

“Church Decline: Has the Gospel Gone Missing?”

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My own denomination, The United Church of Canada, is not unusual in having many healthy churches, but it also keeps closing church buildings, amalgamating congregations, blending names, sometimes to regrettable humorous effect. In Toronto the union of Bond Street Church and St. James Church produced St. James-Bond Church, a union that pre-dated the 007 James Bond movies, but newcomers to the city did not know that. Now even amalgamated churches are closed, including that one.

These days one takes for granted that mainline denominations are in serious trouble. What seemed like isolated erosion back in the 1960s has become a major feature of the religious landscape. Various reasons can be offered including pluralism, mass media, and changing demographics. Individual congregations try innovative strategies to survive and there are hopeful signs. The biggest sign of a crisis may be that crisis language is not used in most denominational communications. This may be because many surviving congregations are viable for the present time and regional and national church officials are overstretched. Still, if there is a fire in the kitchen, one can move only for so long to rooms further from the flames and still have anything to save. At some time one must deal with the problem. Preaching may be part of it. Is it possible that the gospel has gone missing from most pulpits?

We are now fifty years into the New Homiletic, a revolution that swept the preaching highlands and stamped ‘old’ on the three-points-and-a-poem propositional models of sermon. Gone were mechanical outlines, canned ‘illustrations’ that served deductive points already made, and uses of authority that seemed hierarchical.

New models in the showrooms boasted the latest equipment in organic design, inductive process, conversational style, and narrative plot. Images, metaphors and stories made their own points in their own ways. Design was with rhetoric in mind, not just for intellectual appeal (*logos*), but for emotional and ethical (*pathos* and *ethos*) appeal as well. The sermon became a Word ‘event’ in the lives of the hearers. The needs of listeners became foremost, how they heard against the diversity of their backgrounds. Communication trumped information. Both connecting with experience and providing it were essential. Social justice came into focus. Truth was best ‘overheard’ or ‘evoked’ rather than dictated; now one speaks of offering it best as testimony and confession.

The new models were long overdue. Apart from Horace Bushnell in the United States and F. W. Robertson in Great Britain, both in the mid 1800s, few preachers implemented the central tenets of the English Romantic poets like S. T. Coleridge on matters of art, metaphor, and the importance of imagination. Then the New Homiletic broke on the scene. Form, content, and function were interrelated, both in the biblical text and the sermon. Sermons were designed to be what Mike Graves called “form sensitive”. Tom Long encouraged replicating some aspect of the literary form of the text in the sermon so that the sermon’s effect was similar to the rhetorical effect of the text on its initial hearers. The sermon is to say and do now what the text said and did then. The sermon became an event of the text.

Some scholars might say that the New Homiletic contributed to the gospel being heard. It was one of several forces that helped recover the Bible in the pulpit. Topical sermons like those of Harry Emerson Fosdick at Riverside Church in New York City and the death of God movement in the 1960s left preachers wondering what role the Bible should have. Leaders in the New Homiletic like H. Grady Davis, David James Randolph, and Fred Craddock insisted that the sermon arise out of God's Word. This emphasis on the centrality of the Bible was reinforced by widespread mainline Protestant revision and adaptation of both the church year and the Roman Lectionary following Vatican II. Bible scholars discovered a ready market for lectionary-based resources aimed at preaching.

Sermons changed under the New Homiletic. Given all of the resources devoted to support preaching in seminaries and the church at large, one might legitimately expect this to be a golden age of preaching. If it is, it is a secret. Preachers have become more contextual theologically, better teachers of Bible texts, they display a wider range of sermon forms available to them both 'old' and New, they have made important adjustments for how people hear in a pluralistic multi-media age, and they engage the contemporary scene.

Have sermons improved in their ability to discern and communicate the gospel? The answer is probably no. I recently worshipped in two quite different churches with a familiar result. In both, the sermon provided a worthy treatment of one of the Scripture readings. The historical background of the text was lifted up, engaging contemporary stories were told, social needs were named, yet apart from the preacher's own positive attitude of what we could accomplish, no hope was given. Where was the gospel? I have also worshipped where the gospel is the focus and have come away with wondrous renewed faith and hope, a sense of having been encountered by God.

A minimal requirement of the gospel is that it be good news. From a theological perspective, what we are required to do is trouble and death to us, not good news. Paul says, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:19). If we could do what is required of us before God, no Savior would be needed.

Most published sermons in recent decades display a common ailment: Up to half contain no good news. Less than one third contain substantial good news of more than a sentence or two and rarely is the good news and its implications even a fifth of the total length. Hope is preached generally only if the biblical text is hopeful (e.g., the lost is found) yet most hopeful texts are preached as trouble.

Hope and focus on God is only a minimal requirement of the gospel, yet some preachers resist even this. They say it reduces the Bible to a single doctrine of redemption. In response, doctrines emerge in their full range through engaging specific biblical texts. Hope ought not to be the theme of every sermon any more than the sun is the theme of all daytime conversations. Hope is simply the tenor of the gospel, an indicator that God is still faithful, sovereign, and in control.

Textbooks on preaching are in the same infirmity beds as sermons (perhaps no surprise). Rarely, even on the evangelical side, do they discuss the nature of the gospel or emphasize focusing the sermon on God and human life before God. Rather, the biblical text is the focus.

Perhaps the importance of teaching introductory students essential historical critical exegesis has led teachers of preaching to be silent about its weaknesses. Many teachers of homiletics are biblical scholars who may agree on what is the gospel and may in fact preach it, but most do not include in their sermon method why or how students might do the same.

Sermons lack hope either because they are anthropocentric focusing on human actions or because they focus on sin and injustice and what God requires. They provide less by way of windows for the Realm of God than mirrors. What God has accomplished in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit seemingly means little. If the shadow of the cross falls over pews during the sermon, it often does so without any dawning of a new creation in Christ that preaching is said to effect.

What is the gospel? At minimum, it is the saving, liberating, and empowering actions of God found anywhere in the Bible (Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1-3 speak directly of good news) yet that have their fullest expression in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, ascension, gift of the Spirit and promises concerning the end times. The gospel is the reason the church preaches: Christ commissioned it in Mark 16:15, a text that is canon in spite of variance in ancient manuscripts. Arguably, apart from the gospel the church has little to offer the world.

In our postmodern age, some people resist gospel in the singular. Most references in the Bible are to “the gospel.” Paul speaks of “my gospel” (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8), ‘our gospel’ (2 Cor 4:3), and ‘a different gospel’ (2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6), adding—“not that there is another gospel,” (Gal 1:7) although he refers to “a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you” (Gal 1:8). Whatever else we may say, cross and resurrection are central for Paul, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel...so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17); “but we proclaim Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:22).

Over lunch I asked a friend how intentional she is in preaching ‘the gospel.’ She said not very, “I try to present Jesus in such a way that someone listening might be drawn to know him better.” I suspect that is how I often have preached. If we preach the miracles of Jesus without clarifying his decisive identity, I wonder if seekers relate to him any different from a fictional comic book action figure.

Is the gospel something to preach only when a biblical text offers it? Were that the guide we would mention the cross and resurrection never with the Old Testament, sometimes with the epistles and revelation, and with the Gospels, as rarely as we preach from their endings. There is something wrong with this way of thinking if Jesus Christ really is the ‘cornerstone.’

How one determines gospel is part of how one reads the Bible. Christians for centuries read with a view to how the entire Paschal Mystery illuminates and is illuminated by individual biblical texts. The classic creeds of the church confess Christ and summarize the gospel. They also interpret Scripture. Creeds and Scripture mutually instruct, restrain, and affirm one another. The Reformers had better understanding and practice of the unity of Scripture than we do. The Testaments read one another; the creation accounts in Genesis and the new creation in Revelation refer to each other and offer perspectives on all books in between. The beginning and ending of each Gospel informs all of its chapters and *visa versa*.

The New Homiletic followed some scholars in treating Bible texts too much as isolatable objects of history. Historical and literary criticisms are essential tools in sermon preparation yet they fail the basic test of a hermeneutical method: they cannot account for how texts function as revelation. In fact, many biblical scholars are so steeped in history that they feel uncomfortable speaking of the Bible or what they find in it as the Word of God. For some this is a personal matter of faith that lies outside of their discipline.

Our preaching forebears were generally much better than we are in proclaiming the gospel. They had different understandings from ours of a preaching 'text': a text typically was any verse or portion thereof that led to a doctrine that the sermon developed, freely referencing as many other texts as came to mind. For all of their faults in using proof-texts, allegorizing, and failing to deal with texts contextually, they nonetheless had an expansive notion that the 'text' for preaching is also all of Scripture, one is not limited to the text at hand. For them the cross and resurrection were relevant to every text.

Were preachers from history to speak, they might readily name what is wrong with the New Homiletic. In spite of its focus on the Bible, it lacks focus on God and specifically on the gospel. It allows historical and literary criticism to render biblical texts without an accompanying theological and hermeneutical strategy that permits these texts to speak to or from the heart of the faith. It encourages preachers to preach texts, by which is meant pericopes or units of Scripture, rather than see texts as essential instruments in and through which to proclaim the gospel.

A divide has now occurred in homiletics between those who identify the purpose of preaching seemingly as preach-the-text (perhaps most biblical scholars) and those who affirm the essential nature of texts to serve the larger purpose of preach-the-gospel.

What might be needed if the gospel were to be recovered for the pulpit? Perhaps the whole homiletical enterprise needs to be reconceived from beginning to end. The gospel is not just a few sentences sprinkled in a sermon like pepper in soup. Students need to be taught not only how to safeguard biblical texts using historical-critical exegesis, they also need to be taught how to do supplementary theological exegesis that recovers the texts as Scripture for the church.

We may say that we follow the literal sense of Scripture that the Reformers affirmed as the only sense, yet their idea of a literal sense is not ours. They maintained a double-literal notion, the lower of these was the grammatical-historical (which is close to our notion) and the higher was the divinely intended meaning. For Luther this was in relationship to Christ; for Calvin it was similar, the meaning revealed through the Holy Spirit. The God sense of texts might need to be recovered: what is God doing in this text or behind it in the larger picture?

If form, function, and effect really are related, sermons might adopt the shape and movement of the gospel. The New Homiletic set imitation of a text's literary form and rhetorical effect as a goal of the sermon. It did not recognize gospel as form and effect. The gospel is not just ideas, it has plot moving from crucifixion to resurrection, from exodus to the Promised Land, from old to new creation. The movement is not back and forth, or in reverse (countering movements exist in Scripture as the movements of sin). It is hard to conceive of a sermon ending in trouble and communicating a lasting impression of the gospel. The gospel transforms even

mission from a must-should-and-have-to duty to an invitation to meet the risen Christ in places of need.

Sermons might have a two-part structure, trouble in the text and its application today (a common structure for sermons that leave out gospel) plus grace in the text and its application today. The gospel is tensive, trouble and grace, sin and redemption, crucifixion and resurrection, not either one on its own, and not one eventually erased by the other. Both are true, as Luther said, *simil justus et peccator*.

The Word of God is not necessarily gospel, for God also judges and condemns. Emil Brunner humorously said, Christ meets us in the law, but not “as himself.” Even grace, understood as God’s empowering action, is not gospel. However, grace points to gospel. It provides a lookout in the direction of the cross to determine how a particular text’s meaning is altered or fulfilled in it, or to find the gospel within the text through echoes of the larger Christian story.

What might we learn if we were to avoid the errors of our preaching ancestors and benefit from their insights? They had two main ways to safeguard the gospel. First, they concentrated on key doctrines. James S. Stewart named: Christ’s death and resurrection, the in-breaking of the realm of God with power, God’s intervention in human lives and history. Samuel Dewitt Proctor named ‘pistons’ of his preaching engine: God’s presence and activity in human affairs, the possibility of spiritual renewal and moral wholeness, genuine community, and death as a reality that is behind us. However we name key doctrines (the church year does some of this), they speak of the centrality of Jesus Christ and what has been accomplished in the cross and resurrection concerning the past, present, and future.

Another approach of our forebears was an art that our age has mostly lost, a further testimony to the gospel gone missing: the art of proclamation. Our age thinks of proclamation as a mere synonym for preaching. History indicates that preachers were skilled in two key arts: teaching and proclamation. The former is the necessary sermonic precondition for the latter and arises directly out of the biblical text, the world, and theology. Proclamation arises out of the intersection of these elements with the heart of the gospel. Through proclamation God’s words of empowerment for ministry are heard or received as direct from God, words like, I love you, you are forgiven, I will never let you go. Proclamation actualizes the *kerygma*, it does the gospel to the people. In it people meet Christ, not ideas about him, and the results are transforming.

Augustine identifies a plain style of preaching that informs. He calls it teaching. Most preaching today is plain-style teaching that stops short of proclamation (a significant exception is in many African American and some southern churches). Augustine also spoke of the moderate and grand styles that delight and persuade and are mostly foreign to us. They were easier to distinguish in his culture and in spoken Latin. Still, even on the page of sermons throughout the ages one can see passages that have shorter phrases, that center on the gospel, that are spoken with greater energy and passion, that arise out of teaching the gospel, and that we can identify as proclamation. If we could train our eyes to spot such passages, how we approach old sermons might change—we might go to them with a sense of adventure and learning. We might even learn to proclaim again. In this age of critical church decline many experiments are being tried to stem the loss—a novel approach might be for us preachers to try the gospel.

“Preaching with an Awareness of Early Scriptural Interpretation”

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My remarks today do not concern the content of preaching directly, but rather what should come prior to preaching, that is reflection on and interpretation of the biblical text.

When I teach my introductory course in Old Testament to seminary students, the first class always includes a lecture that is something of an *apologia* for the study of the Old Testament. Perhaps fifty years ago this was unnecessary, though I doubt it. The suspicion towards Israel’s scriptures has an antique history dating back to Marcion. But among the points I make is that the Old Testament was the central authority to Jesus and his first followers so contemporary Christians should know its contents and how to interpret it. At one point during the first lecture, I like to hold up my old *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* that is over twenty years old, falling apart at the seams and bound with black tape and proclaim “this was Jesus’s Bible.” That always gets a laugh. And it also conveys, more or less, the point I want to make: that for Jesus who was a good Jew and for his first followers who were also Jewish, Israel’s scriptures were their scriptures. And indeed, the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, not to mention the book of Revelation, are shaped by concepts, images, prophecies and fulfillments, allusions to, not to mention explicit citations of the Old Testament. The *kerygma*, the earliest preaching, of the first Christians was rooted in its interpretation, understood in the light of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is thus essential for latter day preachers in the twenty-first century to gain some sense of how Israel’s scriptures were understood and interpreted at the turn of the era because the ancient hermeneutic differs quite dramatically from contemporary understanding of scripture.

While my holding up the Bible may be helpful from a heuristic standpoint, it is also misleading for two reasons. The first is that there was no such a thing as a bound book in the first century C.E. Rather the Jewish scriptures circulated as scrolls. Luke 4, for example, provides us with an image of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth and reading the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. The library at Qumran which dates from the 2 century BCE to 1 century CE was a collection of many scrolls referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls, made from sheepskin rolled up and stored in jars. The use of papyrus and the binding process of the codex would eventually allow the writings of the New Testament to circulate as a book, but that was not for some generations after the time of Jesus.

But a second misleading factor about simply holding up a bound book, is that first-century Judaism and thus earliest Christianity took root in what was very much an oral culture, so Jesus, assuming he was indeed a carpenter, would not have been spending a lot of time reading and writing. Moreover, reading was not done silently in a private setting, but aloud. Susan Niditch has made that point very clear in her influential study of orality in ancient Israel and early Judaism, *Oral World and Written Word*. She writes: “Very few people in the culture we are envisioning know written works because they have *seen and read* them; they have received the works’ messages and content by *word of mouth*.” (p.5) Writing might have served as an “aide memoire” to help with the process of transmitting traditions, but literacy remained low. Thus

scriptural traditions as well as their interpretation were communicated orally. Another related fact to mention about this era is that the wording of scripture was not absolutely fixed; but had a fluid life of its own. We know this from the variety of textual manuscripts and variants among them found at Qumran. Indeed, scripture cannot be too readily separated from interpretation during this era, exactly because of its oral transmission.

And here we get to an important corollary that can be extrapolated from the oral dimension of scriptural transmission in early Jewish and Christian antiquity: interpretation of scripture is contained within the Old Testament itself. This should not be too surprising when we consider that the books comprising the Hebrew Bible were written over a span of perhaps as long as ten centuries, if we date the J source to the 10th century and the book of Daniel to the 2nd century BCE. The inner-biblical interpretation has not been the focus of a separate sub-field of scholarly inquiry until relatively recently. Michael Fishbane wrote an influential book on this subject some twenty years ago now, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, which, along with James Kugel's more recent work, *Traditions of the Bible*, or *In Potiphar's House* and Richard Hays' work on early biblical interpretation in the Pauline corpus, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* have had a great impact on the field of biblical studies. "Reception history" whether of the Old Testament in the New Testament or the later history of interpretation after the canon was formed, is now a major area of inquiry judging by both publications and attention to the area in the guild, the Society of Biblical Literature.

The assumptions governing earliest scriptural interpretation are quite different from modern historical-critical approaches that govern most teaching of the Bible today. Historical-critical scholarship, with which you are all familiar, tries to situate the literature in the time it was written, by determining sources, redaction, assessing comparative Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman material in order to learn more about authorship and the communities out of which the literature emerged and for what distinct purposes it was written. To take an example that will no doubt be familiar to you, since the nineteenth-century work of Bernard Duhm who delineated three parts of Isaiah, most OT scholars have accepted that Isaiah 40-55 is the work not of the eighth-century prophet in Jerusalem, but of someone writing at the very end of the Babylonian Exile by dint of the reference to the Persian ruler Cyrus who is acclaimed as the Anointed, the Messiah of Yahweh in Isa 45:1.

By contrast, early scriptural interpretation in early Judaism and Christianity was governed by a very different view about the nature of scripture. The so-called "Old Testament" is referred to consistently in the NT writings and in other early Jewish sources, as comprising two parts: "the Law and the Prophets." Rather than seeing it as a collection of literature deriving from different historical periods and with human authors, the undergirding assumption was that there was a unity to the revelation because it ultimately was divine teaching. As John Barton made amply clear in his book on prophecy in the post-exilic period, Hebrew scriptures were conceived largely as a collection of oracles, that is, divine revelation, perhaps mediated by prophetic figures who committed the revelation to writing. These oracles in scripture were considered of immediate import in the teaching and learning of the Jewish communities that received them.

To return to our earlier example in Luke 4 of Jesus reading the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, the passage he reads actually is a conflation of what we know now as Isa 61:1-2 and 58: 6. "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." What then does Jesus say? "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That provides a clear illustration not only of the fluidity of scriptural traditions, but also of the immediacy of scripture and its message for the contemporary age. There was no attempt on Jesus' part to situate the words in the context of the Babylonian exile or its aftermath. Rather, the word of God then had immediate import for the in-breaking of a new age, of life lived in the present.

This is not to say that the interpretation of scripture in the NT was simply prophecy and fulfillment. There are many ways in which scripture shaped the message of the gospel writers and Paul. Let us take a subtler example from Luke about the way in which Isaiah shapes the gospel. You all know that John the Baptist quotes Isa 40: 3 in all the gospels: John is understood as the one whose "voice is crying in the wilderness: make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Isaiah 40:4-5 reads:

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

In Luke, the shape of the gospel itself reflects this flattening of the landscape. Jesus does not hike up a mountain, but in fact delivers the Sermon on the Plain. Journeys are a very important feature in Luke; and Luke-Acts refers to the following of Jesus and his teaching as "the Way" using a Greek term *hodos* (Act 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 24: 14, 22) that is the same used in Isa 40:3 "Prepare the way of the Lord".

It is important for us as preachers of scripture to know that this use of scriptural interpretation in relation to Isaiah was not confined to the New Testament and the portrayal of Jesus by the gospel authors. In fact, the Qumran community used the book of Isaiah in much the same way as the New Testament authors. Qumran's Rule of the Community--which lays out their own self-understanding, some of the laws of the community, as well as their practices of worship--quotes Isa 40:3. They seemed to have understood themselves as a set-apart community living in the desert wilderness by the Dead Sea at the end of days (much like the first followers of Jesus). So too, just as Jesus is said by Luke to have understood himself as having the Spirit of the Lord upon him by citing Isa 61:3, so too, we have a text from Qumran in which an eschatological deliverance figure is described using the same language and other language from Isaiah. So often, preachers think of the early Christian movement as wholly unique and something distinct and set apart from early Judaism. And certainly we as Christians affirm particular features of Jesus' ministry and witness as unique, perhaps especially the mode and meaning of his death and resurrection; but at the same time, other Jewish groups were using prophetic texts in a similar way to describe their leaders, or to understand the role of their community in relation to their place and purpose in history and world events.

The Context of 3 Lent

I want to provide another example of the relevance of interpretive context of the New Testament's use of the Jewish scriptural traditions especially with the use of a "water" motif in two of the texts from the Revised Common Lectionary that were read on Sunday for the third week of Lent: Exodus 17, the story of the Israelites' murmuring and Moses getting water from a

rock at Massah and Meribah; Psalm 95 which extols God as King and Creator but also recalls the hardening of hearts of the Israelites in the wilderness; and John 4, the tale of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well; and a reading from Romans 4. I am puzzled at the Revised Common Lectionary committee's choice of this combination of texts. If I had been selecting texts, I surely would have included 1 Cor 10:1-4 for a cohesive combination rather than the selection from Romans on justification, but more on that in a minute. I don't know where you may have been on Sunday, but I was in Church of the Redeemer on Sunday morning on the corner of Bloor and Avenue---a stone's throw away from here. My church had something I would guess yours did not: a fountain issuing from a rock that sat in front of the altar in the front of the church. It is not out all the time, but the fountain is put out for so it is something of a mobile fountain.

The material below includes reflections on two of the lectionary passages, Exod 17:1-7 and John 4:1-42; a portion of my proposed substitution for the epistle reading, 1 Cor 10:1-4; an excerpt from James Kugel's book, *The Bible As It Was*; and two excerpts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Damascus Document and Hymn 18 of the Hodayot .

N.B. The following section relied on a hand-out and oral discussion of material in the February seminar, which is not all reconstructed here.

Exodus 17

When read from a historical-critical perspective, this chapter can be understood as one of a two stories; the other occurring in Num 21, which relate the tradition of Moses miraculously getting water from a rock in the wilderness, thereby allowing the Israelites to survive on their long journey. It also serves as two sources of the etiology of a place name: Massah and Meribah---testing and strife. But from the perspective of early interpreters, scripture, particularly the Torah, was considered immediately relevant and relevatory, but in a more logocentric way than contemporary Christian interpretation. Jews and Christians in antiquity understood the scripture to be of whole cloth and perfect, thus what we might perceive as irregularities or two discrete traditions that were redacted together. The occurrence of this rock story in two places in the Pentateuch, once after the crossing of the Red Sea and a second time in the wilderness of Zin near Kadesh was understood as the same rock, in effect, a traveling rock that providentially sustained the people. This interpretation of a mobile rock with life-giving water can be seen in a wide range of early Jewish literature including the New Testament, the rock sometimes supplanted by a well or spring.

John 4

This text features Jesus' meeting of the Samaritan woman at the well---in part to display his association with cultural 'outcasts': Samaritans, women, the divorced. In this text, there is a larger interpretive context of the figure of spring/well, seen also at Qumran (see Hodayot below). John 4 reveals Jesus as a prophet---who knows all things, and is also the Messiah.

1 Corinthians 10: 1-4

This text also includes the motif of Jesus as the provider of living water--an interpretive motif linked to Exod 17/Num 20--as we see here:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,¹ that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Notice the traveling well---just like the manna prefigured the body of Jesus, so the water was also associated with Jesus.

Materials from Qumran: The Damascus Document and Hodayot

This language of water/spring and fountains can also be seen used metaphorically at Qumran in literature that dates to the second to first century BCE, thus prior to the NT. Here are two examples:

1. Consider this excerpt from the Damascus Document, another rule for the community at Qumran. Here from the historical critical perspective we see the motif of the wilderness wandering, an old tradition inserted into the narrative of Numbers 21:16-20:

¹⁶ From there they continued to Beer;¹ that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together, and I will give them water." ¹⁷ Then Israel sang this song: "Spring up, O well! -- Sing to it! -- ¹⁸ the well that the leaders sank, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter, with the staff." From the wilderness to Mattanah, ¹⁹ from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth, ²⁰ and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that overlooks the wasteland.¹

2. Consider also this excerpt from one of the Hodayot, the hymn of the prophetic priestly leader, identified as Hymn 18 (*The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* G. Vermes, pp.284-287). Here God is the source who puts water from the fountain in the leader's mouth:

I thank you, O Lord, for you have placed me beside a fountain of streams in an arid land, and close to a spring of waters in a dry land, and beside a watered garden in a wilderness."

. . . You O my God have put into my mouth as it were rain for all those who thirst and a found of living waters that shall not fail.

In the NT, of course, John views Christ as the water source himself---the source of all wisdom and divine teaching, and this hymn from Qumran which dates from the first century BCE seems to be a clear interpretative precedent for it.

Implications for Preaching

I have just pointed to a few select examples from Isaiah and from the well/spring motif to give a sense of the oral and written interpretive context of scripture at the beginning of the Christian era. These examples could be multiplied many times over. Theological ideas are conveyed primarily by means of metaphor and symbolic language rooted in scriptural imagery. The same images and ideas were often claimed by rival groups, whether Samaritan or Judean, groups that that claimed the scriptural inheritance and its promises for their own. The early Jesus movement and the *euangelion* of its scriptures must be understood in that context.

It is important to note that these different traditions represent an intra-Jewish polemic---the very same texts might be used by different groups to claim elite or prophetic status for themselves. At the same time, they also shared interpretive motifs: such as the traveling well, which is understood in 1 Corinthians

I hope the above examples serve to illustrate that theology was not communicated propositionally or systematically during this era as much as through narrative---through claims and counter-claims made on the basis of interpreting scripture within the context and culture of a Hellenized Judaism during the Greco-Roman period. While the church eventually settled on a canon of particular books for teaching or doctrinal purposes, the canon cannot capture in full the rich interpretative environment in which scriptures were written.

The task of the preacher is of course to communicate the gospel and to make the message of old alive and vibrant for the contemporary church. An awareness of the rich and dynamic oral and written traditions of scriptural interpretation during this era can enhance and enrich preaching from scripture and lend a sensitivity to depictions of both the faith and practice of the early Jewish communities in their diversity and early Christians who inherited much of their ways of thinking about scripture in coming to understand the significance of Jesus and his mission.

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“Schola Prophetarum: Prophetic Preaching Toward a Public, Prophetic Church”

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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 deal unflinchingly with 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.

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

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).

called “the church.”² 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

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.³ 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

² Homiletician Tom Long begins to unpack this problem in his text book, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: WJKP, 1989) 10ff.

³ 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.

of religious genius.⁴

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.⁵

As someone trained in homiletics and New Testament, I find Clements' description of their scholarship very reminiscent of the debates around the historical Jesus of the 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.⁶ 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

⁴ Clements, 51.

⁵ 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!

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribners, 1958), 11-20.

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.⁷

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 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.

⁷ This myth is also alive and well in the movies. Just about any Kevin Costner film from the 90’s will do.

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.⁸ 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.⁹ On the other hand, prophecy is anything but a private possession. Prophecy was something to be exercised in and with the church.¹⁰ Second, with prophecy in community there came the need for a shared

⁸ 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, 1983) esp. 247-290, 317-338.

⁹ Aune is very careful to say that such statements are more theologically programmatic than empirical or historical, 200f.

¹⁰ 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 feature in his article, “Prophecy (Early Christian),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday 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., 1992), 5:501. David Hill defines the prophet thusly: “A Christian prophet is a Christian who functions

role in “discernment.”¹¹ 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 Thes 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.¹² Fourth, the natural locus of this prophetic Word was the worshipping community.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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

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,” *New Testament Prophecy* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1979).

¹¹ 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.”

¹² E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978).

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

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

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.¹⁶ Even in the later pastorals of the canonical NT 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

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 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 revised 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: WJKP, 2002), 92.

this way: “The Spirit makes alliances.”²² 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 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.

²² 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.