

---

# DOMESTICATING THE PROPHETIC VOICE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Stephen J. Bennett

*An Induction Address delivered on August 29, 2000*

## **Introduction: The Prophetic Voice**

Sit! Down boy! Nice doggy. Sit down! Ah yes, the domestication of the dog. That ferocious wolf-like canine that could easily kill a man with a few snaps of those sharp teeth; obedient and submissive to the every wish and command of the master; domesticated.

Even the dog “Buck” in Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* was not immune to domestication. Although determined to resist all advances in his new northern home, he soon learned to submit when beaten with a stick. And yet that “call of the wild” rose above the voices of domestication once again.

There are domesticated prophets, the kind that support the *status quo*, quietly toeing the party line and never challenging any of the power structures. And then there are the spirited wolf-like canines that refuse to be domesticated. The call of the Holy One keeps them from submitting to the *status quo*.

Isaiah heard that call from the Holy One. In the presence of God he realized that he was unfit in comparison with God’s holiness. It was he who first heard the now famous words, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Isa 6:8 NIV). He could not block out the sound of that call. When Jeremiah tried to walk away from his call, the words

of God were like a burning fire in his heart (Jer 20:9). He could not keep silent. The call of God, the character of the prophet, and the needs of the community would not allow him to.<sup>1</sup> It is God who provides the initiative for the prophet's call. It is God who will raise up his prophets, just as was predicted for the ideal prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15. Amos emphasized this fact when he claimed that he did not come from a prophetic guild or from a lineage of prophets, but his call was from God (Amos 7:14-15).

So the prophets were to speak for God. They were divine mouthpieces (Deut 18:18; Jer 1:9; Ezek 3:4). Only false prophets speak their own message. They speak it because they have deceived themselves (Jer 23:26). But a true prophet's authority comes from the originator of both the message and the call: God himself (Deut 18:15, 19).

Isaiah's experience shows the importance of the life and character of the prophet. He was not ready to hear God's call until his language had been cleansed (Isa 6:5-7). He could not speak the words of God until his own words and speech became more godly. The prophets could not speak to the culture of their day unless they stood apart from the ungodly aspects of that culture. Yet there was often a feeling of inadequacy on the part of the prophets. Moses felt unworthy for his commission, but received God's reassurance (Exod 3:11-4:17). Jeremiah felt that his youth was an issue preventing him from the prophetic task. From God's perspective this was not an issue (Jer 1:4-8). God would be with his prophet; the message of God would be accompanied by the very presence of God and there was no reason to fear.

The rationale for the prophetic call was to be found in the nature of the prophet's community. The community was in need of a transformation in the direction of God's standard of holiness. The

---

<sup>1</sup>Otto J. Baab, *Prophetic Preaching: A New Approach* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 19.

prophetic message must communicate this standard, but not as a matter of intellectual curiosity. The message was designed to bring change.<sup>2</sup>

So the task of a prophet is to be prophetic; to be an agent for change as a spokesperson for God. Despite the popular fascination with the predictions of prophets, the call for change takes priority over prediction. Prediction was only ever *supportive* of the central task of the prophets. Predictions were not made to satisfy curiosity but to give weight to a call to repentance.

That call to repentance may be broader than what may be regarded as the well-known obvious sins, such as breaking the Ten Commandments. The prophet also spoke to more subtle departures from God's will for his people—departures involving worship practices and participation in the accepted systems of culture.

The message of the Old Testament prophets often focused on judgment or hope. The judgment was pronounced as a result of disobedience, but there was hope in a brighter future where obedience to God would prevail. The disobedience showed itself in empty ritual observance of God's law, accompanied by syncretistic adaptation to the practices of surrounding nations. This often involved oppression, injustice, and immorality. Jesus exercised his prophetic voice along the same lines. He exposed an empty observance of ritual laws accompanied by an acceptance of and accommodation to current cultural practices.

The holiness of God demanded a higher standard than this. The only true and living God is unique in his holiness and requires a relationship of submission from his people. It is only then that they can reflect his holiness and it is only then that they can proclaim that

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Levi A. Olan, *Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1982), 117, "Philosophers and theologians explain the world, the prophets were men dedicated to changing the world."

holiness to a hurting world. This is the bold extent of the prophetic vision. It is only the wild prophetic voice which can resist the forces of conformity and domestication and proclaim such a message beyond the limits of popularity and common acceptance. This is the task of the prophet.

### **I. The Prophetic Voice in the Bible**

The biblical prophets held a high standard of covenant loyalty. Yet they lived in an environment of plurality. The Canaanite presence and influence in Israel was significant. Canaanite religion and culture was widely practiced in full view of the Israelites. Accommodation to these practices soon became the norm—practices involving intermarriage, Asherah poles and high places, Baal worship and child sacrifice.

The message of repentance and judgment for sin was central to the message of the prophets. Part of this was their call to reject the syncretism that had crept into Israel's worship and lifestyle. The people were taking their cues from the surrounding culture rather than from Torah.

The prophetic task, then, became twofold. It was to reform the worship of Yahweh and even what had become organized religion, and to reform the civilization of Israel by challenging contemporary culture. Both had been influenced by Canaanite practices. Israel's vision of God and the social system had been compromised.<sup>3</sup>

This assessment of the situation is largely contrary to the usual Sunday School type understanding of the conquest of Canaan. There a linear picture is usually painted whereby the tribes of Israel, one by one, expel or extinguish the Canaanite civilizations. This all began with the grand show of "people power" in the destruction of Jericho

---

<sup>3</sup>Robert McNeill, *Prophet, Speak Now!* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1961), 33. Cf. Baab, 32.

under the leadership of Joshua. The balance of the biblical account, however, paints a more complex picture. While the twelve tribes eventually spread out over Palestine, they continued to live among or adjacent to many of the original inhabitants.

The religion of these inhabitants became very attractive to the young nation of Israel. Baal worship was usually represented by a bull, the symbol of fertility including fertility of the land. The “high place,” an outdoor shrine, provided the place of worship. Essential elements were a stone pillar to represent Baal (“lord”), a tree to represent the female consort (Asherah), a table for offerings, an incense altar, and a couch for sacred prostitution. The focus of worship was to encourage fertility in family life and agriculture. The goal was materialistic.<sup>4</sup>

Israelite syncretism did not involve acceptance of this religion as such. There was no blatant rejection of Yahweh. What were accepted, at least at first, were the religious practices of other religions. Yahweh was worshiped in the same way as Baal was worshiped. Yahweh was still accepted as sovereign, but then little baals were kept to encourage fertility of a particular plot of ground.<sup>5</sup> The prophets spoke against this widely accepted practice. God’s sovereignty and holiness and uniqueness demanded exclusive loyalty.

In the northern kingdom of Israel, political and economic success in the eighth century BC brought new challenges to the exclusive worship of Yahweh. King Jeroboam II had conquered new territory and brought increased prosperity despite his wickedness. The northern kingdom had a history of broken covenant. Idolatrous golden calves were set up in Dan and Bethel right at the birth of the nation. Jeroboam I had set up these calves for political reasons. As the king of a new nation he did not want his people to go back to Jerusalem to worship, and so possibly shift their allegiance back to

---

<sup>4</sup>McNeill, 26.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

that center of leadership (1 Kgs 12:26ff). There was still religious activity, even in the name of Yahweh, but the covenant heart was missing. There was not the concern for an exclusive relationship with God, and Baal worship was practiced openly.

Israel learned from the Canaanites that agriculture would only be successful with the consent of Baal, the god of fertility. The name Baal means “owner, lord, master, husband”; thus he was considered lord of the ground, and each area had its own Baal.

Four prophets from the eighth century BC provide examples of the prophetic voice in Israel that was willing to speak out against these trends. These prophets are Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah.

Amos offered his prophetic voice against the abuses in the northern kingdom of Israel. Coming from the southern kingdom of Judah he was in a special position to be objective about the sins of Israel. The increased prosperity had been accompanied by a wider demand for luxury items (Amos 4:1; 6:1,4). As these goals gained prominence in popular life, morality and religion took second place. Bribery was used to gain large tracts of land at the expense of the smaller land holders. Those deprived of their land then had no recourse to the court system which was also corrupt (Amos 5:7, 15, 24).<sup>6</sup> Oppression of the poor and immorality became characteristic of the lifestyles of Israel (Amos 2:6-7; 4:1). Along with this went a hypocrisy in worship. Amos noticed the people worshipping at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba, without really seeking the Lord (Amos 5:4-5).

Domesticated prophets kept quiet about these atrocities. They were benefitting greatly from the new prosperity and the generosity of the crowds who came to the shrines. Amos was not so easily bought. His message was one of judgment for those who had broken Yahweh’s covenant. Three times he described God as the one “who

---

<sup>6</sup>Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), 885.

brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” It was the exodus which was foundational for the covenant. Prosperity had brought rejoicing but Amos prophesied judgment leading to mourning. Prosperity had brought plenty but Amos prophesied want, and fainting and falling in the place of strength and youth (Amos 8:9-14).

The response of the priest: “Amos, take your visions and get out! Go back to Judah and earn your living there as a prophet.” (Amos 7:12 CEV). But Amos was not working for money like the domestic prophets. He was raising a conspiracy (Amos 7:10).

Hosea also ministered to the northern kingdom of Israel. As a northerner himself he was not as harsh as Amos, but focused instead on the love of God. Still his objective was the same as that of Amos, and Hosea was no less appalled by the religious syncretism that was occurring in his own land.

While Amos focused his preaching against social injustice and the exploiting of the poor, Hosea’s concern was directed to the moral, religious, and political problems of Israel. Such offenses denied the “loving father” (Hos 11:1ff.) and “faithful husband” (Hos 2:2ff.) which God longed to be to his people.

Hosea addressed the issue of Israel’s broken covenant and announced that the people had broken God’s covenant and law (Hos 8:1). The idolatrous golden calf is evidence of this lack of loyalty to Yahweh (Hos 8:5ff.). Hosea again refers to the calves in a general attack of idolatry and expresses disbelief that people would kiss calves! (Hos 13:2).

Micah and all the “writing” prophets except Amos and Hosea ministered to the southern kingdom of Judah. The cultural situation which Micah addressed involved improper worship practices and injustice toward others. Micah showed contempt for idols and Asherah poles, temple gifts, shrine prostitution, and witchcraft (Mic 1:7; 5:12-14 [Hebrew 11-13]). He condemned injustice (3:1-3, 9)

including bribery and oppression (3:11; 7:3), fraud, and illegal seizure of land (2:1-2, 8-9).

One manifestation of injustice involved market place trading. Dishonest merchants were increasing their profits by weighing out produce with light weights to make it appear that more had actually been purchased, and by weighing out gold with heavy weights to make it appear that the merchant had paid out more than was actually the case. There was no effective system of justice for the weaker parties to gain justice. The laws of the jubilee year and the provisions for the helpless were also neglected. These were designed to protect the poor, the widows, orphans, and foreigners.<sup>7</sup>

The domesticated prophets, of course, turned a blind eye to this situation. In an oracle directed against these prophets, Micah announced: “You lying prophets promise security for anyone who gives you food, but disaster for anyone who refuses to feed you” (Mic 3:5 CEV). The domestication of the prophetic voice takes money and coercion, but those who wish to domesticate are willing to pay the price because their material interests are at stake. And then there were those prophets who liked to sell fortunes for money (Mic 3:11). But Micah was not working for money. He refused to be domesticated.

Isaiah also ministered in Judah contemporary with Micah (in the second half of the eighth century BC). Isaiah too was concerned about empty rituals and the poor moral climate. Priests and prophets were ineffective as teachers because they were intoxicated (Isa 28:5-10). The motions of piety were carefully adhered to and people would fast and “humble” themselves but it made no difference in their lives. They continued to exploit their workers and were engaged in quarrelling and even brawling (Isa 58:1-5). Sacrifices were offered and incense burned, but these practices were merely part of the pluralistic compliance with whichever religions were expedient. Along with

---

<sup>7</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1984), 5.



sacrifices to Yahweh, all-night vigils were kept in secret at grave sites, and the forbidden flesh of pigs was being eaten (Isa 65:2-5).

The low moral climate was characterized by lying, stealing, oppressions, and murder (Isa 1:4, 21-23; 5:20; 9:17 [Hebrew 16] - 10:4; 30:12; etc.). This kind of lifestyle produced an attitude of arrogance and faithlessness (Isa 3:11-15; 22:15-25; 32:5-7; 59:5-8).

One evidence of the domestication of the prophets is seen in their drunkenness. They, along with the priests, staggered from wine and reeled from beer (Isa 28:7). Perhaps the domesticated prophets turned to alcohol to find some relief from the internal conflicts associated with turning away from the true task of their calling. Isaiah did not turn away from his calling but spoke out against the syncretism and injustice around him.

The prophets called Israel to forsake the elements of their lifestyle which reflected the surrounding culture and religion but conflicted with Torah. The people were not in every instance aware that their practices were counter to God's will. "Everyone was doing it." The prophets' message addressed issues relating to world view, worship, business, and justice.

It was natural for the Israelites to think in ways that reflected their neighbors who lived near them and even with them in the same towns. The world view of these neighbors was one of polytheism. Their attitude would have been an acceptance of Yahweh as another god in the pantheon. Yahweh had his jurisdiction and Baal had his. No conflict would have been obvious in the polytheistic mindset.

Spilling over into worship, it would have been easy enough to go so far as to identify Yahweh with Baal. Rituals learned from the Baal-worshipping Canaanites may have been "sanctified" for use in Yahweh worship; the Canaanite forms of worship would have been used while naming Yahweh as the God being worshiped. This was apparently happening at the high places which were a concept that came from Canaanite culture. It may also have been happening at the Israelite

(northern) shrines of Bethel and Dan where Jeroboam had set up golden calves “who brought you up out of Egypt” (1 Kgs 12:28 NIV). Baal was also represented by a calf (bull) and the people may have thought of these idols as physical representations of Yahweh.

The normal practice in business dealings was apparently based on dishonesty on the part of the vendor: heavy weights used in weighing out goods (so less is given, in effect) and light weights used in weighing payment received (so more is received, in effect). Israelite merchants who were competing in the same market with Canaanite merchants would soon adopt these practices also. That would have been the commonly accepted method of doing business.

Bribery was the norm in the culture that surrounded Israel. Israel's legal system soon accepted this characteristic also and so justice was compromised. Only a person of means had a chance of getting justice. The normal way of conducting these legal affairs would not ordinarily have been challenged.

The prophets of the 8th century BC did, however, challenge these practices. They pointed out that these practices came from the surrounding cultures and not from the Torah (which should have been Israel's foundation). In this regard they were doing more than calling for repentance from known sins. They were calling for an understanding of the sinful nature of commonly accepted practice and culture.

In this sense Jesus stood within the prophetic tradition and exercised a prophetic voice. Indeed he was considered to be the fulfillment of the ideal prophet which Deuteronomy 18 described (John 6:14; 7:40). He also referred to himself when he said that a prophet is without honor in his own land (Mark 6:4). Like the Old Testament prophets, he challenged the empty religious ritual and cultural accommodation of his day.

Jesus was concerned with attitudes of the heart along with outward observance of the law. Laws which did not relate to motives of love were discarded in favor of a response of love. The laws of retaliation and divorce fit into this category. Ceremonial hand

washing was thus seen as having little importance. Sabbath observance was given greater significance when Jesus took it out of the realm of legalism. He condemned even tithing when it was an empty form unaccompanied by a true concern for justice. Likewise he was appalled when a show of righteousness was made out of prayer and giving to the poor. Neither did he condone using religious piety as a means of discrimination against others. Jesus took more joy in seeing a repentant sinner. Injustice associated with religious observance drew Jesus' most violent reaction when he dismissed the merchants from the temple courts. But Jesus would not be drawn into violence. In fact, his most subversive proposal was the rule of love which demanded peace and non-violence. He promoted this idea in a time when many had begun to believe that violence was the only rational solution to attain liberation from Roman oppression.<sup>8</sup> Jesus did not direct his prophetic voice to the oppression of the Romans against Jewish society, but to the oppression within Jewish society.

Jesus spent much of his time talking about money.<sup>9</sup> Much of the oppression that he witnessed stemmed from greed for money. Yet the issue went deeper than money alone, so much so that a Greek word would not suffice for Matthew's record of Jesus' words: "You cannot serve God and *mammon*" (Matt 6:24). Traditionally *mammon* has been understood to mean "possessions" or "money." This is how

---

<sup>8</sup>McNeill, 59f., quoting "Speaking for God—The Prophetic Role of the Church," Division of Christian Relations, Board of Church Extension Report, General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1958, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>For example, in Mark 10:17-25 the rich ruler must sell everything, and it is difficult for rich to enter the kingdom; in Matthew 6:19 Jesus gave a warning about storing up treasures on earth; and in Matthew 16:26 he said that one can gain the whole world but lose his or her soul.

the word is used in the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>10</sup> The assumption is that *mammon* comes from the Hebrew root *man*, “to confirm, to support, to trust.” So serving *mammon* would refer to overly trusting material things.<sup>11</sup>

John W. Wright has indicated, however, that recent research is pointing in a different direction. It may be that *mammon* came not from a Hebrew word but from the Canaanite language. Here the term *mon* means “provisions” or “stored goods.” Trade and commerce were, even in Jesus time, integral to the Canaanite culture. “In such a society, life was about *mon*. *Mon* provided social status, power, influence, and the ability to create more *mon*. The more *mon*, the more security one had. ‘Possessions, stored goods’ - *mon* represented the secret of success to people in Canaanite society. Serve *mon*, and *mon* will serve you well!”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus was not merely challenging an aspect of culture when he spoke about money. He was challenging the foundations of culture. He believed that the accumulation of possessions and wealth has a way of drawing one into the whole value system of the Canaanites. Jesus challenged everything the people, including the most religious of the people, were working for. Probably unconsciously, they had bought into a system that was contrary to true worship of God.

---

<sup>10</sup>*Community Rule*, 6:2, “The man of lesser rank shall obey the greater in matters of work and money [*mammon*]”; and *Damascus Document*, 14:20, “[Whoever] deliberately lies in the matter of property [*mammon*].”

<sup>11</sup>John Wesley Wright, “Mammon—A Word Study: How Has Canaanite Philosophy Influenced Today’s Culture?” *Illustrated Bible Life* (March/April/May, 1998), 12-13.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, 13.

## II. Prophetic Vision in the Bible

The prophetic voice identifies what needs to change. It challenges the sinfulness of the *status quo*. But it does not have a destructive or negative posture. The prophets longed to see a right relationship between God and his people. This is the positive side of the prophetic message; this is the prophetic vision. The foundation of this vision in the Bible is holiness.

The centrality of holiness in the Old Testament is seen in the prophetic preaching and concerns. The essence of the prophetic message is a call to return to covenant loyalty. This relational concept is the essence of human holiness which is always derivative of God's holiness, and therefore depends on a right relationship with God.

Holiness is the "meaningless" word to describe the "otherness" of God. He is different, transcendent, divine, not like us, perfect, just, whole, love, unique, indescribable, etc. We have no human frame of reference for this concept. No metaphor can do justice in describing God in his essence. A word must be dedicated to this task; a word that does not have an anthropomorphic reference point. God is without human reference; he is holy.

Human holiness is therefore a mere reflection of God's holiness and is on a different level. It is dependent on relationship. In the OT this relationship is institutionalized in the covenant. *Hesed* is the word describing the bond: unconditional love. Love and holiness are inextricably linked; they are one.

The relationship then has implications for ethics, morality, ritual, loyalty, etc. The ten commandments spell out these implications. Those in a right relationship to Yahweh (submission) will not have any other gods, graven images, blasphemy, or irreverence for Sabbath. Submission to Yahweh involves a recognition that he is unique (holy) and therefore there is no room for other sovereign loyalties.

The vertical relationship has a corresponding horizontal element. Those who are in a right relationship with God (i.e. holy) will not demand dominion over fellow humans. This would be taking the position of God. The horizontal relationship will also be characterized by love (*hesed*). Thus those who are holy (i.e. reflect God's holiness) will have certain ethical and moral standards: no killing, stealing, adultery, neglecting elderly parents, coveting, or lying in court. This is what a right relationship with God looks like from the outside. This is holiness (human holiness).

The syncretism of the Israelites along with rebellion had moved many far from this ideal. The prophets' main concern was to bring them back to it. They were concerned with holiness. They preached repentance and judgment. In a continuing cycle of apostasy and repentance, the prophets called people back to a right relationship with God—a relationship characterized by submission and exclusive loyalty.

The prophets of the eighth century will again serve to illustrate this prophetic vision. Amos focused on the sovereignty of God and also his justice. He was convinced that the holiness of God would not allow him to tolerate the violations of moral law which were prevalent in Israel.

The holiness of ritual would never be enough to avoid punishment in the thinking of Amos. He condemned the festivals, offerings, and rituals which were offered with no regard for morality. He warned that God, in fact, was ready to destroy the altar with all its emptiness (9:1). Amos condemned the rituals of Gilgal, Carmel and other places, along with the abuses that were associated with them (2:7, 8, 12; 5:26; 7:9; 8:14). He also shattered popular reliance on the "day of the Lord." The day of the Lord would not conform to the popular idea of blessing, but would be one of judgment. In this sense, the holiness of God would be revealed. His justice would be clear on that day.

The prophetic vision of Amos involved an ideal of divine-human relationship where the human side would reflect divine holiness in an ethical sense. Amos' condemnation of injustice was a call for human holiness based on a right relationship with God.

While Amos emphasized the judgment side of God's holiness, Hosea emphasized his love. Love is the characteristic of the relationship between the holy God and his people. Despite the lack of response from Israel, God continued to reach out in love, and even his judgment was a loving discipline designed to convince the people of their need of repentance which would restore that relationship.

The popular conception of God's requirements was a mechanical participation in the ritual observances. Hosea's metaphors of father and husband for God called for a more intimate level of divine-human relationship. The loving kindness of God (*hesed*) was to be matched by an emotional and spiritual involvement from the human side also. Israel was hopelessly deficient in these moral and spiritual qualities which would necessarily be involved in repentance (Hos 5:4; 11:7). The people lacked *hesed*.

The description of God as the Holy One in Hosea 11:9 stands in stark contrast to the unholy descriptions of the people. God is no mortal that he would behave or react as humans do. To be holy is to be divine. There is nothing intrinsically holy about humanity.

Yet this is no excuse for human immorality and idolatry. On the contrary it is all the more reason why humans should offer their allegiance to the holy God. It is because God is holy that his people should be faithful in covenant with him. When such a relationship is in place, people can reflect God's holiness in worship and morality. This was Hosea's vision for his people: an intimate relationship with the holy God that impacted every aspect of their lives.

Micah's name is a question, "Who is like Yahweh?" (cf. Mic 7:18), which expresses the essence of divine holiness. God is holy precisely because there is no other like him. That is what holiness is—divinity.

Like the other prophets, Micah saw the impending judgment as a result of the people's departure from holiness, as well as the hope that was anticipated as the holy God reached out once again to his people.

When Micah asked the question, "What does God seek from his people?" (6:6-7), he did not mention sacrifices. God is concerned that acts be just, that his people's loves, desires, and motives be true and faithful, and that their relationship to God be one of humility and cautious fellowship. Micah's attitude toward sacrifice was essentially the same as that of Isaiah (1:11-13) and Amos (5:21-22). Sacrifices had no value in themselves, but gained value in the attitude and action of the worshiper. This is what constitutes human holiness: the act *and* the attitude. A right relation with God involves both (cf. 6:8). Thus, Micah too called the people of Judah to reflect God's holiness.

Isaiah also expressed the uniqueness of God with a question, "Who compares with God?" (Isa 40:18 CEV, cf. 40:25; 44:6,8; 45:5-6,21). Isaiah's call in chapter 6 emphasizes God's uniqueness, separateness, and transcendence. Isaiah's emphasis on God's transcendence is essentially an affirmation of his holiness. The designation "the Holy One" is used in Isaiah twenty-eight times (and not often elsewhere in the Old Testament)(1:4; 5:19, 24, etc.). Isaiah also asserted that only God has the right to be called holy (6:3; 17:7; 40:25, etc.).

The holiness of God is seen in his moral and ethical perfection. Thus he is just (5:16). This is a significant contrast to the human experience, and Isaiah could only respond, "I am unclean" (6:5). This response refers to more than a ceremonial uncleanness, as his lips, that is his speech, were unclean. Here Isaiah's failing parallels one of the problems of his culture: lying. The other common sins of the people in Isaiah's day—stealing, oppressions, and murder—further contrast the human condition with God's holiness and perfection.

Despite the divide between the human condition and God's holiness, Isaiah also saw in God's purpose the principle that his people should share his character, and thus his holiness (35:8; 48:2;



60:14; 62:12). Redemption is more than a forgiveness of sin, but also deliverance from sin (4:3-4; 6; 11:9; 32:15-18; 35:8-10; 60:21). Lives of justice, righteousness, and purity, which human effort could not achieve (Isa 40-55), are the result of divine provision (Isa 56-66). This was Isaiah's vision of holiness for the people when they stand in a right relationship with the Holy God.

In the New Testament, Jesus both continued the prophetic vision of holiness and provided an answer to the problem of (the lack of) human holiness. The terminology of love is more significant in the Gospels than that of holiness. The two ideas are integrally related. "Love" describes the relationship of a person who stands in a right relationship with God. Such a person reflects God's holiness (which is love) and also makes love the characteristic of inter-human relationships.

Love and holiness are primarily internal matters, although they are evidenced externally. As such, it is the Sermon on the Mount which provides Jesus' most succinct expression of holiness because it deals with the internalization of the law. The internal element was missing from contemporary Jewish observance of the law, but it was never missing from the Old Testament ideal of covenant law. The command to love God and others was already given in the Old Testament record (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Jesus took this concept and applied it to individual laws. The law against adultery he applied to lust. The law against murder he applied to hate. He even extended the law of love to those who are considered enemies.

In his prophetic vision, Jesus was profoundly counter-cultural. In the Sermon on the Mount he blessed all those who were not respected in the culture (where *mammon* reigned supreme): the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc. And just to clarify the matter, he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament writings by continuing in the prophetic tradition and making the vision of the prophets a reality. It

was his death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit that took the standard of human holiness out of the realm of vision and into that of reality.

### **III. The Prophetic Voice in Contemporary Culture**

It is all very academic and convenient and clean to discuss the cultural accommodation of the Israelites and the Jews. Everyone knows that they killed the prophets and now let us all join in the Pharisee's prayer: "Thank you Lord that we are not like them!" But we *are* like them. We have accommodated to the surrounding culture and have scarcely given it a thought. The prophetic task must be renewed in every generation and in every culture.<sup>13</sup>

McNeill describes the prophetic function as:

preaching a full-orbed gospel with stress upon present conditions both personal and social, teaching the Scriptures from the standpoint of what the author intended to say rather than borrowing his words to support our own preconceived notions, speaking forthrightly both publicly and privately on what he considers to be the will of God on sensitive, even painful issues, championing justice at all costs in order that grace be effective, chastening for confession yet soothing for redemption, feeling the sins, hurts, and aspirations of the people so keenly that they become a part of his own spirit.<sup>14</sup>

What would the prophets say if they were preaching here? It would be impossible in a study such as this one to contain the content of the prophetic voice for the many cultures represented by the realm of Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. After a mere two months in only one culture among so many cultures, I am not the one

---

<sup>13</sup>McNeill, 28.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 43.

to suggest what the prophetic voice would say. Perhaps that is not the appropriate role of the Old Testament professor anyway. Rather than offering prophecies, APNTS should be training prophets. It is the students and graduates who go back to their cultures who will need the tools to assess cultural values and to do so on the basis of a firm foundation of sound biblical interpretation.

This is not to absolve the professor from giving examples and drawing attention to the literature which attempts to contextualize. Students must have models of the prophetic voice which are relevant to their setting. The biblical prophets provide the foundational model.

Biblical prophets addressed two broad areas of disobedience: empty ritual observance of God's law, and syncretistic adaptation to the practices of surrounding culture. These two broad categories are no less relevant for contemporary culture and the church, and they are still closely connected. The modern world, as in the biblical world, is characterized by plurality. Different cultures and religions live side by side. Urban and rural world views live side by side in growing cities, and values characteristic of different generations live side by side. In an important sense, the church and the world live side by side. Christians are influenced by the culture of their world every day. That culture is part of their identity. Often they do not realize when their values are from the world and not from Christianity. They accommodate to the world without even realizing it until the values and practices of the church coincide with the values and practices of the host culture. If such accommodation continues to go unrecognized, church attendance and involvement can become empty ritual. The church can become just another club which meets personal needs but does not challenge personal behavior and values.

This is not to say that Christians consciously reject Christian values. As the Israelites slowly drifted into the religious and moral practices of their neighbors (and co-habitants), so Christians today may accommodate to their host cultures without a great deal of

reflection. They need modern day prophets who will engage in the needed reflection on culture and God's Word, and who will point the church back to the right path. These prophets must resist the forces of domestication and speak out about accommodation to contemporary culture.

There is still a need to be "in the world but not of the world." Christianity must not be disengaged from culture to the extent that it has no impact. Newbigin describes this balance as steering between irrelevance and syncretism.<sup>15</sup> The middle road between irrelevance and syncretism is contextualization. The starting point is Scripture. The fact and truth of revelation is not negotiable. What are negotiable are the forms that are used to convey that truth. These forms should be relevant to the culture in question and not imported without reflection from another culture.

The taxonomy of David Hesselgrave would classify this approach as "apostolic contextualization." The focus is on meaning and relevance. His definition of "prophetic contextualization" goes further. It involves not only words, but actions. Prophetic insight into the culture is needed so that one may see what God is doing and saying, and then may speak and work for needed change.<sup>16</sup> Thus healthy contextualization is both positive and negative. It finds cultural modes of expressing the gospel and it also speaks to cultural

---

<sup>15</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67. Cf. Charles van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996), 198.

<sup>16</sup>David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1989), 149f.

values which are contrary to the gospel.<sup>17</sup> This is the model provided by Jesus and the Old Testament prophets.

Arthur Glasser sees the positive side of contextualization in the Old Testament prophetic activity of symbolic action. Thus Hosea contextualized his message when he entered into marriage and family relationships that symbolized the love of Yahweh (Hos 1-3).<sup>18</sup>

Contextualization is also seen in the forms of speech chosen by Amos. These were drawn from the literary conventions of his day. For example the form of a funeral dirge was used to announce the coming doom of Israel (Amos 5:1-2). “Woe sayings” were composed to express the certainty of this coming doom—it was as if Israel was already dead (Amos 5:7,18; 6:1). Priestly forms were used to mimic and attack the empty ritual observances (Amos 4:4f; 5:4, 21-24). Amos also used riddles, comparisons, proverbs, folk wisdom, and images from contemporary agriculture.<sup>19</sup> This is the positive side of contextualization by the biblical prophets that goes along with the negative side (“prophetic contextualization”) which was discussed in the section “The Prophetic Voice in the Bible.”

---

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Dean S. Gilliland, in Charles Van Engen, *et al* (eds.), *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993), 108, “Contextualization is a faulted discipline if it simply ‘fits’ the situation and does not prophetically seek to change what is less than biblical.” This is a reference to Dana Robert’s article in the same volume, “Revisioning the Women’s Missionary Movement,” where she says, “Missiologists need to put women’s issues at the top of the agenda in ongoing discussions of the theories of contextualization” (p. 115).

<sup>18</sup>Arthur F. Glasser, “Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Its Environment,” in Dean S. Gilliland (ed), *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1989), 42.

<sup>19</sup>James L. Mays, *Amos* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 5-6.

Prophetic contextualization as applied to contemporary culture can be found in current literature.<sup>20</sup> Walter Brueggemann, for example, is an eminent Old Testament scholar who has been very influential in his application of Old Testament study to current structures in the American context. In his book *Prophetic Imagination* he claims that the “task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”<sup>21</sup> As the prophets of ancient Israel evaluated and criticized the culture that had engulfed the nation, so ministers today must be prophetic in their understanding of contemporary culture and how they help their congregations to respond to it.

Brueggemann considers the American church to be so enculturated by consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act. He asserts that prophetic ministry must promote criticism and dismantling of the dominant consciousness. Along with this goes the positive side which is the energizing of communities by promising another time toward which the community of faith moves. There is a possible alternative community which is not dominated by the prevailing systems of injustice. Moses is the prophetic model of this approach. He evoked a consciousness which was alternative to Pharaoh’s politics of oppression and exploitation. Prophetic criticism is not primarily

---

<sup>20</sup>See also Edward Cell (ed.), *Religion and Contemporary Western Culture: Selected Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967); William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1988); Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951); Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1983); Marsha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 13.

destructive or negative (“does not consist of spectacular acts of social crusading or of abrasive measures of indignation”<sup>22</sup>) but begins in the capacity to grieve because things are not right. Prophetic energizing involves stepping out into the unknown, recognizing that God is for us, and appropriating the freedom of God by singing the doxology (which converts fear to energy). God is not contained by the empire.<sup>23</sup> This empire was, for Moses, the system ruled by Pharaoh. Today it is whatever social system is diminishing freedom by promoting a politics of injustice (consumerism in the American context).

Other works by Brueggemann have drawn similar analyses from every part of the Old Testament. The prophets and the Old Testament as a whole have a revolutionary, counter-cultural flavor. Brueggemann’s work provides an excellent model for students from Asia and the Pacific to study biblical literature carefully and apply it to their own contexts—dismantling and energizing without succumbing to the cultural forces of domestication.

Another Old Testament scholar exercises his prophetic voice in the Asian context. Wonsuk Ma is a Korean missionary who teaches at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in the Philippines.<sup>24</sup> In a recent issue of *Journal of Asian Mission*, of which he is the editor, Ma addresses nine Asian cultural traits which challenge the effectiveness of Asian missionaries. These traits are “missionary-receiving mentality,” “historical baggage,” “we don’t have the stuff,” “can-do spirit,” “micro vision,” “short-term approach,” “neo-colonial psychology,” “nationalism,” and “not learning from history.”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 110.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 11, 13, 15f., 23, 27.

<sup>24</sup>I took Ma’s class on Hosea in 1991.

<sup>25</sup>Wonsuk Ma, “Mission: Nine Hurdles for Asian Churches,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 2:1 (March, 2000): 103-24. <http://www.pts.edu/jam>.

Ma's approach includes promoting solid mission education for missionaries and pastors. This would involve biblical, theological, and historical perspectives of mission, and no doubt a development of skills in analyzing culture. He also promotes a concept of Christian community which transcends that of national allegiance. He writes, "Christians must demonstrate a kingdom perspective. Our identity with God and with fellow Christians should precede that of our earthly nation."<sup>26</sup> Ma also speaks out against a mechanistic view of applying church growth theory. This is based on his observation that church growth in Korea slowed down in the 1990s despite the continuing presence of the factors considered to lead to church growth. He writes, "The first thing Asian missionaries and churches need to have is humility. Church growth, economic growth and subsequent missionary movement should not be understood as a trophy of hard and brilliant work, but as God-given grace and opportunity."<sup>27</sup> In true prophetic spirit, Ma does not intend his evaluation to be destructive, but to point out areas for positive progress and change.

It is in the tradition of prophetic Old Testament scholars such as Brueggemann and Ma that APNTS must prepare its students. These kinds of prophets must be found at APNTS and produced by APNTS. The prophetic voice and vision must characterize its Old Testament studies so that graduates will have a ministry that is both faithful to God's revelation and relevant to their cultures. Old Testament study loses its importance when it becomes merely an academic pursuit that carefully analyzes the short-fall of the Israelites. It must examine, just as carefully, the involvement in empty ritual and syncretism of ourselves, those who are studying and teaching.

---

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 107, 110.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 115.



The prophets found that applying holiness in their contexts was not a popular task, and it is no more popular today. Modern prophets must resist the forces of domestication which come in a variety of forms. Five major forms of domestication are acceptance, distraction, disengagement, payment, and marginalizing or persecuting.

Acceptance is a very subtle form of domestication. It occurs when prophets are so much a product of their cultural environment that they accept the cultural categories without realizing that aspects of that culture are contrary to the biblical standard of holiness. Kean points out that in the Middle Ages, culture was considered to be equivalent to Christianity to the point that it was almost impossible to identify aspects of culture as non-Christian.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the best example of this in modern times is prosperity doctrine. The pursuit of wealth is so fundamental for Western culture that it is not surprising that there would be a movement legitimizing it. Kenneth Copeland views prosperity as the result of Jesus' death. He writes, "Prosperity is yours! It is not something you have to strive to work toward. *You Have A Title Deed to Prosperity*. Jesus bought and paid for your prosperity just like He bought and paid for your healing and your salvation."<sup>29</sup> Os Guinness decries a focus on God's abundance: "God's got it, I can have it, and by faith I'm going to get it."<sup>30</sup> These views are not true to Christian theology because they are self-centered and use God as a source for serving one's own self-

---

<sup>28</sup>Charles Kean, in Edward Cell (ed), *Religion and Contemporary Western Culture: Selected Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 85.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted by Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the World: Resisting the Seduction of False Values* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1987), 26.

<sup>30</sup>Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983).

interests. The focus is on control of God. Christianity, however, is essentially a religion of *submission* to God.

Prosperity doctrine arises not only from accommodation to Western culture. Ki Young Hong has identified Shamanistic forms in Korean churches. He seems to be referring to form when he writes, "I do not think that Shamanism is good or bad because it is a kind of tribal religion in Korea just as I do not think that Islam is good or bad."<sup>31</sup> Hong then suggests that Christianity should use Shamanistic forms to communicate the gospel. One of these "forms" which Korean churches have employed, however, is an emphasis on material blessings.<sup>32</sup> This is not really only a *form* of Shamanism, but is apparently part of the *content* of Shamanism. This content happens to be contrary to Christian theology, as noted above.

Ironically even the definition of what is prophetic is influenced by culture. Petersen has observed that in eighteenth century Germany, Old Testament prophets were understood to be romanticists who expressed the spirit of natural poetry. In the rationalist setting of nineteenth century England and Holland, the prophets were understood as sober rationalists who expressed strict moralisms. Then in the rebellious climate of the 1960s in the United States of America, the prophets were often understood as counter-cultural figures.<sup>33</sup> It was the culture of the interpreter which influenced the interpretation of Old Testament prophets. We have a tendency to mold even prophecy into our own image.

Blind acceptance of culture leads to a domestication of the prophetic voice because the culture can no longer be analyzed. It has

---

<sup>31</sup>Ki Young Hong, "Planting an Indigenous Nazarene Church in Korea as a Basis for Church Growth," *The Mediator* 1:1 (January, 1996), 46.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>33</sup>David L. Petersen (ed), *Prophecy in Israel* (Issues in Religion and Theology 10; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1.

already been accepted. Christians, however, should not be conformed to the world and its culture, but transformed with a new way of thinking (Rom 12:1-2).

A second form of the domestication of prophecy may be termed “distraction.” This form of domestication involves focusing on an aspect of prophecy which does not require repentance or analysis of culture. Two manifestations of this form of domestication are a focus on externals and a focus on the prediction element of prophecy. Holiness is central to the prophetic message and while holiness is primarily a matter of the heart, it is evidenced externally. An over-emphasis on external matters can, however, lead to legalism and a neglect of the more important internal nature of holiness. This seems to be a tendency in former Nazarene pastor W.L. King’s publication, *The Voice of the Nazarene*.<sup>34</sup> In one issue of this periodical a photograph of “real holiness folk” was included to provide evidence that such a phenomenon still exists. The evidence? The men in the photo did not wear neck ties.

This legalistic focus on externals was a major issue in the early days of Nazarene missions in the Philippines. Pioneer missionary Joseph Pitts led the Nazarenes in this kind of “purity.” Women were forbidden to cut their hair or to wear makeup or jewelry including wedding rings. So strong was the distraction of this issue that a schism resulted (as had already occurred in the United States with the formation of the Bible Missionary Church following the 1956 Nazarene General Assembly). Ironically, Pitts saw his approach as being prophetic against an accommodation of the holiness lifestyle to culture.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup>The Voice of the Nazarene, Inc., 6 Conklin Road, Washington, PA 15301, USA.

<sup>35</sup>Floyd T. Cunningham, *Holiness Abroad: Leadership in Nazarene Missions in Asia* (Taytay, Philippines: Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, n.d.), 350f.

Another form of distraction can be found in focusing on the prediction aspect of biblical prophecy. The current interest in prophecy is almost feverish, especially perhaps with the turning of a new millennium. But this very interest in prophecy can amount to a domestication of prophecy when the focus is exclusively on prediction at the expense of the prophetic call to repentance and avoidance of syncretism. The predictive element of Old Testament prophecy was always subordinate to the preaching element. Focusing on inconclusive speculation regarding future events is a distraction from the central message of the prophets: holiness.

A third form of domestication is disengagement. This might be characterized as “leaving things the way you found them.” Many people have left the church altogether because their “prophetic” analysis led to the conclusion that they can be better Christians outside the church (a contradiction). This is what Brueggemann calls “destructive autonomy.”<sup>36</sup> At times there seems to have been almost a movement of people claiming that God has called them out of the church. Keith Martinelli represents this viewpoint. He makes a scathing criticism of Christians whom he considers to be mostly “spoiled brats” with heretical theology, led mostly by so-called spiritual leaders who are really satan coming as an angel of light. Martinelli offers his reasons why he does not attend any church: after searching for five years he has not found a truly Christian church.<sup>37</sup> Martinelli has allowed his prophetic voice to be domesticated by disengaging from the church. He has heeded the instructions given to Amos: do not prophesy (Amos 2:12 ). When this situation is widespread, there is not much prophecy in the land (1 Sam 3:1).

The promise of payment, power, or position can be a domesticating influence upon the prophetic voice. A prophet is tempted to think

---

<sup>36</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 147.

<sup>37</sup><http://www.GodsPeople.com/members/keith.htm> [no longer active].

twice when one of these elements is under threat. This is why the wild John the Baptist type of prophet is in a unique position to prophesy: he or she has nothing to lose—neither salary nor position. This type of domestication is evidenced in the following advice given to speakers on radio and television in New York City:

Subject matter should project love, joy, courage, hope, faith, trust in God, good will. Generally avoid condemnation, criticism, controversy. In a very real sense we are selling religion, the good news of the Gospel. Therefore admonitions and training of Christians on cross-bearing, forsaking all else, sacrifices, and service usually cause the average listener to turn the dial. . . . As apostles, can we not extend an invitation in effect: “Come and enjoy our privileges, meet good friends, see what God can do for you!”<sup>38</sup>

To this way of thinking, the danger of listeners “turning the dial” is of more importance than the danger of having nothing significant to say to them. Those who are in the business of “selling religion” have already sold out to domestication of the prophetic voice.

The fifth form of domesticating the prophets is marginalizing or persecution. The impact of a prophetic voice can be reduced simply by asserting that such a person is not really to be taken seriously. The prophetic analysis is said to be marginal or not “mainstream.” This form of domestication was attempted on Elijah when King Ahab labeled him “the troubler of Israel” (1 Kgs 18:17). Isaiah was also accused of conspiracy, but God reminded him not to call conspiracy what these people call conspiracy (Isa 8:12).

Persecution is also an attempt at domestication. Jesus pronounced a special blessing for those who suffer this fate: “God will bless you when others hate you and won’t have anything to do with you. God will bless you when people insult you and say cruel things about you, all because you are a follower of the Son of Man. Long

---

<sup>38</sup>McNeill, 78.

ago your own people did these same things to the prophets. So when this happens to you, be happy and jump for joy! You will have a great reward in heaven” (Luke 6:22f. CEV).

Jeremiah was repeatedly persecuted for his prophetic voice. These attempts to silence him played very heavily on his emotions. He was thrown in an empty cistern, plotted against (11-12), placed in stocks (19-20), and imprisoned (37-38). The king even burned his scroll (36). His emotional response to these injustices and to the apostasy of his people led to his current designation as “the weeping prophet.” Yet he stood firm in his resolve to speak the word of God. Indeed he tried to keep silent but he could not because God’s word was like a fire in his bones (20:9).

Marginalizing and persecution can be very effective in domesticating the prophetic voice. The message is very direct, strong, and personal and the prophet is tempted to succumb. Like all forces of domestication, however, it must be resisted.

The Old Testament prophets who stood firm, stand in stark contrast to those who gave in to the forces of domestication (the false prophets). The true prophets continued to preach their messages from God even when it cost them all popularity and sometimes their lives. The modern prophet must do the same. Many of these forces of domestication are very subtle and so it is necessary for prophets to be careful students of the Word and of culture. Once forces of domestication are recognized, courage must be “screwed to the sticking point” to resist these forces and to act and speak in prayerful obedience to God.

#### **IV. Prophetic Vision in Contemporary Ministry**

The content of the biblical prophetic vision is holiness. This relational category must also be the foundation of the prophetic vision in contemporary ministry. In the pastoral setting, the minister must be aware of the common need to earn the right to be prophetic.

While conscious of this, Wesleyan prophets would do well to emphasize the categories of prevenient grace and the means of grace. A personal application of holiness must come first, however, for Wesleyan prophets.

A personal experience of God's sanctifying power would be the first necessity for applying the prophetic vision of holiness to the church. There is an emptiness in a proclamation of holiness that comes from a heart that has not yet fully surrendered to God. In this posture of submission, the key action is prayer. It is only in communion with God that we are able to reflect his holiness. The result of prayer is the power to perceive the world differently; to perceive it according to the reality of God's rule.<sup>39</sup> This new mode of perception amounts to a new way of thinking (Rom 12:2) and also a transformation of the Christian's social relationships with others.<sup>40</sup> It is a mode that involves a certain detachment from one's own culture (as well as the culture where ministry is taking place). It does not mean a retreat from the world and its people, or a rejection of contextualization, but a recognition that there is no Christian system in this world. Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world.

This new way of thinking will require discernment. Prophets must develop skills for analyzing culture and avail themselves of resources which attempt to do so. Tools such as Paul Borthwick's "values check" would be helpful in this regard. In this simple questionnaire Borthwick suggests an analysis of one's priorities for time and money, lifestyle, sense of needs, Christian involvement, and for activity which has a lasting impact.<sup>41</sup> One New England preacher suggested

---

<sup>39</sup>Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 35.

<sup>40</sup>Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1992), 19.

<sup>41</sup>Paul Borthwick, *A Mind for Missions: Ten Ways to Build Your World Vision* (Navpress, 1987), 141-42.

analyzing one's date book and check book log to see if behavior actually lines up with personal values.

There are no objective criteria for documenting a transformed mind. With the complexity of cultural involvement, reflection on one's own participation in the practices of the world will occasion the need for repentance. Since there is no possible or desirable escape from all the influences of the world, a continuing attitude of humility and repentance is appropriate for today's prophet.

In ministry application of the prophetic voice, it can be helpful to look for God's hand already at work in the culture (prevenient grace), and also to encourage the appropriation of God's grace through the means of grace. This will set the stage for developing a community of faith which is bilingual (speaks the language of the church and the culture). But often the prophetic voice must first earn the right to be prophetic.

Not every audience welcomes a message of change. This was usually the experience of the biblical prophets as well as of prophetic voices today. Lyle B. Pointer identifies three stages on the way to becoming a prophetic pastor: Priest, Pastor, Prophet.<sup>42</sup> The newly arrived pastor is pastor in name, but not in role. He or she has not yet earned the confidence of the people, and can function effectively only at the priestly level. That is, the new pastor will be permitted to perform ritual functions such as weddings, funerals, baby dedications, baptisms, prayers, and preaching. If these functions are performed well, and a strong relationship is developing, the congregation may permit him/her to become their pastor. This move from priest to pastor is paved through personal (or perceived) relationships. These prove the pastor's love and gain the congregation's acceptance.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Lyle B. Pointer, "Pastor as Leader," in "Fashioning Leadership Authority for Mission Engagement." unpublished paper.

<sup>43</sup>Pointer, 4f. Cf. McNeill, 43.



To become an agent of change in the church, the pastor must move to the position of leader or prophet. This will allow his/her suggestions for change to be accepted and implemented. It is only after a sufficient period of acceptance in the “pastor” role that this prophetic role can be attained.<sup>44</sup> This period allows relationships and trust to develop further until the prophetic voice of the pastor is accepted and taken very seriously by the congregation.

Pointer gives two examples of prophetic activity: (1) a prophetic pastor will risk confrontation (in love) with the purpose of helping people break out of sinful ways into righteous living; (2) set sociological groupings will be challenged with the purpose of encouraging existing members to accept new people. Throughout such challenges to the *status quo*, the pastor’s continued effectiveness as prophet must be maintained through careful fostering of relationships and adequate evaluation of the climate of acceptance.<sup>45</sup> The pastor has had time to learn about and feel with his or her congregation.

There is a fine line between earning the right to be prophetic and succumbing to the forces of domestication. Motives and attitudes must be examined and the forces of domestication must be recognized. Prophets must have a thorough knowledge of their context: both the church and the culture.

The itinerant evangelist, in a sense, stands outside this need to earn the right to be prophetic. While the evangelist does not have the opportunity of building a long-term relationship with his or her audience, there is also less danger that prophetic preaching will be damaging to the relationship. Thus evangelists have a special place in the life of the church because they can speak prophetically with a greater boldness.

---

<sup>44</sup>Pointer, 6.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 7.

The prophetic voice in ministry must look for evidence of prevenient grace in the host culture. John Wesley considered every commendable human action or virtue to be possible only by the grace of God. This grace is, however, extended to all humanity even to those who have not experienced saving grace. Thus it is called prevenient grace (it comes before salvation). These virtues, by the grace of God, are present in every culture, although the knowledge of moral law is usually vague and “tangled in cultural diversity.” Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace, therefore, led him to rule out a distinction between “secular” and “sacred” forms of achieving God’s purposes.<sup>46</sup>

It is the task of the prophet to analyze culture and to identify areas where God is already at work, that is, where God’s prevenient grace is present. Thus God’s initiative can be built upon for furthering his kingdom, rather than trying to begin our own framework. This is closely related to contextualization. The prophetic voice must look for what is right about culture as well as what is contrary to Christian values. The prophetic work is not fundamentally negative, but points toward the positive result of holiness, and builds on the activity of God which is already present in the world.

McNeill makes a similar point when he distinguishes between destroying basic social forms and the appropriate prophetic judging of those forms by their human consequences. So, for example, the Old Testament prophets were not against monarchy, but against the degrading effects it produced on the people. Likewise, the prophets were not against private ownership but against the heartless accumulation of property (Isa 5:8).<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 84, 99, 245.

<sup>47</sup>McNeill, 35-39.

Ben Johnson applies his understanding of prevenient grace to personal evangelism. In his book, *Speaking of God*, he advocates a method of personal evangelism which begins by looking for an existing awareness of God in those outside the church. This involves identifying the activity of the Holy Spirit in their personal histories. He writes, "To help a person become conscious of Christ and to respond to that person is, after all, what evangelism is all about."<sup>48</sup>

Wesleyan prophets should also be familiar with the "means of grace" and would use these to help develop a counter-cultural sensitivity in those under their ministry. For Wesley these means of grace included those practiced by his Anglican church: fasting, prayer, Eucharist, baptism, and devotional readings. He introduced additional means of grace into Methodism: class meetings, love feasts, and special rules of holy living.<sup>49</sup> Even through these means, Wesley considered the Holy Spirit's presence to be immediately effective. They are the key to spiritual growth.

The Old Testament prophets spoke against empty ritualistic observance in worship. A sound appreciation for the means of grace can help to reduce this problem in contemporary churches. The modern prophet has an opportunity to help his or her people understand the significance of these means of grace for meaningful worship, spiritual growth, and purity from the influences of worldly culture.

The means of grace are counter-cultural in both form and content. They are counter-cultural in form because they involve submission, symbolized in acts such as kneeling; and they involve accountability in community. Both submission and community are not often valued by Western culture which values instead independ-

---

<sup>48</sup>Ben Campbell Johnson, *Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 100.

<sup>49</sup>Maddox, 192.

ence and autonomy. The means of grace are counter-cultural in content because they make ample use of the Bible which is a counter-cultural document; and because we sing about suffering and hope in a world that values comfort but lives in despair.

The counter-cultural form and content of the means of grace must be emphasized by the prophetic voice in ministry. They can be used to foster cultural discernment both in regard to the world, and in the church, and in one's own life. As Randy Maddox puts it, what is required is "a persistent deepening of our awareness of the deceptive motivations and prejudices remaining in our life, because co-operant healing entails some discernment of that which still needs to be healed."<sup>50</sup>

Finding God's prevenient grace at work in culture and appropriating the means of grace in counter-cultural ways amounts to two poles of a paradox: Christians are to be in the world but not of the world. They are also to be in the church and to draw strength and growth in holiness through this community. These two poles are developed by Brueggemann in terms of creating a bilingual community. The metaphor comes from the encounter of the Israelites with the Assyrian messengers during the siege of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was locked up tight and the conversation was conducted while the Israelites stood on the wall and shouted down to the Assyrians. There was an argument over which language to use in the negotiation: Hebrew or Aramaic (the language of the Assyrians). The community of faith knew the language of those outside the wall (Aramaic). They were willing to communicate. But they had their own language for exclusive use inside the wall (Hebrew).<sup>51</sup>

By way of application to contemporary ministry, the prophetic voice of the pastor must foster in the church a community which is

---

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>51</sup>Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 41-43. Cf. 2 Kgs 18-19.

bilingual. This community should speak the language of those in the world: it should know the culture and the categories and be able to connect; it should be able to see prevenient grace at work in the host culture. But the same community should have a different language inside the church. This is the language of holiness which understands what makes it different from the world and prevents acceptance of the values of the world (domestication). This is the language that is sung and heard and read and acted out in the means of grace. This is the language of prayer, worship, and ethical reflection.<sup>52</sup> The prophetic voice must call the church to speak this language in its pure form, without borrowing values from the host culture.

### **Conclusion: Prophetic Vision at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary**

The prophets of today are the pastors, preachers, evangelists, singers, writers, and teachers. Like Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah they are called to speak out about the accommodation to culture which they see in the church community which calls itself the people of God. Some have been domesticated and are preaching on “safe” topics. But others are as embarrassing as John the Baptist ever was. Even their diet is different from what the advertisers would prescribe. They are agents for change as spokespeople of God. They are champions of justice and of faithfulness to God. They have repented for their own involvement in the structures of injustice. They live in daily repentance for their own involvement when there is no obvious way to abstain from the complex structures of injustice.<sup>53</sup> They focus on their divine commission and on storing up treasures in heaven. They will not be domesticated.

---

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>53</sup>Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 112, “No prophet has ever borne an unconflicted message, even until Jesus (cf. Mark 14:36).”

This is my vision for APNTS. The Old Testament department should lead the way in training students to criticize and dismantle the empty ritual and syncretism where they serve. It should train students to energize their people by learning to sing a doxology of praise to God which imagines a new kind of community. This community will be one which stands apart from the non-Christian aspects of the host culture while always seeking ways to reach the people in that culture. To do this APNTS will need professors who are willing to stand back from their own cultures and become aware of the ways in which those cultures have lured Christianity away from its vision of holiness; professors who will look into their own lives and realize that they are inextricably entwined with structures of injustice in their cultures; professors who will dare to model servanthood and engage in menial tasks. To be this kind of school, APNTS must take a stand against the forces of culture which would compromise its essential mission. APNTS will have to be willing to hear the prophetic voice even when it is directed against itself. APNTS must become a community where truth can be told.<sup>54</sup>

A firm grounding in biblical truth is essential for training APNTS graduates to be prophetic. The Old Testament prophets did not create something new, but they called the people to be faithful once again to their “first love.” The Word of God must be the starting point for contextualization. As Lingenfelter writes, “The key to the power of the gospel for transforming culture is an unwavering commitment to the Word of God.”<sup>55</sup> The center of the Old Testament prophetic vision was holiness. As a Wesleyan school, APNTS must prepare students adequately in biblical, theological, and experi-

---

<sup>54</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “Foundational Account of Israel’s Faith,” “Decisive Mutation of Israel’s Faith,” “Failed Account of Israel’s Faith,” Three lectures on the Psalms delivered at Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO, February 26-27, 1998.

<sup>55</sup>Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture*, 212.

ential holiness. Old Testament theology must deal with holiness in depth, and exegesis courses must not fail to take account of holiness in whatever biblical books are being studied.

A foundational understanding of holiness leads naturally then to the necessity for intentional reflection on culture as well as identifying accommodation to culture within the church. Missiological tools are needed for this task. Analysis of Old Testament culture in biblical studies courses will set the stage for the development of these skills in missiological courses. Because ethnocentrism and cultural blindness are so prevalent,<sup>56</sup> APNTS must be intentional about training its graduates to be “students of culture.”<sup>57</sup> The Old Testament prophets approached their calling in this way and so were able to apply holiness to their cultural settings.

A recent issue of *Holiness Today* is devoted to examples of how holiness applies in the whole variety of cultures. Franklin Cook’s editorial describes the bridge building that can result from such a common theological conviction.<sup>58</sup> If APNTS is to “bridge cultures for Christ” it must accomplish this task through a message of holiness which is made relevant but never compromised. Terry Read’s article suggests a metaphor for this task: “Bring the plant, not the soil.” In this model culturally relevant forms of theological education, evangelism methods, church construction, and of new projects and ministries must be developed.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Rick Kalal, “We’ve Got Trouble,” *Christian Education Journal* (Spring, 1999): 55, “while seminary graduates excelled in exegeting scripture, they lacked ability to exegete culture,” quoted by Joven Laroya, “Church Leaders: Theologians and Teachers,” *The Mediator* 2:1 (2000), 37.

<sup>58</sup>R. Franklin Cook, “To the Reader,” *Holiness Today* (August, 2000).

<sup>59</sup>Terry Read, “Bring the Plant, not the Soil,” *Holiness Today* (August, 2000), 36f.

APNTS prophets participating in this task must resist attempts of domestication. There must be an application of prophetic ministry on a personal level and on the level of ministry. Personal application is an important starting point (and continuing concern) because we have a tendency to see the speck in the eyes of others without noticing the log in our own eyes. Andrew Walls uses the metaphor of a saw to express this: “we draw the teeth of the Scriptures so that they will not bite *us*, while still hoping that they will bite other people.”<sup>60</sup>

Prophetic vision has a negative aspect in the analysis of what the church is doing wrong in its accommodation to culture. But a prophetic ministry is not essentially negative. As the biblical prophets were concerned to bring people back to a right relationship with God, so prophetic ministry today has a vision for holiness and a vision for helping people see how Christianity is radically counter-cultural, for helping them appreciate worship and the means of grace for their profoundly counter-cultural nature, and for leading them in worship (form and content) that continues to counter culture, resisting a domestication.

Effective Wesleyan theological education must produce prophetic graduates. As Brueggemann says, “the purpose of theological education is . . . *to reflect critically on the church’s call to obedient mission.*”<sup>61</sup> APNTS students will be challenged to renew this task in their varied contexts of ministry. APNTS cannot possibly give them all the content of their prophetic voice, but it must give them the tools and the imagination and the courage to be prophetic and to resist domestication. The Old Testament department has an important role in this task.

---

<sup>60</sup>Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 54.

<sup>61</sup>Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 100.



Where can we find a school that will stand firmly and without apology in the Wesleyan tradition and train its students to be prophetic? Where can we find professors who will take up this task and model the much needed prophetic voice and vision? What students will stand apart from the pressures of conformity and speak holiness to empty rituals of worship and to the injustice and numbness where they live? The call of God continues to go out: “Who will go for me and whom shall I send?” Here am I Lord, send me.