

Speaking of Hope: Prophetic Preaching

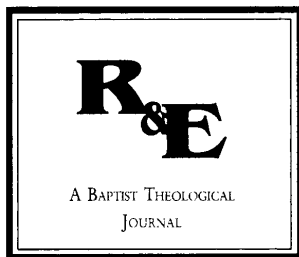
By Sangyil (Sam) Park*

ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the justice demand of caring for the poor, the weak, and the lost is the core biblical mandate and the prophetic role of preaching on the issue is the most urgent pastoral duty of all preachers in our time. In an effort to support this thesis, it provides the biblical background for this demand for justice in prophetic preaching and its hermeneutical, theological, and pastoral insight for an effective application to our context of rapid decline of church. Being aware of today's cultural reality in which preachers are often tempted to become a horn of the prosperity Gospel, this article argues that prophetic preaching as speaking of God's hope with pastoral love and compassion from an eschatological point of view is what will not only make Christian church authentic but also bring the pulpit back to life and change the future course of the church in America. This article concludes with some practical suggestions for prophetic preaching.

Several years ago I came across a minister who said to me, "Oh, you teach preaching at the seminary? I have been preaching more than forty years and I still am not sure what preaching is." As I think of that incident, two thoughts come to my mind. One is that he may have had in his mind the complex and mysterious nature of the event of preaching that cannot be

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“defined” by human words. Preaching is the proclamation of the word of God through our words, verbal and nonverbal. We bring who we are and most of what we have to this central moment of Sunday morning worship; it is what we “do” as preachers. As a work of science and art, creative and relevant sermons require diligent preparation of a serious preacher

no matter what the nature of the preaching context. Nonetheless, we preachers also know that preaching is not of us. It is of God.

The second possibility is that preaching was something that my minister friend did not quite understand even though he had spent a good part of his life as a preacher.

Sadly, that is true of many preachers, especially in our culture in which the office of preaching has to deal with the reality of church decline and compete with those TV evangelists who appear before our parishioners prior to our Sunday worship. I remember frustrating moments when I was appointed as a Methodist pastor to a parish right out of seminary many years ago. The church was one of those small struggling churches in a coal-mining community in Pennsylvania. Most of the members were old and I did many more funerals than baptisms during my short tenure there. As a young preacher, I wanted to change the course of the church as quickly as I could. I was very tempted to preach on biblical passages that would make the parishioners feel good. I was hoping that my sermons would attract more people in the community to the church. Out of desperation to grow in number, it is very easy for preachers to lose sight of what it means to be called to preach the good news of Jesus Christ in this troubled world.

I know of a congregation that just moved into the San Francisco Bay Area. They turned a corporate building into their church with a book-store, coffee shop, and a state-of-the art sound system in the sanctuary. The system cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The sermons preached in this church are mostly about individual salvation and material prosperity. The pastor once asked a friend of mine to come and preach in the church with one condition: “Please, no politics in your sermon.” By that, the pastor meant to ask him not to bring social issues to the pulpit, but to only tell his people what they wanted to hear. The congregation is growing in number, but most of its new members are not new to the church; they come from other churches in the surrounding neighborhood. Facing such a reality, I am concerned about the future of the church and question the authenticity of preaching in our time. There is certainly a biblical vision of human prosperity. God wants

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every human being to be well and to prosper. We have to know, however, that wealth cannot always be a sign of God's blessing since we see many occasions in which wealth is obtained by means of oppression and corruption.¹ The same is true of church growth. Everyone wants to see their church grow in numbers. After all, it is a biblical mandate that we go out into the world to make more disciples of Jesus Christ. Real church growth, however, can only take place when we

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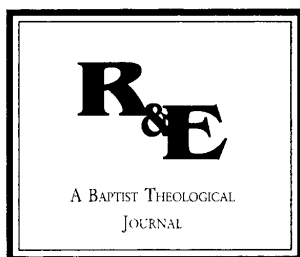
Real church growth . . . can only take place when we add new members to the whole body of Christ rather than drawing people from other congregations.

add new members to the whole body of Christ rather than drawing people from other congregations. More importantly, we cannot say that there is church growth unless we expand the kingdom of God on the earth by doing what Jesus Christ commanded us to do.

In this article, I wish to propose that the justice demand of caring for the poor, the weak, and the lost is the core biblical mandate; therefore, the prophetic role of preaching on the issue is the most urgent pastoral duty of all preachers in our time. In an effort to support this thesis, I will provide the biblical background for this demand for justice in prophetic preaching and its hermeneutical, theological, and pastoral insight for an effective application to our context of rapidly declining churches. As a part of this effort, I will also share the story of a local church where prophetic preaching is bringing life back to a declining membership.

Prophetic Preaching as Authentic Voice in the Scripture

Although the definition of preaching may be as varied and diverse as the expectations and experiences of the people who craft, listen to, and critique sermons, there is a common fundamental foundation—scripture. No matter how many books and journals we have in our study, they are only guides to the one Book. Since members of our congregations expect us to preach from it each Sunday, we preachers ought to humbly approach the biblical text and consider it an enormous privilege as well as responsibility to interpret the word of God for our congregants. Through our critical eyes and ears of hermeneutic suspicion, our job is to receive what God says through the text for our people and to deliver it to them, rather than try to create a message that they want to hear. In that respect, every message should be prophetic preaching. The sermons we preach must carry the message that God wants us to hear even if it is totally opposite to what we want to hear. Preaching is,



in Walter Brueggemann's words, an event through which our spiritual "numbness" is broken open and the view-point of God comes into our "consciousness" so that an alternative world of meaning takes shape in our thoughts, and actions.²

The conventional understanding of the word "prophetic" is usually drawn from "prophets" or "prophetesses" who are believed to foresee what will happen in the future. In the Old Testament, however, prophets and prophetesses were intermediaries whom God had called to be a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds. As God's mouthpieces, they not only told the people what they had heard from God, but they also risked their lives so that the words of God could be heard among the people in times of crisis — both on personal and national levels. However unpopular those preachers and their sermons may have been, they were understood to be "moral and ethical innovators who brought Israelite religion to a higher level of development than it had previously achieved."³

The God of the Old Testament expected the Israelites to act in a certain way. One of the most important teachings was to love and worship God; that was the title of the first sermon the people of Israel heard from Moses when they arrived at Mt. Sinai after escaping from Egyptian slavery. It was also the last sermon they heard from Moses at Mt. Nebo when they were about to enter the Promised Land. But such sermons were always concluded by another important stipulation: love of neighbors, especially orphans, widows, and aliens. Love for God without love for people is a lie (Exod 22:21-23; Deut 10:13-20; 24:19-22). Worshiping God without listening and attending to the cries of God's people in our neighborhood and beyond will be rancor as the prophet Amos says:

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Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:23-24).

In the biblical text, the word "righteousness," which often appears in parallel constructions with the word "justice," means the state of being in the right: right relationship with God and right relationship with people. Justice and righteousness are interrelated and come from a biblical concept given by God's grace. According to Rom 3:21-24, "the righteousness of God has been manifested . . . for all who believe . . . they are justified by his grace."⁴ This

means that without justice, which means caring for the poor, the weak, and the lost, no one will have a right relationship with God or with other human beings. Every human being deserves to live with dignity. It is everyone's responsibility to take care of the disfranchised.

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In his blog, Jonathan Kligler, a Rabbi from Woodstock, NY, reminds us of God's impartial love and demand for just treatment of strangers when he talks about the cry of Hagar in Gen 21:16-17. Kligler points out that since the Torah was written without vowels, the name Hagar may also be read *ha-ger*, the stranger or foreigner. He adds, "Hagar is now no longer merely an individual character, she is the first appearance of perhaps the key archetype of the Torah: the stranger." Then he makes this stunning point:

When Cain kills his brother Abel, and then asks defiantly 'Am I my brother's keeper?' his question resounds to this day. But for me what raises the Torah to the sublime is that it is not satisfied with the imperative of caring for one's kin. The Torah insists that the well being of the stranger is our responsibility, too.⁵

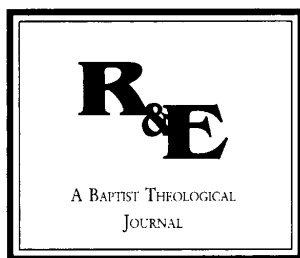
God's mandate for such an inclusive love runs through many parts of the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah reminds his people that sharing food with the hungry and providing the poor wanderer with shelter is a way for them to see the glory of God (Isa 58:6-7). Jeremiah finds his people guilty for not pleading the case of the fatherless and not defending the rights of the poor (Jer 5:28). Ezekiel declares that the sin of Sodom was "they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49). Micah says God requires his people to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God" (Mic 6:8).

The psalmists recognize their own inherent weaknesses, as aliens on the earth, and ask God to show them the commandments so that they may follow the way of righteousness (Ps 119:19); they beg God to answer their prayers and to hear their cries, for, they say, 'I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were' (Ps 39:12).

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Keith Russell points out that the image of Christian community revealed in the gospel of Matthew is "households of justice." In Matt 12:46-50, someone tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are trying to speak to him and Jesus says:



"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Russell argues that Christian communities "formed in allegiance to the power of Jesus are based exclusively on whether a person does the will of God" rather than favoring "race, blood, status, or wealth."⁶ In Luke's gospel, Russell sees that "the church is to be a sign of God's reign and not a sign of the Roman Empire."⁷ Under the harsh reality of Rome's military occupation of and its socio-economically stratified culture, Russell states, "the world then, as now, favored the rich, the powerful, and the influential."⁸ Jesus' inaugural speech in Luke 4:14-19 challenged the Christian community to be different; followers of Christ "must not compromise their values to adjust or adapt to the values of the culture."⁹ Reminding that Luke's Jesus calls into question the prevailing values of prosperity and success of the dominating culture, Russell says:

To honor the kingdom of God requires that the households of faith have room for slaves, women, children, widows, and any others who are on the boundary of acceptability in the empire.¹⁰

The New Testament Epistles are not silent on the issue of justice. Paul says, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Rom 12:20). James says that the true sign of religion lies in the act of looking after orphans and widows in their distress and that faith that does not produce such deeds is dead and useless" (Jas 1:27; 2:16-17). First John says one's compassion for the needy shows that he or she has the love of God (1 John 3:17-18).

In his book *Where Have All the Prophets Gone*, Marvin McMickle laments that prophetic preaching in has declined in the last decades.¹¹ One of the reasons for this reality is a focus on prosperity and personal enrichment themes; McMickle says that text selection is not the issue but that the courage, urgency, and pathos of preachers are missing in our pulpits.

True enough, biblical texts taken from the prophetic corpus are often employed in weekly sermons, but the power and the pathos are not heard or felt. Isaiah and Micah are used primarily to demonstrate that the birth of Jesus was foretold several hundred years earlier. Malachi is seldom preached except in an occasional sermon on tithing

and the promise (3:10) that God will open the windows of heaven. . . . The fiery words of the prophets, however, go unspoken in most pulpits across America.¹³

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Prophetic Preaching as Hermeneutical Task

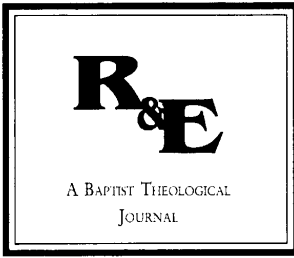
Authentic biblical preaching does not consist of citing many passages from here and there in scripture; it comes from a critical reading of the text(s) from both a historical and literary context. This is important because each biblical passage carries its own world of meaning, and has its own historical context. Using texts without due hermeneutical

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process for purposes such as “proof texting” or advancing one’s own agenda, good or bad, will never do justice to Scripture. Prophetic preaching is possible only when preachers seek to communicate the will of God delineated in the text and not to promote their own agendas.

Of course, preaching has to meet the needs of a congregation; sermon topics and themes should always arise out of the local context. Every passionate pastor knows that people sitting in the pew bring much to their worship on Sundays. Among them are families who lost their jobs, people whose mortgage payments are several months behind, people who are trying to make ends meet, and others who are desperately seeking a way out of their troubled lives. To people struggling with difficult circumstances, every word that comes out of the preacher’s mouth counts. This observation does not mean, however, that pastors need to use or abuse the text to the address these hurts and questions. Rather, preachers need to ponder the texts and listen to what God wants to communicate. In that respect, Karl Barth’s advice to “take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both but interpret newspapers from your Bible”¹⁴ can never be a cliché. Through the hermeneutical process, the preacher can first what God wants her to see and then show it to her listeners.

As preachers we all believe that the sermons we preach convey the words of God to our congregants; but what do we mean when we say ‘the words of God’? What makes our words ‘the words of God’?¹⁵ As a way of answering this question, I would point to Heb 4:12 that says: “The word of God is sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.” What about the word of God makes it sharper than a sword? Mark 10:17-31 relates the story of a rich man who comes to Jesus asking a huge theological question, “Teacher, what should I do to have eternal



life?" Jesus says to him, "You know what the Bible says: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" Hearing all this, this young man does not think a second and says, "Teacher, I did all." Jesus looks at him and says, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor. Then come, follow me." The text says that this man was

shocked and went away grieving. For the rich man, what he had just heard from Jesus was like a sword that pierced through his conscience.

John 8:1-11 reports that a group of people bring a woman to Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery." What would you do? Jesus says, "If any one of you is without sin, let him throw a stone at her." Hearing this, the text says, everyone went away ashamed. It was a moment of spiritual surgery for those whose hearts were hardened. The word was a sharp sword.

A recent Discovery Channel documentary highlighted a Japanese family that has been making sushi knives for many generations; the featured family member puts his sweat and soul into forming a piece of metal meticulously every day. After the entire process is complete, the commentator shows his art work; the blade is dazzling! Now, they take the knife to a sushi restaurant to see how it works. I could not believe my eyes—the knife was so sharp that the sushi man was able to make slices of fish look like sheets of paper. The sushi chef said that he had to wash the blade each and every time he cut a slice; otherwise, the blade would rust.

What makes our words the words of God, which are sharper than a sword, so that our hearers are shocked, grieved, joyful, or even transformed in their hearts, minds, and lives? Simply raising one's voice or citing texts from here and there will only make sermons dull. Sharp sermons need new insights to break the spiritual numbness of this age. Good sermons need the same diligence, meticulous skills, and artistic craftsmanship required to fashion a good sushi knife requires.

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Prophetic Preaching as Eschatological Activity

Once preachers have new insights through the hermeneutical process, they must present these insights in ways that cause their listeners to appropriate the messages in their own lives. Prophetic preaching aims to help our listeners see and follow the big picture for humanity that God has

in mind. It is a theological invitation not only to reorient to the vision but also to move to a position in accordance with the will of God. When the Israelites were stuck between Pharaoh's cavalry and the waves of the Red Sea, they whined, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?" In answer, God told Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move on!" (Exod 14:11, 15). While humans are afraid of leaving their comfort zones and like to turn back when faced with challenges, God wants us to move forward into what God has prepared for us.

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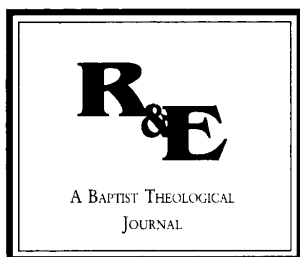
I am aware, however, of the difficult reality of our contemporary preaching context. About ten years ago, I was serving a congregation in the Bay Area of California. A woman started attending our Sunday worship services with her elderly mother and told me how appreciative she was of my sermons. The two of them even joined us for our summer outdoor retreat. There, she told me how much God had blessed her family in the housing

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market, doubling the price of their house for them. A few weeks later, the lectionary texts included a strong prophetic message that challenged our materialistic way of life as followers of Jesus Christ. Since that sermon the woman has never returned. No wonder many preachers across denominations hesitate to preach on texts that challenge the "it's all about me" mentality of many

congregants in this age of church decline.

We preachers, however, must not be afraid to speak the truth by saying, "Thus says the Lord" as many Old Testament prophets did. A prophetic sermon is not about God's anger; rather, it is about God's love for the world and the potential for delivering humanity from self-destruction. Humans seek their own pleasure and become content once they have what they desire. But God cannot be satisfied until the whole world is cared for. In our current culture, individuals believe that their right to pursue happiness gives them permission to live for their own sake, rather than for the sake of society. This mindset depends on the idea that the pursuit of one's self-interest is the highest moral purpose. Yet, such individualistic idealism has brought to the world -the reality of injustice in every corner of human society. The poor become poorer as the rich become richer. The kingdom of God presented in scripture, however, is a world where the reign of God is a reality not just to the poor, but to everyone including the rich; all God's people are welcome into a new relationship with God.



The story of the unjust manager in Luke 16 shows not only to what degree human beings are self-centered but also how they can be transformed when they realize that their eschatological time is approaching. The manager worked under a rich man and squandered the owner's possessions. Nevertheless, the bigger problem seems to be with the owner, not the manager. The manager only

implemented his boss's order to oppress the poor. When the manager heard that his job would be taken away, he tried to undo some of the wrongs he had done. This text shows us that once one person, the manager, had the courage to do what was just and right—distributing the wealth of the rich owner who had accumulated his wealth through abusive power—he and all the people around him enjoyed the benefits of his action. Certainly, the rich owner understood himself to be one of the beneficiaries as he later commended the manager for what he did.¹⁶ This story portrays a vision of God's Kingdom that is inclusive and invitational to all people.

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 presents a similar eschatological vision. Both the rich and the poor begin a new relationship with God as they enter into the reign of God brought about by the presence of Jesus. These and other biblical stories bring to mind one of my childhood memories. Just like any six to seven-year-old would, my friends and I played outside almost all afternoon. In those days, no one in the village had a TV or any of the electronic gadgets children enjoy today. We were happy playing with toys made out of clay or wood pieces. One day my mother came with others mothers calling our names and saying it was time to go home. The moment we heard our names, I remember, we did not even look back; we ran toward our mothers,

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leaving behind all the toys we had been playing with. The eschatological voice we hear from the scripture urges us to think of who we are as humans and what our view of wealth should be. In Matt 25:34-40, Jesus says:

I was a stranger, and you invited me in; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink? 'And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you? 'When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' "The king will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.'

Prophetic Preaching as Pastoral Activity

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Although caring about the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked is an important element of prophetic preaching, that does not necessarily mean we should point our fingers only at the wealthy and powerful. Rather, as prophetic preachers, we must raise our prophetic voices against the self-centeredness of all people, including ourselves. No one is immune to this divine mandate. As Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "The prophet himself stands under the judgment which he preaches. If he does not know that, he is a false prophet."¹⁷ God not only calls all preachers to this mission but also holds them responsible for it. The purpose of prophetic preaching is for all God's people to see the big picture of God's vision so that everyone can lay aside their personal agendas and work for the common goal of God's Kingdom in this world.

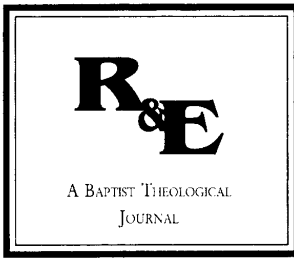
Leaders of congregations want their churches to grow in number and spirit. I know how frustrating it is to see no sign of church growth. We cannot deny that preaching plays a major role in church growth in many churches. I, however, also believe that the role of preacher is much broader than growing

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the number of people who come and worship in the four walls of our church buildings. We should not forget that the role of the preacher is to grow the kingdom of God; our churches are but small agents in that kingdom. This means that we need to help our people see the bigger picture of God's vision so that they

can work together with others, beyond their creeds and denominations, to materialize such a vision of God.

I recall a sermon illustration that I once read. A pastor preached about hell in his sermon every single Sunday. After hearing the same topic Sunday after Sunday, the congregation fired him. They hired another preacher, who surprisingly did the same thing. This time, however, the members of the congregation really loved him dearly. Why? Because the second preacher always wept for the people while he talked about hell. I think this story tells us about the importance of compassion for one's listeners. When it comes to prophetic preaching, I think the message is the same—the way we preach matters. No matter how sharp and strong the content of the sermon, we must deliver the message in a loving and caring fashion. As a servant privileged to interpret the Word for her community, the preacher should show her own love of God along with her love for the people to whom she is preaching. The preacher must deliver the prophetic message with a keen



sense of human weakness and God's unfailing love. In this respect, prophetic preaching does not conflict with pastoral concerns; it is the most pastoral of activities.¹⁸

A. Katherine Grieb maintains that, for Paul, there is an inextricable link between prophecy and pastoral care. In 1 Cor 14:6 and 19, Paul describes himself as both prophet and pastor to the community. Grieb says that this is an example that differs from the traditional dichotomy—that being “pastoral” is “non-confrontational caregiving” within the frame-work of “maintaining the status quo” and being “prophetic” is being “lone rangers” who are “non-compromising.”¹⁹ Such a leadership model of the pastor-prophet is important for preachers in today's world. Although it is not always easy for pastors to become prophets to the congregants who pay their salaries, the preacher's role as a visionary leader in the community can bear fruit as his and her sermons take root in a variety of prophetic ministries in the community throughout the week.

Besides my role as a professor, I also serve a small congregation as a part-time pastor near my seminary. We do not have many people and our resources are very limited, but our church is doing its best to provide services to the community—especially those who are in need. The prophetic voice of God's radical love for all people and our responsibility to take care of widows, orphans, and aliens are the foci of my preaching and of our outreach ministries in the community. Several months ago, a woman came to our church; she was Eastern Orthodox, already 5 months pregnant, and had fled from her Muslim Uzbekistani husband seeking asylum. Since she did not have a family here our church become her family; our love and compassion for her was big enough to overcome the language barrier between us. A spirit of care and warmth developed among our fellowship and has turned our church around, due, I suggest, to my prophetic preaching and the congregation's positive response to serving our neighbors in need. The growth has been vivid in the membership of the congregation as well as the number of people we are serving in the community.

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Prophetic preaching as a language event can be more effective when it uses poetic language. As Augustinian styles of preaching—teaching, delighting, and moving—indicate, preachers have to instruct, please, and persuade their listeners with stories and images using imagination. Stirring people's emotions is important to move their hearts. Without the stirring of

emotion and heart, it is hard for listeners to carry the message into their daily lives. Brueggemann says, "*prophetic* must be *imaginative* because it is urgently out beyond the ordinary and the reasonable."²⁰ The language of preaching, often due to its stereotypical and dogmatic nature, can be too dull to break open the layers of complacency. The use of an imaginative narrative tool such as a metaphor, however, can help listeners to see reality in a new way. Metaphors help our sermons to have, in Crossan's words, "a depth of speech that is otherwise impossible."²¹ Metaphors confuse us and obfuscate the old world of meaning in our consciousness, thereby dismantling old meanings and creating new ones out of "God's imagination."²²

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The Latin word, *salus* (for salvation), means "health," "safety," and "well-being." Given that the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions of human living are all interconnected, we need to take many factors into consideration when dealing with the concern of human well-being. In addition, one's well-being cannot be discussed apart from the complex dynamics of relationships between individuals and communities.

If the Gospel we preach is for the salvation of humanity, it is essential that our preaching tap into all dimensions of human living, both individual and communal.

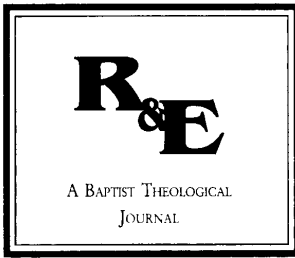
If the Gospel we preach is for the salvation of humanity, it is essential that our preaching tap into all dimensions of human living, both individual and communal. In this respect, God's mandate to take care of orphans, widows, and aliens reminds us of the importance of prophetic preaching. The role of prophetic preaching can never be over

emphasized in this world.

Preaching in this twenty-first-century global environment requires extra hermeneutical and pastoral sensitivity. Decades ago, people did not have internet access to information around the world. As I work on my sermon for this upcoming Sunday, I can constantly access updates on the situation of Libya's revolt against the dictatorship of the regime. Although I have never been to that part of the world and have no personal connections with people there, the gruesome pictures of the wounded protestors, the result of a mass shooting by the citizens' own military, will make an impact on my personal life, my process of exegesis, and sermon delivery in my church in California.

Final Remarks: Prophetic Preaching as Hope

We live in a challenging time. As I write this article, I hear from my region of the United Methodist Church that they will close more than a dozen



churches this year and will reduce the number of preachers drastically within the next few years. Such is likely true for many other denominations in America. This means that the influence of the Christian pulpit will shrink as the Church continues to shrink. As churches face this reality, preachers must compete not

only with the secular gospels of the world but also with prosperity gospels within the church. Thus, some may claim that prophetic preaching is a lost cause, a lost vocation.

... preachers must compete not only with the secular gospels of the world but also with prosperity gospels within the church.

I believe, however, that prophetic preaching will appeal to many, not only those in the church but those outside the church; it will bring the pulpit back to life and change the future course of the church in America. Church is of God and so too is preaching. We preachers speak, as Barth said, only because God speaks. Preaching needs to be understood in the overall context of what God says and does. Even though some people may think they are done with church in this culture, I believe that God is not done yet with us. God not only still speaks but also does work among us. God continues to call us to be partners of that work. As long as we have faith, we have every reason to retain hope. To close this article, I would like to make the following suggestive summary.

First, prophetic preaching is a core biblical mandate. The just cause of taking care of the weak, poor, and lost is the authentic expression of God's love for humanity that permeates the Old and New Testaments. Thus, all preaching should be prophetic in the way it conveys this overarching biblical message to pulpits across America.

Secondly, given the central location of Christian worship and life for so many people, the recovery of preaching is crucial to the church for its revitalization. As preachers grapple with ways to reverse the declining reality of the church, many look to other means—like prosperity theologies. Every personal agenda, though, has to come under the mandate of listening to what God says to us. We must speak what God wants us to speak, not anything else. Prophetic preaching that humbly carries a genuine message of God will sustain the church.

... the recovery of preaching is crucial to the church for its revitalization.

Thirdly, prophetic preaching is a hermeneutical activity that requires every preacher to diligently study the biblical text and artistically craft creative sermons to provide relevant messages to today's audience. Imaginative

sermons break open people's hearts and transform their lives.

Fourthly, prophetic preaching is about God's eschatological hope—the hope of the kingdom of God for all. We are all vulnerable under the judgment of God. The biblical image of the kingdom of God is inclusive and invitational to all people. Prophetic preaching aims to help us see the big picture of God's vision so that everyone, poor or rich, can lay aside their personal agendas and work for the common goal of God's kingdom in this world.

Fifthly, prophetic preaching is one of the most urgent pastoral duties of preachers in our time. As pastor-prophet, the preacher needs to see where his or her people are and carry out the prophetic role in humility and love in the pulpit. As a way of bring holistic well-being to all of humanity, prophetic sermons ought to take root in a variety of ministries in the local parish. God desires the expansion of the kingdom of God on this earth. The church is the agent for this great mission and it grows only when we reach out to the people in our communities. We must work together with people beyond the walls of church buildings and across creedal boundaries.

PROPHETIC
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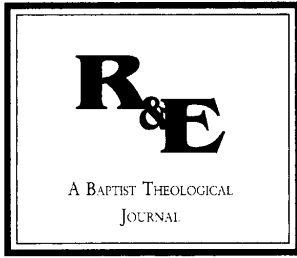
¹ See "A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel" From the Africa Chapter - Lausanne Theology Working Group. <http://www.lausanne.org/documents/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel.html>. Accessed on March 22, 2011.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 27, 117.

³ *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 826. Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 300-302.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 871.

⁵ Jonathan Kligler, "Hagar the Stranger: 1st Day of Rosh Hashanah." Woodstock Jewish Congregation- Kehillat Lev Shalem. <http://www.wjcshul.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=78877>. Accessed on 1/31/2011.



⁶ Keith Russell, *In Search of Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute Publication, 1994), 25-26.

⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All The Prophets Gone* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).

¹³ Ibid., 6-10.

¹⁴ According to the Barth Center at Princeton Theological Seminary, this is a correct statement that Barth made; it is published in the *Time Magazine* of May 31, 1963. The Center confirms that it "has thus not been able to discover an authoritative source for the popular words, "read the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other," which people believe Barth had said. <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/faq/quotes.aspx?menu=296&subText=468>. Accessed on February, 18, 2011.

¹⁵ This portion of the article is also posted under the title of "Sharper Than a Sword?" on the blog of American Baptist Seminary of the West. <http://absw.wordpress.com/2009/12/23/sharper-than-a-sword/>. Accessed on February, 18, 2011.

¹⁶ Sangyil Park, *Korean Preaching, Han, and Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 156.

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Test of True Prophecy." *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 110.

¹⁸ William Willimon & Richard Lischer eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 388.

¹⁹ A. Katherine Grieb, "Preaching Paul Prophetically," *Preaching As Prophetic Calling*, eds. Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 128-29.

²⁰ Brueggemann, xv.

²¹ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992), 10.

²² Brueggemann, xx.



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