

## From Intimacy to Revolution Receiving

### the Full Prophetic Experience in the Body of Christ

by Chris Hoke

*“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”*

### **Introduction**

There persists a rather wide chasm between two schools of Christian faith and ministry: the highly personal and individual on one hand, and the socially informed, engaged and resistant on the other. Social and structural injustices are so overwhelming that the latter activist tradition may actively avoid what seems to be an overly individualistic and internal ministry, seeing it as a pacifying distraction from more urgent communal and organizational development. And more evangelical or inner healing traditions moving in a sensitivity to the Spirit too often embrace an extremely “sovereign” understanding of God’s will on the earth that would see little need for people of faith to question or challenge kings, rulers, authorities, markets and injustices beyond issues of personal morality or the nuclear family.

Both these traditions have an understanding of the prophetic: for one it is to cultivate intimacy with the Father in the Holy Spirit, hearing his voice for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14), and for the other it is to be a bold voice on behalf of the oppressed, seeking to dismantle the powers of the dominant social order to make way for God’s totally Other revolution and reign of mercy and justice.

From the way that I have set up even the first two paragraphs, it is clear that this paper will reject such a duality between the “two” prophetic traditions. However, my aim is not to merely disqualify the distinction theoretically, as is the binary-busting trend these days in the academy. Instead, it is a brief look concretely at the life and ministry of Jesus as the pinnacle of the biblical prophets, observing how his radical ministry was empowered and propelled by an inseparable array of prophetic functions. His intimacy with God as father, which empowered him to speak words of life as well as administer healing to individuals along the margins, led to the animation and development of a Spirit-charged social body

resistant to the state and religious dominance. And this social body—the Body of Christ—will be increasingly strengthened and sensitized in God’s voice, edifying a growing and truly alternative community with prophetic witness and force amidst the dominant culture of imperial wealth, numbness and injustice.

## **Prophetic Baptism**

Jesus grew up under Roman imperial occupation, and like us, with great political unrest throughout his land, and all sorts of religious perspectives from resistance to complete allegiance to Caesar, seen in the official offering in the Temple for the emperor’s health every day. As social historian and archeologist Richard Horsley and Neil Silberman remind us, “Theology aside, we can say that the baptism of Jesus took place within a popular revival movement that was spreading among a predominantly rural population that was being taxed, exploited in new—and to their eyes—extremely threatening ways”. Outside the Temple and out along the wilderness margins of the Jordan’s banks, John the Baptist was inviting ordinary people—not just religious ascetics, as with other religious baptismal rites—into a cleansing act of repentance, “a personal pledge to return to the way of life that God had decreed for the people of Israel”. “Like Amos and Hosea and Jeremiah before him,” Horsley and Silberman note, John the Baptist “was a prophet engaged in a passionate critique of current political happenings, never afraid to point fingers or name names” (Luke 3:14-20). Carrying on the social prophetic tradition of Israel’s prophets, John directly challenged the rule of client-king Herod Antipas in the land of Judea, who “began to act as if he believed that the divine promises to the People of Israel could best be fulfilled through *him*”—“that his people’s best route to salvation was through economic development,” and enforced with military and police protection throughout the land. John’s prophetic call back to God as *away* from the empire’s ways, we can say, “posed a serious internal political threat,” so much so that first century historian Josephus noted that “When others joined the crowds about him, because they were so aroused to the greatest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed.”

The ministry and vocation of Jesus of Nazareth, then, began with his arrival on this dissident scene on the edge of his society to undergo a baptism of radical renunciation and commitment. “A journey out to see John the Baptist in the wilderness,” Horsley and Silberman conjecture, would have taken Jesus—presumably in the company of other

people from Nazareth—out across the fringe of the Jezreel Valley where they would have passed through other rural villages, meeting tenant farmers and migrant workers, and seeing, at least from a distance, the houses of the overseers and the great villas of the wealthy lords...a world of carefully regulated oppression, closely guarded by soldiers, loyalists, and paid informers.

Like the earliest prophet Moses, after Jesus “had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor” (Exodus 2:11). Like all prophets and interruptions of God’s presence and voice into human history, Jesus walked through a specific social, religious, and political moment with a specific landscape of actual, scattered, confused, powerless and hopeless people. Standing in solidarity with such people, fully immersing himself in the grim and complex realities of the time, Jesus descended into the Jordan’s waters alongside the throngs of peasants. Like so many in baptismal commitments before him, Jesus “had rejected the entire complex of economics, political institutions, and cultural expression that was being carried on in mainstream society.”

Mark’s gospel vividly records what Jesus experienced immediately after this bold step, dying to the warring cultural allegiances in his submersion beneath the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:10-11)

Dripping wet, as if a newborn child, vulnerable now without any attachment to society’s structures or solutions apart from his creator’s, Jesus is able to hear his true identity—clearly, directly, and personally from God, his Father. Jesus’ prophetic vocation is not grounded in an anti-state orientation, an identity defined against something else with a resentment justified as “righteous.” Rather, Jesus here is freshly rooted in the deeply affirming and loving embrace of God. Though Jesus humbled himself to being baptized by John, his hearing of God’s voice was unmediated by any clerical, pastoral or leadership figure. Jesus is not immediately armed with either revolutionary weapons, materials or rhetoric for further education and public organization. In his weakness and

belovedness, Jesus passively receives the Spirit of God upon him as a gift of God's felt favor and power.

Today, the contemporary international charismatic renewal is fueled by this intimate experience and reality—what Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship Senior Pastor John Arnott calls “the Father's blessing.” Yet even social historians and archeologists like Horsley and Silberman cannot help but note the transformative power of this supremely subjective, internal and individual encounter with God's voice. “From that moment on,” they write of Jesus' soaked reception of God's words, “even after John the Baptist was hauled away to prison by soldiers—the power of Herod Antipas”—the human figurehead for the whole Roman Empire, the government, the taxes, the military, the economic development overhauling and weighing on the entire region—“would have seemed empty to him.”

We cannot too quickly pass over this observation. This is where we see the “two” traditions of the prophetic superimposed. To uproot this individual experience of God's intimate embrace from the soil of the larger social landscape and jagged terrain of shining, oppressive powers demanding allegiance, is to cause the prophetic “anointing” to wither and have very little fruit or substantial impact on the world. Such a purely spiritual yet “anointed” community, that is not rooted in the circumstances of the poor and marginalized, no matter how much soaking in God's nourishing Spirit, will not grow tall or strong enough to come up against nor challenge the world's reigning identities and counterfeit authorities.

On the other hand, it is dry and mechanistic to try to educate and mobilize just another structured constituency of orphaned and hungry individuals into the same material struggle, which kings and principalities will always dominate, no matter how rebellious the upstart ideology is. It is hopeless to think we can carry on the subversive and prophetic project of bringing about Jesus' Kingdom reality while denying God's complete and intangible subversion of our internal reality with his specific words to constantly edify, guide and reveal all things to us.

We see in the initiation of Jesus' prophetic life these basic ingredients: an immersion in social reality, a public step away from the dominant culture's rulers and methods, a vulnerable and personal touch in the reality of God's Spirit into an identity as his beloved child, and an empowered ministry to follow, which would be so free, fearless and

transformative of individuals along the bottom of society that the religious, state and economic establishments would fear it as an intolerable revolution. From the intimate words of the Spirit to the ignited waves of the hopeful social body, Jesus enjoys the full prophetic vocation.

### **On Being Liked, Adopted, and Called**

There is more to observe in the baptism of Jesus. We do not see any prophet in the biblical witness who is self-appointed or self-motivated. The living and continually misrepresented God of Israel freely initiates every communication with his people. So the prophet his- or herself is the first to experience the call to repentance, the interrupting word that jars and transforms the current identity and lifestyle of the people. The center of this repentance is the supreme shift of one's identity: as personally known, seen, touched, called by and belonging to only God. This is the core event of the prophetic. Senses of existential meaninglessness, strife, and performance to belong to other fabricated and temporal identities are exposed and countered when hearing the personal words God speaks to *his/her* people. One's true identity is touched by God. One's deepest self hears what it's been hoping to hear from the world by serving it all this time.

We can look back and see this sort of encounter in the records of the major prophets. Moses was met amidst his confusion between Egyptian or Israelite, royal or vigilante, identity by God's embrace of adoption over his concerns, absorbing Moses at the burning bush into his heart and mission: "*I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt, I have heard...Indeed, I know...So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt*" (Exodus 3:7, emphasis mine). The work is God's, the people are his children, and the love and concern and even the words will come from God. "I will be with you," God assures him, as a parent. So Moses is freed from confusion, indirection, warring allegiances, despair or inaction. He is relieved of his own efforts, words, strivings or failures. He and his desires for liberation are adopted by God, personally. He has become a prophet.

And there's Isaiah. In his famous calling text (Isaiah 6), he initially does not aspire to the office of a prophet. Isaiah is so overwhelmed by the way God reveals himself to him that Isaiah identifies himself as among a wayward people of "unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5) It is God's merciful and personal move to cleanse Isaiah's lips and announce his guilt as

“departed” and his sin “blotted out” that constitutes a washing, a baptism of the one he is embracing to his side, to his project. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” the LORD asks rhetorically to this trembling man, inviting Isaiah into the “us.” Isaiah can then “go to this people” as an ambassador who has himself undergone the immense shift in identity and personal restoration that God will offer his people through Isaiah’s lips.

Jeremiah’s vocation also begins with God’s radically intimate initiation: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). The subversive and threatening confrontation God would throw at the religious, state, and military establishment first ruptured young Jeremiah’s read on reality, his current identity: “‘Do not say ‘I am only a boy’ ...Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,’ says the LORD” (1:7). The personal voice that speaks of being alongside him since the womb, that identifies him as known, consecrated and appointed by God, now reaches out with a hand and tenderly touches him, the way one touches only a lover or their own child: “Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant’” (1:10). From then on, a clearer path of communication exists between the two, and through personal dialogue, Jeremiah is tutored in receiving God’s more vivid revelation of images (1:11-15). The record of his entire prophetic experience is filled with pages of uncensored, personal dialogue to the point that God’s heart and words are so internalized that even when Jeremiah strives *not* to be a prophet and keep silent, he feels “something like a fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (20:9).

This is the relationship characterizing Jesus’ prophetic life and ministry, first seen in the record of his baptism where he hears the voice of God publicly identifying him as son, in the center of God’s affection: “You are my son, the Beloved”—other ancient authorities read “You are my son, today I have begotten you”—“with you I am well pleased”. This is more than an adoption and more than a calling. And more explicitly than with any other prophet’s personal encounter with God, Jesus’ ministry is grounded in the consciousness of being personally liked by God. There is no mandate given, no mission imperative. We must assume, and acknowledge in our own experience, how empowering it is to be liked by another, how freeing, and how open a friendship or communication can be when the other openly enjoys simply who you are. Jesus is thus called intimately like the prophets

before him, only with an unprecedented informality of favor and tenderness, held in identity as God's child.

### **The Prophetically-Awakened Communities**

While these prophet narratives begin around the central figure who is washed and held as God's own, Walter Brueggeman notes in the preface to his second edition of *The Prophetic Imagination* that since his first publication, "Robert Wilson helped us to see that the prophets are not lonely voices against the establishment but are in fact representative voices that give social expression to what may be important and engaged social constituencies." As individual as the prophetic embrace and calling appears in our texts, it is important to appreciate that an entire community was necessary to record, preserve, and presumably embrace the perspective and embody the stance of that prophetic reception and mobilization of God's new word for their moment. While also acknowledging that the individual prophet came from a particular social location, we remember that the prophetic voice, or "alternative consciousness," as Brueggeman puts it, cannot be divorced from the larger social body in which it incubated and which followed and grew out of God's awakening word to be an "alternative community" challenging the reigning identities of the day. We see in Jesus' journey out to the Baptist how he was a member of his Nazarene community as well as the peripheral renewal movement of rural villagers gathering along the Jordan's banks. God raised up his child/prophet in the prophetic "natural habitat" described by Brueggeman: "subcommunities that stand in tension with the dominant community in any political economy." An even more powerful movement of subcommunities came out of Jesus' ministry, becoming a prophetic social body in Galilee, eventually descending upon Jerusalem and becoming His Body to the ends of the earth upon his prophetic self-giving of his body to the powers on the cross.

This paper will try to unpack that last string of statements in the pages that remain. But let us now zoom in more closely, so to say, at the specific actions of this newly-anointed and -appointed prophet that began to edify, animate and mobilize an alternative community. Jesus' ministry began with individuals. And it continued to grow with physical and spiritual transformations individuals experienced at the personal words and touch of Jesus. Unlike Jeremiah at the Temple gate or John the Baptist at the Jordan who waited for the people to come into their hearing, Jesus went to the people. The synoptic

gospels do not record Jesus going to the Jerusalem Temple at the beginning: he began in the villages and towns, with the peasants held captive and oppressed by the imperial, religious and spiritual forces at work. Jesus went to the distinct social location announced as his prophetic vocation: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news *to the poor*. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

He did not look like a movement leader, speaker or intellectual at first, but rather a servant of afflicted people. “Full of the Holy Spirit,” Jesus came out of the wilderness with more than “people power” to directly cast out unclean spirits where he taught and visited the homes of people with sicknesses to heal them, such as Simon’s mother-in-law suffering from a fatal fever (Luke 4:31-39, Mark 1:21-31). Jesus showed care for people’s personal bodies in his constant healing ministry, where individuals, families and whole villages experienced a compassion beyond presence and words. Jesus carried an anointing able to immediately transform daily, physical reality and reanimate what had been weighed down, immobile and decaying. This is what gathered and organized the scattered people: “That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons” (Mark 1:32-34).

More than utopian rhetoric, Marxist ideology, or emphatic calls to uprising, Jesus displayed a sustainable power and alternative source of life that countered the hegemony of Death in people’s felt needs. Here was the incarnation of Israel’s prophetic words about the physical restoration of Israel. As Horsley and Silberman point out, this restoration of the people “was not political protest in the sense of making overt, anti-government speeches or secretly plotting armed rebellion” or focusing energy on getting the Romans or scribes to adjust structure and policy. Jesus’ prophetic mobilization had its own power and ability to change reality, which threatened the establishment’s monopoly and control, where the people saw that they didn’t need the structures. Jesus’ power “was political in a far more powerful way. In Jesus’ presence or under his influence, people who had been previously paralyzed or crippled by forces beyond their control began to piece their lives back together.”

This ministry was not, on the other hand, merely that of a local pastor or village healer, handing out miracles to atomized, middle-class conference attendees. ‘Jesus’ healings



and exorcisms were, in fact, part of a larger program...not aimed solely at individuals but...as a way of transforming wider community life,” Horsley and Silberman emphasize. “His miracles were seen not so much as bizarre natural curiosities but as additional signs that God had once again chosen to intervene in the earthly history,” the thrust of the entire prophetic tradition. Jesus, like Elijah, demonstrated God’s ability to provide even food. Even if some scholars choose to read the feedings of the four- and five thousand as only the “miracle” of communal sharing, those events directed by Jesus drew the people together in amazement and nourishment, weaning them away from the centralized market dependence and the authorities regulating it.

Jesus’ seemingly presumptuous ministry of rampantly declaring forgiveness of sin to individuals, not based on compliance with any religious formula, was a direct threat to the authorities regulating the economy of guilt. Daringly speaking for God, Jesus derailed the public’s internal space one by one from the legal and religious tracks for clearing their record. Brueggeman describes how “Hannah Arendt had discerned that this was Jesus’ most endangering action because if a society does not have an apparatus for forgiveness, then its members are fated to live forever with the consequences of any violation. Thus the refusal to forgive sin...amounts to enormous social control.” Rather than lobbying for the religious or legal institutions to be more forgiving, Jesus’ prophetic ministry brought the forgiving, liberating words of God directly to the people, making the official authorities and avenues obsolete for a growing portion of the region.

Jesus’ teaching, we will briefly mention here, constantly “amazes” the listeners. He proclaims startlingly good and simple news about who God really is (Luke 15, ), what sin truly is (Matt. 5-7, 23, 25; John 9, ), whom the Kingdom is primarily for (Matt. 5, 11:25; Luke 4) and how it is actually “at hand.” In all this, he is described as teaching with unprecedented “authority” in his direct and piercing word, and facile, accessible images in parables for the illiterate, revealing his deeply intimate understanding of God’s heart and Kingdom.

Thus far, we see how Jesus awakened communities not with removed, prophetic proclamations and dissemination of educational materials, but by going to the poor with direct healing, deliverance, forgiveness and teaching. And this ministry was not a pacifying, charitable stop-gap covering society’s failures with spiritually consoling platitudes. His presence, touch and words were so radical and personal that docile working class communities were awakened and the establishment was threatened.

## **Intimacy with the Father**

How, then, did Jesus actually heal people's bodies? Or how did he know to forgive one individual versus calmly commanding an evil spirit to leave the next person? Where did he learn to teach so well—the religious educational avenues of the synagogue? Talking to the people directly? Or was he uncannily sharp and insightful, having a way with words? While some of these biographical experiences are possible, too often the church assumption is to not ask these questions: instead, we are left with merely “Jesus was God, so he can do whatever and obviously knows all things (unlike us).” This assumption is widely out of step with the key to Jesus' ministry, which he repeatedly shared with his disciples and those who were amazed. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus speaks to others' disempowered or angered feelings in witnessing his authority to heal, teach, and know: the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. (John 5:19-20)

Jesus' project of social renewal filled with personal insights, teachings, healings and exorcisms all comes out of a vulnerable and constant prophetic posture of dependence. Jesus is perpetually listening to God. In that receptivity, Jesus has become forged in his identity as the beloved son, and so God as his father.

Not only does the authority over physical bodies as well as spiritual afflictions come being God's child, as an inheritance, but the thoughts, words, and discernment in using them with each person he faces comes from constant, unseen communication with God. Bill Johnson, a pastor who has experienced such a healing and deliverance ministry—though with possibly less socially prophetic potential in the Northern Californian, suburban church setting—is free enough to state: “I continue to remind people, Jesus had no ability to heal the sick. He couldn't cast out devils, and He had no ability to raise the dead.” Rather, alluding to Phillipians 2, Johnson unsettles the traditional church assumptions, either conservative or liberal: Jesus

had set aside His divinity. He did miracles as a man in right relationship with God because He was setting forth a model for us, something for us to follow. If He did miracles as God, we would all be extremely impressed, but we would have no compulsion to emulate Him.... Jesus so emptied Himself that He was incapable of doing what was required of Him by the Father—without the Father’s help. That is the nature of our call—it requires more than we are capable of. When we stick to doing only the stuff we can do, we are not involved in the call.

This is the humility, the weakness of the prophet, or the prophetic calling: to receive power and words that are not our own. It puts one in the constant position of a receiver, never a doer. Jesus says, “I have not spoken on my own, but the father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak....What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me” (John 12:49, 50). As if constantly in need of counsel, Jesus is recorded at many points as going off to a secret place, or alone to pray before the sun had risen (Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42). As Guy Chevreau notes, who has been involved in wide, socially transformative ministries among the poor, including heroin addicts in Spain and thousands of orphans in Mozambique: “prophetic announcement is always nurtured in the secret place, alone, in silence.” Jesus lives out what Second Isaiah describes in one of the Servant poems: “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a taught-one, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught” (Isaiah 50:4).

We see in Jesus the extreme immersion in what the earlier prophets had only indulged in (so it seems in the written record) for the larger pronouncements: listening to God, seeing God, as if in his presence. This is a distinction we see between Jesus and Israel’s prophets: while the prophets received God’s words to proclaim to the rulers and the nations on highly-public and significant scales, Jesus also listened to his Father facing smaller, personal interactions, bringing the power of the direct heart and word of God to the weak and weary, to their unique problems and existential obstacles. Many ministries are re-discovering this totally blind and free aspect of Jesus’ ministry, now calling it “prophetic evangelism.” It is what so far has been referred to in this paper as Jesus’ amazing “insights” into people’s lives, which always made the woman or man feel

known by God personally, animating them to be vigorous recruiters or joyfully repentant givers. Mark Stibbe says this:

Jesus consistently operated in the gift of prophecy in his ministry to the lost. In fact, one of the distinctive features of Jesus' life is what theologians call *cardiagnosis*....Jesus had a special knowledge of the human heart. By prophetic revelation, he read the lives of everyone he met....Jesus knew full well in his spirit what the scribes were saying to themselves (literally, within their hearts) [Mark 2:1-12].

The social prophetic tradition often overlooks this aspect of Jesus' life, not recognizing it as an expansion of the prophetic vocation and power of carrying God's spoken, living and active word to his people. Jesus did not address and exhort only the "people of Israel" en masse. He was able to be in deeper, truer solidarity with the downtrodden or alienated as he listened to what the Father would reveal about individuals in the crowds or alone in unexpected encounters, connecting to their deepest issues or desires.

### **Weaving Their Stories into One**

We see in Jesus' brief interaction with the Samaritan woman in a village where he knew no people how a single prophetic insight so animated a mere woman of ill-repute that her sudden excitement accomplished the work of vigilant community organizer (John 4:7-42). In what could be a casual interaction over a drink of water, Jesus discerns the stranger's true thirst and speaks into the private details of her life and past relationships, causing her to exclaim, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). This leads her to ask possibly her deepest question about her people's subordinated status compared to the mainstream Jewish religion, and Jesus offers radical, non-Temple words of God's radical freeness and presence to all people. Within minutes, the woman leaves her jar for water to go tell the entire city, "Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (4:29). It is not Jesus' radical teaching that propels her to gather so many others, but the highly subjective word she heard. It apparently convinces her that she has tasted something real, that God might after all be with her. With this, she brings her people together with a conviction that they too will find something real, not to be disappointed by more meetings and tired talk of traveling

speakers about Samaritan and Messianic issues of the day. “The conclusion is inescapable,” Stibbe believes: “Jesus listened prophetically to what the Father was saying in his ministry to the lost. This is one of the major characteristics of his earthly ministry.” The potency of his prophetic word to one disenfranchised woman is seen when it not only brings up the core social identity issues, but when she actually returns:

They left the city and were on their way to him...So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (4:30, 40-42)

Stibbe goes farther than many charismatic/renewal voices in acknowledging that this kind of personal “prophecy can bring release, healing, liberation, and favour to the poor.”

Brueggeman, who writes from the historical-critical perspective, offers an insight that also superimposes the aim of the prophetic—both individually and socially. “Prophetic ministry consists in,” he writes, “letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and his will for justice. (117) Both alienated individuals and marginalized social groups have experienced their identities as sidelined from society’s central narrative. Just as when Yahweh says to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people...I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them...I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt,” so God reveals his intimate knowledge of and concern for individuals when they hear God’s description of their stories, as with the Samaritan woman (Exodus 3:7, 9, 10). As we’ve seen, this is powerful enough to awaken an entire ethnic makeup in a city as they sense that God is with them, as well.

In John 1, a skeptical Nathaniel is quickly converted into a follower and joins the social body Jesus is building when he hears his own story in the light of God’s movement of “freedom and will for justice.” What Nathaniel probably thought of as just another moment of his isolated existence, his afternoon sitting under the tree, is mentioned—“seen”—by Jesus when they later meet. Jesus similarly “seeing” Zacchaeus individually in the crowd, with prophetic insight from hearing the Father, leads a man complicit in oppression to joyfully repent in word and in money, joining the movement (Luke 19:1-10). In this instance, Jesus’ prophetic ministry is clearly conscious and critical of the

established injustices, yet his prophetic presence with individuals goes beyond blanket denunciations and demonstrates power over personal bondage to greed and corruption, effecting immediate change. “This repentance is public, radical, and saving,” Stibbe concludes. Jesus also concludes this episode with Zacchaeus with another clarification of his prophetic mission: “I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save those like him who are lost” (19:10). Prophetic ministry consists in letting individuals and people groups see their own stories as parts of this unfolding and free mission of God.

### **Raising up the Prophetic Social Body of Christ**

There is a healthy fear among liberation theologians and ministers along the social margins of anything which leans back to “that unfettered individualism which seeks to fragment and destroy.” William T. Cavanaugh’s study, *Torture and Eucharist: Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, painstakingly dissects the Pinochet regime in Chile in the 1970s, where state tactics of fear, torture, and disappearance effected an intensely individualized and passive population. Cavanaugh focuses on the official Roman Catholic Church’s subservient ecclesiology, which for decades abandoned the physical bodies and material, political matters to the State, only taking care of the “soul” of Chile. His familiarity with the work of social theorists from Max Weber to Michel Foucault leads him to the guiding conviction that “true resistance...depends on the reappearance of social bodies capable of countering the atomizing performance of the state.” And this, he rightly concludes, is the role of the Body of Christ. Just as Jesus himself embodied the fulfillment of the prophetic, so his larger Body should continue to incarnate and amplify his prophetic vocation.

While Cavanaugh’s assessment of the Pinochet machinations delivers a foreboding example of how far individualism can be taken, enforced, and used to separate and control a people, his central narrative of prophetic resistance is essentially a top-down solution where the clergy finally get their ideological act together and take a stand apart from the tyrannous reign of state control and allegiance. The leading role in the story he tells belongs to the collection of bishops, and, in their own eventual suffering at the hands of the state, how they begin to “discern the bodily nature of the church, to feel that the sufferings of others are in fact their own sufferings, torturing the Body of Christ, which is the church.” Cavanaugh distills the story he tells to that of how “the official church began

to learn how to be oppressed and thus become incarnate in opposition to the state.” Despite his beautiful language about “discerning the body of Christ,” Cavanaugh ultimately assumes that this Body is the already-established ecclesial institution and hierarchies of the Catholic Church.

The prophetic voice and presence of Jesus, however, did not rise within the established religious order of the Temple to make formally approved statements with the High Priest and scribes, expressing their eventual consensus of displeasure with the Roman occupation, followed by more charitable temple activities to better care for the bodies of Jerusalem’s oppressed citizens. While this may be the shift many religious structures need to make throughout the world, we see that Jesus’ way of building a social body was quite different. As we have seen, he did not rely on the strength of offices and clout, nor traditional organizing methods. In utter weakness, the prophet began at the bottom, vulnerably dependent on the voice of God and the strength of his Spirit to bring God’s felt and heard presence to those on the outskirts of society. Beyond the power to heal, cast out afflicting spirits, and speak surprisingly personal words to animate individuals and communities into something new and growing, Jesus taught the multitudes of disciples a new way of existing and interrelating. Going to the “sinners” and everyday workers and not the religious leaders, Jesus began to build fearless communities fused with cooperation, forgiveness, selfless love and servanthood.

As if adopting each of them into a new identity as God’s children, Jesus gives his growing numbers of disciples the same authority he received from the Father to go to smaller towns with the same animating ministry: to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every kind of disease and sickness (Matthew 10:1). Just as Brueggeman highlights Isaiah’s prophetic role of announcing a new kingdom and reality in the face of the existing one, as well as Jeremiah’s role of announcing the end of the kings’ royal illusions, so Jesus’ social body of prophets move from town to town as he does, proclaiming “the good news”: ““The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (10:7, 8). From the bottom up, this continues to bring God’s presence directly to the people’s ears, eyes, hearts and homes, not waiting for the religious structures to catch on and formalize or distribute a single thing.

Rather, this prophetic, decentralized social body will threaten ecclesial and state dominance. It will expose their latent reliance on hatred, violence, and the formalized

methods of social care-and-control. It will incur their discipline, Jesus warns: “Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils to flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.” (10:17, 18). *This* is where Jesus trains his radically free social force in the prophetic: “When they hand you over, do not worry about what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (10:19, 20). Jesus’ revolution does not protest the powers mainly in the streets, reserving the face-to-face encounters with officials for the educated, more articulate leaders of the movement. Instead, as the Body of Christ fearlessly gives itself over to the authorities of domination, each member is another voice speaking truth directly to the power trying to swallow him or her.

And the truth they speak, Jesus insists, should not be their own human eloquence or vocalized resentment but the direct and living word of God to the principalities through the lips of each humble child of God—to the *individual* situation, to the individual ruler or official presiding at the moment. “So have no fear of them,” Jesus daringly says to fishermen and common folk. “What *I* say to you in the dark, tell in the light.; and *what you hear* whispered, *proclaim* from the housetops” (10:27, emphasis mine). This is the destabilizing, dismantling presence of the prophetic word now set loose and lived out in hundreds of scenarios simultaneously. And it only comes through bodies that are in God’s presence, listening intimately in the secret place where no state surveillance, nor theological technician, nor formula for revolution can go.

The author of Luke-Acts understands this historical shift—accelerated at the disciples’ transformative ignition of the Spirit at Pentecost—as that which the prophet Joel had envisioned: “Even upon slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:18). Far from being an individualistic spiritual subculture obsessed with hearing vague, internal messages, we see in Acts 9 an example of Peter privately receiving a vision that abolishes his personal, religious and ethnic barriers and opens him to fellowship with the “unclean” Gentiles both in their homes and across the nations in years to follow. Paul’s famous discourse on tongues and prophesy to the alternative community in Corinth has everything to do with this *unifying* movement of hearing God’s voice (1 Corinthians 14). To those who were overwhelmed with this new phenomena of communing directly in spirit with the heart of God, Paul tries to communicate the priority of letting this gift open them to each other, as if grafted into one body, rather than it being an atomizing experience.



Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy...so that the church may be built up. (14:3,4)

This was Jesus' desire, expressed in his last recorded prayer before dying: that—unlike so many eventually-exhausted and fractioned movements—his brothers and sisters would *remain* as a body in the same intimate unity which Jesus has as a whole person in relationship with the Father.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:22, 23)

This is a social body and revolution resistant to any eventual hierarchical or authoritarian tendencies, as all hear the Father's voice directly—not only for their own grounding and growth, but also to be able to hear and speak God's words of adoration, affirmation, discernment and calling over each other. The body is constantly refreshed as God's words and touch move throughout its members, one into the other. Such a prophetic experience in the Body of Christ is resistant to unclean spirits of religion or dogmatic adherence to words of the past that are purely external and etched in sacred centers of texts and temples (which always end up in the few hands of those more competent in the world's categories of power, such as wealth, education, and cultural preference and prejudice). The Johannine tradition continues to stress this theme in its first letter: "As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone [like a priest or official teacher] to teach you." The Greek word used is *τις*, or *some*, connoting a select few, as opposed to *all* who hear from God as prophets. "But," the letter presses, "as his anointing teaches you," and the Greek is plural, speaking to all, "about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him" (1 John 2:27).

Matthew's gospel casts this "anointing" (as John calls it) of Jesus in the deep prophetic tradition of Moses, where he gives the people a new covenant on the mountain. In what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, this new law that Jesus hears from the Father and gives to the people in mosaic-prophetic stance is inscribed not in stone but inside each person (Matthew 5-7). The author of the letter to the Hebrews confirms this by also comparing what Jesus shares to what Israel had originally received through Moses: "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises" (Hebrews 8:6). The same author goes on to recognize Jesus' shared prophetic anointing and relationship with the Father as the radical shift that Jeremiah had foreseen long before: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel" This announcement came at the end of Jeremiah's anguished career as the lone voice of God to a deaf and war-bent nation: "I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (31:34 emphasis mine).

### **The Heart of God Bombards the Authorities**

In Jeremiah we see a series of "prophetic jests," where the prophet goes beyond words and enacts the message of God visually and viscerally before the kings and the public. God tells Jeremiah to go buy an earthenware jug, take the elders and senior priests out to the place of Judah's eventual disaster for their allegiance and child-sacrifice to other idols, and to break the jug as a tangible vision of how their nation will then be similarly broken (Jeremiah 19:1-12). The false prophet Hananiah employs this technique when he breaks the wooden yoke before the king to announce how God will break Babylon's yoke over Israel (28:10-11). Just as a prophet not only hears but sees, so the prophet lets the people and authorities see as well.

In Jesus' prophetic vocation, many of his actions can be understood in this way. His teaching before the religious authorities about the Father's embrace of all that is discarded and lost in Luke 15 is simultaneously enacted as he sits elbow to elbow with "sinners and tax collectors." Rather than just talk about compassion for the idealized downtrodden, Jesus' enacting this love makes it visible and visceral both to the rejected

and to the offended elite. “Thus the compassion of Jesus is to be understood not simply as a personal emotional reaction,” Brueggeman notes in Jesus’ prophetic stance, “but as a public criticism...of the system, forces, and ideologies that produce the hurt. Jesus enters into the hurt and finally comes to embody it.” Just like the father in the parable with “his ready embrace of his unacceptable son,” Jesus boldly “condemns the ‘righteousness of the law’ by which society is currently ordered and by which social rejects are forever rejected.” Jesus prophetically enacts God’s loving presence with criminals and the transgressors of moral codes.

There are consequences to this enactment. As the body of Christ is aligned with transgressors, daringly enacting God’s presence and compassion among them and his noninvolvement with the respected forces of political or moral enforcement, he is maligned and persecuted as the shamed ones are. In more than words, then, Jesus carries out the prophet’s tradition of exposing the suffering going on amidst everyday life which the people have come to numbly accept. Just as Jeremiah was put in the stocks for highlighting injustice and cruelty of the righteous regime (Jeremiah 20:2), so Jesus carries on the prophetic experience of willfully provoking the establishment with his ministry and message, resulting in criminal treatment. Jesus foresaw his execution and invited his disciples to follow. “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you,” he says in the middle of teaching his body of followers about abiding in the Father’s love, hearing his voice, receiving the Advocate, and loving one another, Jesus warns that following him in this prophetic life will uncomfortably invoke the sharp distinction between God’s ways and the world’s. “Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you...I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God” (John 15:18,19-16:1,2). Jesus forewarns and models for the Body of Christ the consequences of living in relationship with the Father, and living out his heart prophetically in the world.

To prophetically enact the heart of the Father—the central word of God which Jesus brings to the world—is to come unarmed. The only times Jesus is described as having a sword are, first, in his own words about bringing not a pacifying and false unity but rather intensifying division (Matthew 10:34), and second, as coming to judge Babylon with a sword-sharp tongue, with which he will slay the beast (Revelation 19:15). Metaphors aside, Jesus, as the clearest image of the Father, is clean of any violence, physical threat,

or other vestiges of authoritarian force. He comes enacting the love, vulnerability and non-wrathfulness of the Father among his sinful, violent, and deceived creation—to save and serve his children unto death. What is more, if Jesus as prophet came with worldly force, defending himself and distancing the most sinful structures by causing them to draw up their defenses, his word would never be heard nor seen by them. The only aim would be to conquer and destroy them, to win. Instead, we see in Jesus' willingly giving himself over to the authorities without running or striking them down how many opportunities he gains to speak and demonstrate God's truth directly to the powers. In Gethsemane, the guards witness and experience a compassion even for them in the healing of the ear. In the Roman Empire's official courts the client-kings are confronted with the bare character and words of the living God. Even the hired torturers, the perpetrators of state oppression and violence are struck by the living word of God among them, as the Roman Centurion receives it at the foot of the crucified and forgiving Christ. In Luke's account, the Centurion confesses a changed heart toward the Son of God upon witnessing Jesus speak forgiveness over his killers, accept of a criminal beside him, and cry intimate words to the Father all while bearing a shameful, naked, and painful treatment of execution (Luke 23:34, 43, 46, 47-48).

This is the revolutionary model for the social body of Christ to carry out across the world before the powers. To pick up a weapon or support others' doing so is to abandon the prophetic office and anointing given by Jesus. To opt for arms, force or violence in the face of evil and injustice in the world is to willingly dis-member oneself from the prophetic Body of Christ. Jesus' daring way is our way, as the same first Johannine letter reminded: "Beloved, we are God's children now," adopted into this identity of Jesus'. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:2, 16). So as Jesus sends out his disciples unarmed with provisions, verbal self-defense, or swords, he is casting a shower of prophets into the unguarded hands and hearts of evil powers and authorities. To come unarmed is to *give* your life, to happily let the structures most in need of God's living and dismantling word take you into their realms and courts and before their leaders and perpetrators. The followers of Jesus carrying the seed of God's word essentially swan dive before the officials' faces and into the mouths and bellies of the powers and authorities. Such is the radical prophetic—to enact and utter the heart of God while in the very hands of governments, terrorists, sinners and empires, into which you have freely given yourself. Such is the meaning of the thirteenth "chapter" of Romans and other letters passed between the early movement which advise the scattered prophetic

communities to not “resist” evil in the futile way, and be overcome by the same evil, but to *overcome* evil (not comply with its oppressive governments) with good. With something different. With the word of God. New Testament prophets submit to subvert, to undermine, to topple. We let them apprehend us and draw us near to their citadels of authority, where we offer the flaming hot words from God’s heart, and—like the burning coal with which the angel of the LORD touched and cleansed Isaiah’s unclean lips—“heap burning coals on their heads” (Romans 12:20).

## **Bibliography**

Alison, James. *On Being Liked*. New York: Crossroad. 2003.

Arnott, John. *The Father’s Blessing*. Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media. 1995.

Brueggeman, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2001.

Cavanaugh, William T.. *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 1998.

Chevreau, Guy. *Turnings*. Kent, England: Sovereign World Lt.. 2004.

Cooke, Graham. *Developing Your Prophetic Gifting*. Grand Rapids: Chosen Books. 2003

Johnson, Bill. *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind: Access to a Life of Miracles*. Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image. 2005.

Horsley, Richard A. and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1997.

McReynolds, Paul R.. *Word Study Greek-English New Testament With Complete Concordance*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale. 1998.

New Testament. *New Revised Standard Version*. Division of Education and Ministry, National Council of the Churches of Christ. 1990.

Rowland, Christopher, Ed.. *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1999.

Stibbe, Mark. *Prophetic Evangelism: When God Speaks to Those Who Don't Know Him*. Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media. 2004.

Stringfellow, William. *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. 2004.

Horsley & Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*, 40

Ibid, 34

Ibid, 38

Ibid, 35

Ibid. 39

Ibid. 41

Ibid, 32

Theologian James Alison has dedicated much of his work to this sensitivity, eg. *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* and *On Being Liked*.

John Arnott, *The Father's Blessing*

Horsley and Silberman, 41

Walter Brueggeman, in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, stresses the reality of a radically free God behind the destabilizing prophetic tradition inaugurated with Moses. It is a God who is free and outside of the cultural and religions constraints, calendars, customs, expectations and structures of either the temple or pagan kingdoms. Chapters 1 and 2.

Cited in the NRSV footnotes

Brueggeman, p.x

Ibid, p. xvi

William Stringfellow, in his *Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, speaks of Jesus' healing as, though "an intimate event," "utterly threatening politically": "he exemplified life transcending the moral power of death in this world and this world's strongholds and kingdoms." (148-149)

Horsley and Silberman, 51

Ibid, 51, 52

Brueggeman, 85, citing Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 236-243

Bill Johnson, *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind*, 50

Ibid.

Guy Chevreau, *Turnings*, 97

Mark Stibbe, *Prophetic Evangelism*, 154

Ibid., 155

Ibid, 58

Christopher Rowland, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 10

Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 4

Ibid, 106

Ibid, 74

Ibid, 110: The diocese's established Vicaría de Solidaridad is described with all its services to the people as an alternative social program. Cavanaugh also notes as the third response of the Church the Sebastián Acevedo Movement, a more grass-roots resistance community on the streets with a more creative, inspired, and prophetic voice to the powers and citizens.

Horsley and Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*, 221

Brueggeman, 89

Ibid, 91

When we remember that the original epistles were written with no “chapter” divisions or “verse” enumeration, the context of the author’s point is more clear. For instance, we can misread the apparent beginning of “Chapter 13” as advocating cooperating with earthly governments if we forget to read it together with the end of “Chapter 12,” where Paul’s whole argument is based around strategies to *overcome* the evil around them with *good*, not condone secular oppressors.