

“Will The Real Prophet Please Stand Up”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20 = prophets

Kathryn Schifferdecker on sabbatical leave in Ethiopia was teaching a Seminary class on the Hebrew prophets. Not unlike many other places in the world, in Ethiopia there are many who claim to be prophets. Ethiopian Christians are at pains to figure out whether they can be trusted or not ~ whether they actually speak for God.



In her class, one student, a middle aged, wise pastor, told of when he was young, a self-proclaimed prophet told him and a certain young woman that God wanted them to marry one another and if they didn't, they would die. “We looked at each other and we said, ‘No, we’re not going to marry.’ We married others and both of us are still alive.” This anecdote broke the class up.¹ Yet it also illustrates the common misconception that prophecy is all about prediction.



Among Christians in many places, the question of prophecy is a real and living question: who truly speaks for God? We here in the developed West think this somewhat unreal. Nevertheless, while we may use different language and our context may seem so different, yet this is a living question for us

as well: who speaks for God?

In the words of the old television show *To Tell The Truth*:

“Will the real prophet please stand up?”

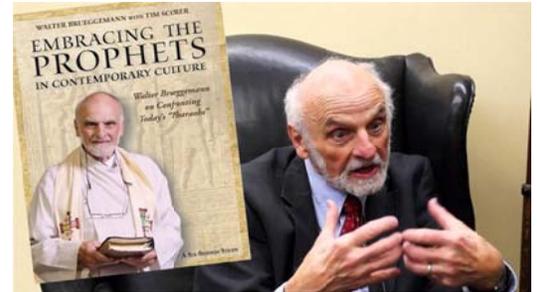
Are prophets the television preachers, the ones who make end-of-year predictions ~ predictions which are as easily broken as New Year's resolutions? Are they the “prosperity preachers, self-help gurus, radio and TV preachers, religious bloggers galore”² Do they speak for God? Many Christians think so. Who does speak for God?





You ask the person on the street in the US to define prophecy and most will say it means predicting the future. By that definition economic advisors, odds makers, political prognosticators and others of the so-called dismal sciences are suddenly prophets. However, prophets are not soothsayers, oracles, augurers, diviners, fortune-tellers. In the Biblical context these are expressly forbidden. In both the Biblical and modern contexts, prophets are emphatically not those who predict.

At my last congregation, a class on the Prophets was using a resource by Walter Brueggemann. In it he defines what a prophet actually is. By his definition, prophets are neither descended from other prophets nor have any wealth or authority, but rather prophets are truly those who have only the power of their own rhetoric. Prophets are those who speak with authority for God, who say in truth “Thus sayeth the LORD.”³



Bruggemann explains further that most Christians get this wrong: conservatives tend to think of the prophets as predictors while progressives tend to define them as social activists. Both are wrong, not incomplete but wrong. I’ve always thought of prophets as the moral conscience of the society, the patron saints of social ethicists. That’s not accurate either.

For Bruggemann, the prophet is not an ethicist but an artist, not theologian but poet, not predictor nor activist but an “imager” of a different world, God’s alternate reality, the world the way God intends it. Bruggemann says the prophets are “poetic imaginers who are truth tellers among us.”⁴

Who are the real prophets ~ today, here and among us? We have already ruled out the usual suspects, the big-name pastors, the self-proclaimed predictors, the hundreds who have twisted Biblical Prophecy to mean predicting a date for Jesus’ return and Armageddon. Every one of those dates has come and gone and nothing. Nor are they the Christian



leaders who have made an idol out of certitude and having all the answers. Nor the activists.

Who then are the real prophets, the “poetic imaginers” of God’s new world coming into this our broken world? Who is to be counted among the prophets today?

On the radio program *This American Life* many years ago⁵ Ira Glass had a segment on the theme “Kid’s say the darndest things.” In one story, Christmas is coming and a 4 year old asks her father “What’s Christmas?”



“That’s when we celebrate the birthday of Jesus.”

“Who is Jesus?”

Her curiosity led to children’s Bibles and talks about the teachings of Jesus. “He was a preacher long ago whose teachings have made people better.” The father struggled to explain the difficult ideas to a four-year-old. He deciphered “Do unto others” and so on.

Weeks later, her interest still strong and natural curiosity still unfettered, they drive by a church with a crucifix. “Daddy, who’s that?”

“Jesus.” Oh, he hadn’t told her that part of the story. “Jesus’ ideas were so true and so powerful, the Roman authorities had to have him killed.” She was satisfied with that.

Later Martin Luther King day came and she asked, “Who is that?”

“Well, he was a great preacher and leader of our country.”

“Did he preach about Jesus?”

“Yes, he did actually.”

“What did he teach.”

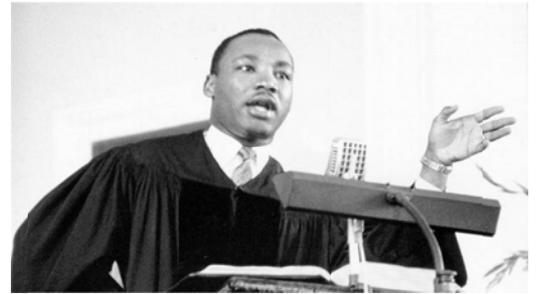
“That everybody no matter what they looked like should be treated the same.” She mulled that over for a while: “That’s the same thing Jesus said.”

“That’s right.” He had never thought of it that way.

“Daddy, did they kill him too?”

Sort of separates the true prophets from the false, doesn't it.

Was Martin Luther King a real prophet ~ the modern day equivalent to a Biblical prophet? He certainly was a "truth-teller." As for being a "poetic imaginer" of God's alternate reality, what could be a more perfect embodiment of that than his "*I have a dream*" speech?



Kathryn Schifferdecker says of true prophets:

- "The true prophet does not seek to be a prophet... It is something, instead, that they do because they cannot avoid God's call."

Recall that M. L. King tried several avenues of service before he finally submitted to God's call.

- "The true prophet seeks neither self-promotion nor riches."

Certainly applies to M. L. King.

- "The true prophet speaks God's word, not his or her own... The prophets are not advocates of the power of positive thinking. Their hope rests on God alone, not on their own power or worth."

Again, ditto.

- "The true prophet ([or] the false prophet) is known by his or her "fruit." ... Does the prophet (or preacher) lead others to be disciples of Jesus or of themselves? Does his or her preaching lead to repentance and transformation or to complacency and self-absorption?"⁶

All of these criteria fulfilled! Martin Luther King, Jr. is definitely a true prophet. Can you think of others?

Not many who claim to be prophets today fulfil the criteria. Yet who does? Mother Teresa? Gandhi? All the ones I've thought of immediately are dead. Who are the living prophets today?



One hint: While Catholic ministry is modelled on the role of priest, Protestant ministry is modelled on the role of prophet ~ a major difference. Prophet in fact is the ground structure

of all Protestant ministry. Then again as Reinhold Niebuhr has observed:

“I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people he or she has learned to love... I’m not surprised that most budding prophets are tamed in time to become harmless parish priests.”⁷

Yet as Protestants, we are every one of us called to ministry ourselves. We all of us are to be poetic imaginers who are truth tellers. More than mere ethicists ~ artists; more than theologians ~ poets; not prognosticators at all and not so much as activists, but “imagers” of a different world, God’s alternate reality.

In the words of the old television show *To Tell The Truth*: “Will the real “poetic imaginers and truth tellers” please stand up?”



¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15-20” at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2353

² *Ibid*

³ Walter Bruggemann, *Embracing the Prophets in Contemporary Culture*

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Ira Glass on National Public Radio, *This American Life*, 24 June 2001.

⁶ Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Op.Cit.*

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, p. 47.