leaves His people intellectually stimulated but emotionally unengaged. Extra neurons might fire, but our neighbour will not know the difference.

This type of prophecy, logos with pathos, comes only to the person who has spent enough time together with God to know His voice and to feel His heart. It comes through study *and* prayer, reading



and reflection. Piety sparks passion. “To the prophet, knowledge of God was fellowship with Him, not attained by syllogism, analysis, or induction, but by living together.”⁸

Prophets cannot live as if God is unimportant during the week, then tune in for a word on Sunday morning. Prophetic speech is the natural result of Spirit-filled people living daily with their God.

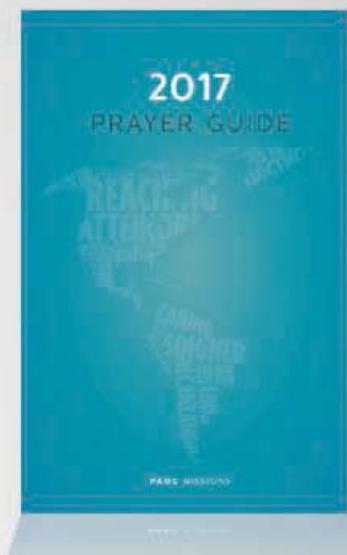
Heschel’s insight into the pathos of God is applicable both inside and outside the worship service. Brueggemann takes us outside the walls of the church.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN AND THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

Walter Brueggemann, professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary and author of well over 100 books, is perhaps most famous for his work *The Prophetic Imagination*. This book helped me to understand the mission of the Hebrew prophets. They did more than toss around messages from God about the future. The prophets boldly spoke the truth of God to a world where an idolatrous religious system propped up political power. Where are today’s prophets? Like Heschel, Brueggemann doesn’t just study the prophets—he is one. His critique of modern society is as acerbic as anything that Jeremiah threw at King Jehoiakim. He launched his work on *The Prophetic Imagination* with these words: “The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act.”⁹

Brueggemann understands that our culture is characterized by an underlying despair which is supported by many factors. Fear is highlighted and elevated in the media, which leads us to distrust rather than love our neighbour. Technological advancement without moral critique undergirds the myth of consequence-free power and control over every area of our lives. An unending stream of upgradeable commodities quickly leads us to idolatry. This idolatry binds us to our jobs, where we continually make more bricks to support our idols. Greed has taken the place of Pharaoh as our taskmaster.

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I've lapsed back into the biblical narrative of the Exodus because our culture is not unique in its despair. For Brueggemann, this despair "... was ever thus, from Pharaoh to Nebuchadnezzar to Caesar and on until now."¹⁰ Ours is a culture that needs the prophetic voice of God as much as any culture that has preceded it.

The task of the prophet is to imagine a world "as though YHWH—the creator of the world, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians come to name as Father, Son, and Spirit—were a real character and an effective agent ..."¹¹ On the surface this sounds sarcastic. Of course God is a real and effective agent in the world. It's one thing to confess it, but it's another thing to believe and live according to it.

Consider the example of Ezekiel. Although he lived among the exiles in Babylon, he acted and spoke as though God was still sovereign despite all signs to the contrary. In the final nine chapters of his book, Ezekiel revels in the hope of God for his people.

In Ezekiel 40, God took His prophet from Babylon all the way across the desert to Jerusalem. The last time Ezekiel saw Jerusalem, it was a scene of starvation and death, fire and destruction. This spiritual vision of Jerusalem was different. The terror of Nebuchadnezzar's siege was over, and God had built a new temple complex. A guide appeared with the Old Testament equivalent of a tape measure and told him to take down the dimensions.

Ezekiel's contemporaries lived in a culture of despair. Read Psalm 137 for a taste of their experience. Read Lamentations. What seems to be boring devotional reading for Christians is pure rarefied hope for the exilic community in Babylon. It took a prophet to see beyond the despair which was expressed in rage (Psalm 137:9!) and to imagine a world where God was still sovereign.

We need this sort of prophetic imagination today. When the latest topic meant to enrage Christians makes the rounds on Facebook, we need people with prophetic insight who see beyond the banal dichotomies aimed at division. We need people who hear and speak God's Word, which transcends any ideology.

This sort of prophetic imagination is planted outside of the worship service. It's a challenge to the oppressors and a gift to the exiles, the people on the margins, a people who suffer the weight of society's despair.

This prophetic word is then made manifest in the worship service because hope always leads to doxology. Regardless of the circumstances of our culture, Jesus is Lord. There is only one appropriate response: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"¹²

I value the role of prophecy in the worship service as long as it is not confined there. As Christians we have the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit who inspired Amos and Ezekiel, living and active in and among us. As Pentecostals, we revel in that moment when the Spirit inspired speech that confounded and intrigued people outside the upper room. The voice of God should always be welcomed inside our worship services, but it is just as desperately needed outside. God still needs to confront the idolatrous and bring hope to the downtrodden—and He has called us to do it.

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BIO

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ENDNOTES

1. Joel 2:28-29, ESV.
2. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), xiv.
3. *Ibid.*, 285.
4. *Ibid.*, 289.
5. Jonah 3:4b, ESV.
6. Jonah 3:10, ESV.
7. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 288.
9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.
10. Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 99.
11. Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.
12. Revelation 5:13b, ESV.