

## Prophetic Leadership: What Is It And Does It Matter?

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### Abstract

*As I seek to be faithful to my ministerial calling, I address this question: What might it mean to offer prophetic leadership? An incident that made Scotland's national news catalysed my reflection prompting three questions. (1) What does it mean to be prophetic? I show that it means to paint a picture of God's alternative reality. (2) How important is prophetic ministry? I demonstrate that it is part of the church's nature and vital in a post-Christendom world. (3) Is being prophetic the same as being a prophetic leader? I argue that they are related but different. Prophetic leadership is a blend of being prophetic and being a leader.*

### Introduction

During the British general election campaign in November 2019, one of my ministerial colleagues,<sup>1</sup> Rev. Richard Cameron, confronted Jeremy Corbyn. The incident raised questions for me concerning the content and style of prophetic leadership. At the time, Corbyn was the leader of the Labour Party, the leader of the Opposition, and one of the two people most likely to become British Prime Minister. Cameron was a comparatively unknown figure.<sup>2</sup> This is how the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) reported what happened.

As Mr. Corbyn was telling reporters about a scarf given to him by the *Who Cares? Scotland* charity,

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<sup>1</sup> I have been a parish minister in the Church of Scotland since 1991.

<sup>2</sup> That changed with this incident. It turned out he had been active on social media. Some of his previous posts resulted in lodging of complaints, and he has been suspended by the church and an investigation is underway.

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Rev. Cameron shouted that he thought the Labour leader would be wearing an “Islamic jihad scarf.” He continued, “Do you think the man that’s going to be prime minister of this country should be a terrorist sympathiser, Mr. Corbyn?” he added. “Who’s going to be the first terrorist invited to the House of Commons when you’re prime minister?”<sup>3</sup>

This incident left me uneasy. The content could be interpreted as Islamophobic, but was he speaking the truth? Were his statements prophetic? Also, the style was too confrontational for my liking. Does being prophetic equal taking a confrontational approach?

My first reaction was to write Cameron off as an embarrassment. Another part of me, however, suspected that my unease might have been triggered by guilt. This part wondered whether my discomfort partly arose from the unmasking of my cowardice. I could never imagine myself doing something like this. Was I uncomfortable because my reluctance to step out of my comfort zone had been exposed? Was part of my calling to confront people who have power, risking criticism and rejection in the process?

As I pondered this incident, I realised that it had the potential to act as a catalyst in my continuing quest to be faithful to my calling. Rather than attempting to form a conclusion about Cameron’s action, I decided to use it as a prompt for reflection. The fact that I remain ambivalent about what happened illustrates the complexity of both the prophetic role and of corporate discernment.

At much the same time, I was invited to speak at a forthcoming minister’s conference. The organiser had decided to use the story of Elijah as a lens to look at leadership. I was assigned 1 Kings 17, which begins “Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at

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<sup>3</sup> BBC News, Church Minister Who Heckled Corbyn Suspended Over Tweets (Nov. 15, 2019), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-50433951> (Accessed June 12, 2020).

my word” (1 Kings 17:1).<sup>4</sup> I was immediately struck by certain similarities. Elijah, like Rev. Richard Cameron, was a recognised religious leader. Ahab, like Jeremy Corbyn, was a significant political figure. Both Elijah and Cameron publicly confronted the politician of the day and accused them of falling short of the standard expected of them. Both made others feel uncomfortable. Both presented themselves as speaking truth to power.

Cameron’s encounter with Corbyn, together with Elijah’s confrontation with Ahab, prompted me to consider to what extent my calling as a minister included being a prophetic leader. Did I need to be more willing to stick my head above the parapet and speak truth to power? If so, I wondered, was this an accurate depiction of the prophetic role in the Bible, and how could I be sure I was indeed speaking truth? As I wrestled with these matters and their impact on my calling, they crystallised into the following three main questions, which I explore in this essay.

First, what does it mean to be prophetic? It is not uncommon to hear some utterance or action being described as “prophetic.” The assumption of a shared understanding about what this means dissolves under scrutiny. One definition is that being prophetic involves speaking truth to power. What exactly is meant by this phrase? I am a Christian minister shaped by the Bible, so does this phrase do justice to what the Bible means by prophetic?

Second, how important is prophetic ministry? Leaving aside Cameron’s interaction with Corbyn, the manner of Elijah’s confrontation with Ahab can leave people feeling uneasy. Elijah, like many of the other biblical prophets, was an uncomfortable character. Should there be a place for this in the life of the church? If so, should it be regarded as permissible, desirable, or essential?

Third, are being prophetic and offering prophetic leadership different, or are the two essentially the same? If they are not the same, how do they differ, and in what ways might this difference be significant? Working through these questions proved fruitful, and I offer my conclusions in the hope that they will assist others as they wrestle with similar questions.

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<sup>4</sup> All scripture references NIV (2011).

## What Does It Mean to Be Prophetic?

This paper discusses two of the many definitions of what it means to be a prophet: first, from the Hebrew Scriptures, “speaking truth to power,” and second, from the New Testament, “a word from the Lord,” which is an immediate, authoritative revelation given by the Holy Spirit. My sense is that these phrases are commonly used in ways that reflect fairly shallow understandings of their meanings. Rather than being inaccurate, they fail to do justice to the depth that is found in Scripture’s use and understanding of the prophetic role.

### *Speaking Truth to Power*

The phrase Speaking Truth to Power was first used in “a charge given to Eighteenth Century Friends” (that is, a speech that assigns responsibility and provides encouragement to a group of Quakers) and was used as the title of a 1955 Quaker pamphlet.<sup>5</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures, Elijah is an example of, if not the pattern for, prophetic leadership. On the surface, his role is that of speaking truth to power. As noted already, the narrative begins with him confronting King Ahab in God’s name.

At first glance, speaking truth to power is a voice of protest. It draws attention to some pattern (for example, a rule, a practice, an attitude, or an assumption) in community or national life that is wrong. This wrong continues unchecked and unchanged within the group. This can be for different reasons, such as the following three.

First, this pattern of behaviour might benefit those with power, who are unable or unwilling to recognise the wrong it perpetuates. At the same time, those who suffer from it are too frightened or marginalised to stop it. In *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*, Deotis Roberts discusses how Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke out against anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, and Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke out against racial discrimination in the United States. Both were confronted by “collective evil in the political order” in which the church was implicated and “they challenged Christians

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<sup>5</sup> American Friends Service Committee, *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (Philadelphia, Penn: 1955), iv.

to be true to the Lord of the church and to unite against the evils in the social order.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, the pattern of behaviour may be so deeply embedded within the community that the majority of people are not disturbed by it. Walter Brueggemann, who has written widely on prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures, identifies “free-market consumerism and its required ally, unbridled militarism” as an example of “the unexamined, dominant ideology that encompasses everyone, liberal and conservative.”<sup>7</sup>

Third, this pattern might be recognised as less than ideal even by those who benefit, but it is so complex and widespread that the majority believe either that change is impossible or that the cost of change is too high. Climate change is an example of something that generates feelings of concern and powerlessness. *Saying Yes to Life* is theologian Ruth Valerio’s prophetic call to the church to recognise its potential to effect change. She states, “Together there is much we can—and indeed must—do.”<sup>8</sup>

Speaking truth to power calls out what is wrong. It names the wrong, spotlights wrongdoing, and demands change.

In 1978, Walter Brueggemann published what would become a seminal text, *The Prophetic Imagination*. In the preface to the revised edition (published 2001), he said that in the 1970’s prophetic ministry was generally understood as a “direct, confrontational encounter with established power.”<sup>9</sup> In his commentary on Jeremiah, he offers an example of this. “The prophetic tradition asserts what the established ideology does not want voiced. The purpose of Jeremiah is to present a counterview of reality, to say that which is most unwelcome to the ruling view of policy.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Valerio, *Saying Yes to Life* (London: SPCK, 2020), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 231. This quotation comes from a chapter titled “Truth Speaks to Power.”

Prophecy's function is that of criticism and finding fault.

In 2001, however, Brueggemann described this approach as "somewhat simplistic."<sup>11</sup> It is more accurate, he continued, to understand prophetic texts as acts of imagination that help to create an alternative reality and are not "necessarily confrontational."<sup>12</sup> By 2011, Brueggemann had refined this further. He said that the task of the prophets was "to reimagine the world as though the character of YHWH were a real and lively and engaged agent in the reality of the world."<sup>13</sup>

The role of the prophet is to both criticize and energize.<sup>14</sup> Frequently, speaking truth to power focuses on the former and neglects the latter. It calls attention to what is wrong. It is an uncomfortable voice of protest that accurately communicates God's concern in its demand that some practice should change. However, all too often it fails to offer an alternative. It might call for a different arrangement but is unable to describe what that might look like or to inspire people to make that a reality. It dismantles but fails to reconstruct. Richard Holloway, who was Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, exemplifies this. In his autobiography, he writes, "I was attracted to the prophetic voice of faith that spoke against structural or institutional sin."<sup>15</sup>

A closer examination of the concept of speaking truth to power and Elijah's confrontation with Ahab shows that Brueggemann's more nuanced understanding is consistent with them, rather than the one-sided concept that is commonly used.

The 1955 Quaker pamphlet *Speaking Truth to Power* describes the evil of violence, militarism, and warfare. It is clear, however, that this is not what prompted the writing and publication of the pamphlet. The intention of the authors is neither to name an evil nor to call out those who perpetrate it, but rather to describe an

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, xi.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic Leadership Engagement in Counter Imagination," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(1) (2011): 3.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Canongate, 2012), 150.

alternative and nurture a movement that will make this alternative a reality. They say that “Pacifism has been catalogued as the private witness of a small but useful minority ... Whether condemned or in a sense valued, pacifism has been considered irrelevant to the concrete problems of international relations.” In light of this, “we have tried to present an alternative and to set forth our reasons for believing that it offers far greater hope and involves no greater risk than our present military policy.”<sup>16</sup>

While it is true that the form of Elijah’s engagement with Ahab is that of speaking truth to power, its substance is something different. The issue at stake is the question: Who is God in Israel? Is it Yahweh or Baal? This choice is embedded in the first verse of the text in two ways: first, the name Elijah (a literal translation of the Hebrew is “the Lord is God”<sup>17</sup> or “My God is Yah[weh]”<sup>18</sup>), and second, in Elijah’s declaration, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives.” This question will be addressed through rain. In Canaanite religion, Baal had control over rainfall, and thus he could withhold or dispense fertility on the land and its people.<sup>19</sup> Elijah is articulating an alternative reality, namely, that Yahweh rather than Baal is God in Israel. It is Yahweh who is the giver of life.<sup>20</sup> Elijah’s words and actions demonstrate that this is the case.

On this basis, the confrontational dimension of speaking truth to power is accidental rather than fundamental. It is the means through which the alternative reality is demonstrated rather than the substance of it.

### *A Word From the Lord*

The Hebrew prophets are often identified with social justice. The Elijah narrative, however, demonstrates that this identification is too narrow. Elijah’s concern is covenant faithfulness. He said, “You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals” (1 Kings 18:18). Another prophet, Micah, offered the

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<sup>16</sup> American Friends Service Committee, v.

<sup>17</sup> Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 133.

<sup>18</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings* (Leicester, U.K.: IVP, 1993), 164.

<sup>19</sup> Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 and 2 Kings* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2014), 230.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *Readings in 1 Kings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 113.

clearest definition of covenant faithfulness. It is “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The prophetic articulation of an alternative reality has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The two dimensions are faithfulness to Yahweh and social justice.

Because social justice is less obviously the focus of prophecy in the New Testament,<sup>21</sup> initially it might appear that the New Testament presents a different understanding of prophecy from the one found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Equally, the early church was a minority community, so it had little scope for speaking truth to power. Closer examination, however, shows that prophecy in the New Testament has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Together these, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, articulate an alternative reality.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is the place in the New Testament where prophecy is most prominent. Most of his comments are part of the guidance he offers about corporate worship. Given the importance of corporate worship for Christians, it is understandable that this creates a lens through which prophecy in the New Testament is considered.

In the New Testament, prophecy is often understood as being “a word from the Lord,” that is, “a direct word from God for the situation at hand.”<sup>22</sup> Prophecy is an immediate, Holy Spirit-inspired revelation. This view is derived mainly from a reading of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. Prophecy in the New Testament, however, is not confined to these chapters, and the material they contain needs to be set against a wider context.

According to the *New International Theological Dictionary*, the basic meaning of propheteuo (to prophesy) is “to proclaim divine revelation.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Social justice is not absent. For example, Luke records Agabus predicting a famine, which prompted the disciples “to provide help for the brothers and sisters in Judea” (Acts 11:27–29).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 210.

<sup>23</sup> Moises Silva, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014), 4:167.



In the gospels, Jesus is clearly portrayed as a prophet. This is explicit in his preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. “He found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me’ ... ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:17–21). New Testament scholar Howard Marshall explains that Luke saw Jesus “not merely as a prophet but as the final prophet.”<sup>24</sup>

Luke Timothy Johnson in *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*<sup>25</sup> develops this idea. He contends that prophecy is the thread that holds Luke-Acts together. For him, prophecy involves “being inspired by the Holy Spirit, speaking God’s word, embodying God’s vision for humans, enacting that vision through signs and wonders, and bearing witness to God in the world.” He traces these features in the ministry of Jesus in Luke and that of the apostles in Acts. Johnson defines prophecy in a manner that is consistent with Silva’s lexical and Brueggemann’s theological definitions: “Prophets are human beings who speak to their fellow humans from the perspective of God and, by so speaking, enable others to envision a way of being more in conformity with God’s own vision for the world.”<sup>26</sup>

It is against this canvas that the particular material regarding worship in the Corinthian church should be interpreted. Prophecy was clearly part of the life of that church and featured regularly in its worship. The material in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 prompts two questions that are relevant for this discussion. First, In what way is prophecy different from teaching? and second, Is prophecy always a spontaneous and/or ecstatic experience?

Prophecy and teaching are similar in that both are intended to edify and build up the church. Prophecy is similar to speaking in tongues in that it can be “a message of knowledge” (1 Cor. 12:8) that comes from the Holy Spirit without conscious thought on the part of the person. However, unlike tongues, prophecy is always intelligible and does not require interpretation.

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<sup>24</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970), 128.

<sup>25</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, vi.

Wayne Grudem, whose Ph.D. looked at prophecy in 1 Corinthians, says, “If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in New Testament terms) a teaching. But if a message is a report of something God suddenly brings to mind, then it is a prophecy.”<sup>27</sup>

Sufficient ambiguity exists about what is recorded for commentators to reach different conclusions about how exactly this happened. For example, Gordon Fee says that prophecies are “spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, intelligible messages.”<sup>28</sup> This view understands that it is the characteristic of immediacy that distinguishes prophecy from teaching. It is a “charismatic, impulsive activity.”<sup>29</sup> Other commentators have a different understanding of prophecy in 1 Corinthians. For example, Paul Gardner believes that it is “unlikely (usually) to be entirely spontaneous.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the concern over whether or not prophecy is always spontaneous distracts rather than illuminates. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner assist when they say that prophecy “is not about the passing on of traditional teaching and ethics, but the communication of a divine message that is understood to be especially given as a response to and tailored to the special needs and issues of those gathered to hear it.”<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, Frank Thielman says, “Prompted by the Spirit” prophets “speak a particularly relevant message to an individual ... or the church” and those messages “seem to come at particularly critical moments.”<sup>32</sup> The task of prophets is to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches—to be its eyes and ears.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 120.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014), 660.

<sup>29</sup> Silva, 4:170.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2018), 537.

<sup>31</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 581.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010), 274.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present*, 2nd ed. (Guildford, U.K.: Eagle, 1995), 205.

This view is not concerned with the means by which the revelation arises. It can be an immediate insight or a dawning realization. It can come in an instant or as a result of reflection. It accepts that the Holy Spirit can and does give revelation in a variety of ways. The essence, as one of my colleagues stated, is “a prophet sees what others do not yet see and says what others are not yet saying.”<sup>34</sup> I see no reason, biblical or theological, why prophecy, either in the New Testament or in the church today, should be restricted to immediate, spontaneous revelations.

Based then on speaking truth to power in the Hebrew Scriptures and a word from the Lord in the New Testament, what does it mean to be a prophet? What is the prophetic role, exercised both by the church corporately, and by certain individuals within it?

The prophetic role criticizes and energizes as it paints a picture of an alternative reality. It imagines the world as God wants it to be and draws attention to those aspects that are not in accord with this. The prophetic role includes symbolic actions as well as words. More significantly, it also embodies<sup>35</sup> this reality. The church is called to be an embodiment of God’s alternative reality. It must be, to use Leslie Newbiggin’s now-famous phrase, “a hermeneutic of the gospel.”<sup>36</sup> All too frequently, the church fails to be this, which is why prophets must often first address the church before they can address the wider world.

### **How Important Is Prophetic Ministry?**

If a prophet is someone who “sees what others do not yet see and says what others are not yet saying,” then prophets will frequently be out of step with their community. A prophet will regularly disturb the consensus and question the status quo. Prophets inevitably are uncomfortable people and might often be viewed as irritants.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Neilson, email, May 8, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Chloe Lynch, “Prophetic Leadership: Making Present the Truth of Ecclesial Hope,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 18(1) (2019): 57.

<sup>36</sup> Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK, 1991), 227.

Most ministers within the Church of Scotland are sole-pastors. They preach and lead worship in most churches every Sunday and moderate (that is, preside) over the Session (the congregation's governing body). Most are pastor-teachers, who care for and nurture the congregation. Because prophets inevitably disturb the status quo, this role tends not to combine comfortably with being a pastor and teacher. It is not surprising, therefore, that the prophetic role frequently is marginalised within the life of the church.

In 2017, my D.Min. final project looked at leadership among Church of Scotland parish ministers. A survey I conducted of the ministry population included some questions that explored ministerial identity. I offered thirteen ministry descriptors (administrator, chaplain, chief executive, community worker, counsellor, evangelist, leader, manager, pastor, preacher, prophet, teacher, and worship leader) and invited ministers to select as many descriptors as they identified with. Words associated with being a pastor-teacher were the most popular, while "prophet" was the least popular. Virtually all ministers identified with "preacher" and "pastor," but only thirty-nine percent selected "prophet."<sup>37</sup>

An absence of the prophetic role is not necessarily a problem. John Calvin described the roles of pastor and teacher as "ordinary offices." He said "our teachers correspond to the ancient prophets." He laid the foundation for a cessationist view by saying that "these three functions [apostles, prophets, and evangelists] were not established in the church as permanent ones."<sup>38</sup> This had a profound impact on ministry in Scotland. In 1643, in the Form of Presbyterial Church Government, the Westminster Assembly explicitly stated what Calvin had implied, saying that apostles, evangelists, and prophets are "extraordinary" offices that have "ceased."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Neil J. Dougall, "Prepared for Leadership" (2018), <http://ascend.churchofscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Prepared-for-Leadership.pdf> (Accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Westminster Press, 1975), 4:3,5.

<sup>39</sup> Westminster Assembly, "Confession of Faith" (Belfast, U.K.: Graham and Hislop, 1933), 304.

Given the context in which he was writing, Calvin's position has an understandable logic. Calvin was a citizen of Christendom. In his magisterial study of the early modern world (1450–1650), *Reformations*, Carlos Eire explains that at this point, "Religion was simply there. It was inescapable. Everyone had to be baptized into the same church, and to observe its laws."<sup>40</sup> Simply by being born, it was assumed that everyone was part of the church. Therefore, the role of clergy was to teach people the faith they were born into and to care for them. Calvin's description of pastor and teacher as the normal and expected roles is consistent with this.

Within Christendom, church and state mutually reinforce each other. The state recognises the church, giving it status and certain privileges. In turn, the church gives its blessing to the state, providing it with moral authority and legitimacy,<sup>41</sup> functioning as "chaplains for national legitimacy."<sup>42</sup>

Within Christendom, it is much harder for the church to exercise a prophetic role. The state co-opts religion to shore up its position and enable it to further its ambitions. Brueggemann describes how, during the reign of Solomon, "God and his temple" became "part of the royal landscape" and "the sovereignty of God" was "fully subordinated to the purpose of the king."<sup>43</sup> Writing from an anabaptist perspective (which views Christendom as an anathema), Stuart Murray argues that this is what happened when the church accepted the "Constantine invitation... to become the religious department of the Empire."<sup>44</sup> The prophetic voice is marginalised and excluded because it is discordant. Instead of supporting, it criticizes. Instead of legitimizing, it offers an alternative vision. A church whose position is supported by the state finds it difficult to be truly prophetic.

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<sup>40</sup> Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 1998), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 116.

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004), 129.

The Protestant Reformation was prophetic. Luther, Zwingli, and many other reformers were Catholic priests.<sup>45</sup> They sought to purify the church by closing the gap between what was taught and practiced. That is, they drew attention to things that needed to change and offered a vision of a church that was different. In this way, they were the latest representatives in a long line of critics who sought to reform the church from within.<sup>46</sup>

Eire argues that it was the social, economic, and political realities of the early fifteenth century<sup>47</sup> that resulted in shattering the monolithic position of the Catholic church. Crucially, however, this did not result in the end of Christendom but in its splintering. This is one of the paradoxes of the Protestant Reformation. Although it was initially a prophetic movement, it did not free the church from its alliance with secular power; it simply created different churches, all of which allied themselves with different secular powers. “In the new mini-Christendoms church and state were more closely knit than ever.”<sup>48</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that a new interest in the prophetic role has emerged as Christendom has ebbed. Because Christendom is a worldview, it is not possible to date it precisely, but it is widely accepted that it has been in decline since the 1950s. In Scotland, attention is often drawn to 1956, the year when membership of the Church of Scotland peaked.<sup>49</sup> According to Stuart Murray, one of the characteristics of the church in the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century is that it is a “prophetic minority,” which “is not absorbed and domesticated by the surrounding culture” and which expresses its vocation by being countercultural.<sup>50</sup>

APEST and Mission as Prophetic Dialogue are two examples of the way that the prophetic dimension has become more visible today.

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<sup>45</sup> Eire, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Eire, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Eire, 1–18.

<sup>48</sup> Murray, 149.

<sup>49</sup> Doug Gay, *Reforming the Kirk* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Saint Andrew Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Stuart Murray, *A Vast Minority* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2015), 155.

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When Calvin talked of ordinary and extraordinary offices, he was trying to understand the significance of Ephesians 4:11, “so Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” A comprehensive reevaluation of the meaning and significance of this verse has been underway for a generation,<sup>51</sup> and it has given rise to the acronym APEST: Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd (that is pastor), and Teacher. One of its main proponents, missiologist Alan Hirsch, asserts that Ephesians 4:11 describes the five-fold intelligence required for a healthy church. He calls this 5Q, along the lines of IQ and EQ.<sup>52</sup> The five intelligences are apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding, and teaching. He argues that all five functions need to be present for a church to be rounded and healthy.

In contrast to a Christendom understanding of ministry which privileged the role of pastor and teacher, or at its extreme believed these were the only valid ministry roles,<sup>53</sup> in a post-Christendom world, many argue that the roles of apostle, prophet, and evangelist are equally essential. The church needs to embrace all five if it is to be faithful to its calling of participating in God’s mission to the world.<sup>54</sup>

Hirsch, along with his various coauthors, argues that while these five intelligences are expressed in specific ministries, they go much deeper and represent the essential nature of the church as God intended it.<sup>55</sup> His argument is based on an exegesis of Ephesians 4:7–11 in which he demonstrates “that APEST is an intrinsic part of the genetic codes of the church in the same kind of way that Jesus himself is.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Harper, *Let My People Grow* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 37.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Hirsch and Jessie Cruickshank, “Activating 5Q” (100M, [www.100movements.com](http://www.100movements.com), 2018), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Alan Hirsch, “5Q” (100M, [www.100movements.com](http://www.100movements.com), 2017), 13.

<sup>54</sup> Guder, 184, 214.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 171.

<sup>56</sup> Hirsch, 7.

The prophetic characteristic of the church creates the holy people that stand for God in the world. When a community stands up for covenantal justice and calls all to the covenantal love of God, to true worship, obedience to God and his word, repentance, and to prayer, it is authentically church.<sup>57</sup>

The prophetic intelligence is concerned with maintaining loyalty and faithfulness to God.<sup>58</sup> It calls the church to be faithful, righteous, and just, and to stand for faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. It has a vertical aspect, in that it calls the church to be faithful to God and God's standards.<sup>59</sup> It has a horizontal aspect, in that it names patterns in the church and the world that are evil and calls for reformation. Both aspects need to be held together in order to avoid "reducing the prophetic gift into either the "mystical-charismatic" or "social activist types."<sup>60</sup>

Prophetic intelligence, Hirsch believes, is "obsessed with two questions: "Who is God" and "What does God require of us in this particular place and time?"<sup>61</sup> These are crucial questions, but others are equally important. The prophet also asks "What is going on?" and "Who are we in God?" In asking questions like this, the prophet criticises and energises; that is, the prophet offers a critique of patterns and structures that are widely accepted and largely unquestioned and inspires with the "anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give."<sup>62</sup> The absence of prophetic intelligence leads to a church that tends to be pragmatic, which no longer expects God to speak, that lacks urgency, and that is marked by predictability, all too often lacking the uncomfortable edge, which wider society finds unsettling yet compelling.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hirsch and Cruickshank, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Hirsch, xxxiii.

<sup>59</sup> Hirsch, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Hirsch, 105.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 30.

<sup>62</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Hirsch and Catchim, 34.



Hirsch helpfully describes the prophetic role as that of “questioner, disturber and agitator.”<sup>64</sup> The model for this is Jesus, who is “the fulfilment and quintessence of the prophetic tradition.”<sup>65</sup> The gospels describe Jesus as “the unpredictable evangelist” (for example, his encounter with the Samaritan woman, John 4), “the story teller and question-poser” (for example, the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10), “the unconventional political activist” (for example, entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Luke 19), and “the awkward dinner guest”<sup>66</sup> (for example, in the home of Simon the Pharisee, Luke 7). A consequence of this is that the prophetic calling is one of the hardest. One minister said, “I think one of the hardest things is to be paid by the Church and in some ways you have to be prophetic against it.”<sup>67</sup> Because the prophetic word is uncomfortable, says Hirsch, it is “often rejected by people” making this “the loneliest of vocations and the one most open to misunderstanding.”<sup>68</sup>

Part of the complexity of the prophetic role lies in the subjective nature of prophecy. The prophet believes that God has revealed something to them. As a result, the prophet is sensitive to concerns that, as yet, most people are unaware of. This means they are always a step ahead of others. It is equally possible, however, that rather than being a step ahead, they might be out of step. Rather than declaring the word of God, they might be giving voice to their own ideas, believing them to be what God is saying. As early as Deuteronomy 13, the need to distinguish between true and false prophesy is identified. Someone might believe they are speaking truth to power. However, as in the instance of Rev. Cameron speaking to Corbyn, while they might be speaking to power, what they utter might not be truth. How can others be sure that this, or any other act of speaking truth to power, is actually true? Who decides what is true and what it not?

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<sup>64</sup> Frost, 174.

<sup>65</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Murray, *Post Christendom*, 314–315.

<sup>67</sup> Anonymous conference feedback via SurveyMonkey, Feb. 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Hirsch, 106.

An “*innate* subjectivity” is involved in trying to discern what God is saying. This means that prophets require some means of testing their insights and have the potential to “be volatile and divisive people.”<sup>69</sup> They will function best within an environment that affirms the difficult questions they ask, while also being willing to test their perceptions rather than accepting them uncritically.

One of the conclusions Grudem draws from Paul’s instructions about prophecy in 1 Corinthians is that “the prophet could err, could misinterpret, and could be questioned or challenged at any point.”<sup>70</sup> It is essential, therefore, that prophets are part of a community that is willing to support them in their role and create a framework of accountability that will allow their insights to be tested<sup>71</sup> and validated. When part of a community, prophets feel valued, which counters isolation and vulnerability. Equally importantly, prophets are also accountable to and balanced by the others, which helps moderate any subjectivity and keeps them grounded. Within that community, their gift and calling is recognized, which means that their insights are respected and listened to. Others understand that their responsibility includes testing and checking that the insight offered is genuinely a word from the Lord.<sup>72</sup>

The community itself also needs to accept that its understanding of truth might be partial and potentially wrong. In supporting prophets within it and affirming their difficult message, the community must remain open to hearing uncomfortable and disturbing words about its worldview. In this sense, all prophecy is provisional. Insights are offered with conviction and humility.

### *Mission as Prophetic Dialogue*

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroder are Catholic missiologists who have written extensively on the relationship between theology

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<sup>69</sup> Hirsch, 106.

<sup>70</sup> Grudem, 69.

<sup>71</sup> “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

<sup>72</sup> “Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all.” (1 Thess. 5:20, 21).

and context. In *Constants in Context*,<sup>73</sup> they describe three main threads in late twentieth-century mission theology: “mission as participation in the life and mission of the Trinity; mission as continuation of the mission of Jesus to preach, serve and witness to the justice of God’s ‘already’ but ‘not yet’ reign; and mission as the proclamation of Christ as the world’s only savior.”<sup>74</sup> They then propose a synthesis of these threads, which they call prophetic dialogue.

Mission, certainly within the modern period, has been intertwined with imperialism.<sup>75</sup> As David Bosch in his seminal *Transforming Mission* explained, until the 1960s, “mission essentially meant conquest and displacement. Christianity was understood to be unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute.”<sup>76</sup> Since then, a questioning of colonialism and a reevaluation of other religions has occurred. One response to this is pluralism, which can lead to the marginalization, if not the abandonment, of mission altogether.<sup>77</sup> However, because mission is such a fundamental feature of the New Testament, others have sought to reframe mission. Bevans and Schroder’s attempt reframe mission is called Prophetic Dialogue.

In *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*,<sup>78</sup> they develop this. The element of dialogue changes the nature of the engagement between Christian faith and the world. Monologue is replaced by dialogue, superiority by humility, confrontation by listening. They suggest that some of the characteristics of dialogue are “respect, openness, willingness to learn, attentiveness,

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013).

<sup>74</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 348.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, the discussion of Christianity, civilization, and commerce in *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire*, Andrew Ross (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 24, 25.

<sup>76</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 475.

<sup>77</sup> Bosch, 481–3.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

vulnerability, hospitality, humility, and frankness.”<sup>79</sup> At the same time, they contend that mission also must be prophetic. Mission remains a “call to conversion,” that is, “to imagine the world differently, to begin to see its possibilities with God’s eyes.”<sup>80</sup> The prophet is someone who listens carefully to God and to the world. They then speak forth, announcing a message and describing how God wants things to be. “Prophets speak out in God’s name when people refuse to live lives worthy of their calling.”<sup>81</sup> Prophets offer a critique of any injustice they encounter.<sup>82</sup> They expect the church to be true to its calling, to be a community of contrast, and therefore to be prophetic by its nature.<sup>83</sup>

In *Mission as Prophetic Dialogue*,<sup>84</sup> Bevans, along with Cathy Ross, suggests that the Emmaus story recorded in Luke 24 offers a template for mission as prophetic dialogue. Jesus engages in a pastorally sensitive conversation with Cleopas and his companion. At the same time, Jesus rebukes and challenges them: “How foolish you are and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). Jesus then constructs for them an alternative reality as he reframes the events of his passion as God’s plan for the world rather than the calamity they believed it had been. “The rhythm of dialogue is not complete without the counter-rhythm of prophecy.”<sup>85</sup> It is the prophetic dimension that transforms the dialogue from conversation to participation in the mission of God.

The interest in prophetic intelligence as part of the five-fold pattern of APEST and in mission as prophetic dialogue is an indicator of the crucial place that the prophetic has for a post-Christendom church. Whether or not it is true that Christendom was an aberration,<sup>86</sup> one consequence of Christendom is that it neutered the prophetic voice of the church, preventing it from

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<sup>79</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 42.

<sup>82</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 60.

<sup>83</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Cathy Ross, *Mission as Prophetic Dialogue* (London: SCM, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> Bevans and Ross, xvi.

<sup>86</sup> Murray, *Post Christendom*, 74.

fulfilling its calling of giving voice to God's critique and God's alternative. It is unarguable, certainly in Scotland, that the church now finds itself marginalized and trying to discover its place in a society where it has lost the privileged position it once enjoyed.<sup>87</sup>

Rediscovering its prophetic identity and calling, which in different ways both Hirsch and Bevans describe, offers the church a way of engaging with the world that is relevant and essential, and is consistent with its calling and history. Prophetic ministry should be regarded as ordinary, normal, and expected. It is essential if the church is to truly be the church and if it is to witness faithfully to God.

### **What Is the Difference Between Being Prophetic and Prophetic leadership?**

This essay has defined what prophetic means—to describe and embody God's alternative reality—and explained the critically important role of the prophetic for the post-Christendom church. The third thing to consider is the relationship between the prophetic role and prophetic leadership.

In 2012, Barbara Kellerman, a professor of public leadership at Harvard University, published the provocatively titled book *The End of Leadership*,<sup>88</sup> which offers a critique of society's obsession with leadership and of the leadership industry. In doing so, Kellerman, paradoxically, highlights the enduring role of leadership. Individuals and groups regularly experience poor leadership while consistently searching for leaders who will lead better. Mark van Vugt, an evolutionary psychologist, offers an explanation for this. He says that "leadership is a response to the need for collective action. How do members of a group decide what to do and how and when to do it?" He describes different patterns of leadership found among human societies at different points in our development. He states, "Leadership and followership are flexible strategies shaped by the

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<sup>87</sup> Gay, 1–29.

<sup>88</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

interplay between ancient evolutionary pressures and modern environmental and cultural demands.”<sup>89</sup>

Leadership is notoriously difficult to define. There is, however, a measure of agreement that influence is a key part of it. For example, Peter Northouse, who has written one of the core texts, says, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”<sup>90</sup> Change is an inevitable aspect of leadership as the common goal will be something other than the present reality.

A prophet also attempts to influence people in order to bring about change. A prophet criticizes what is wrong in the hope that by drawing attention to this, it will cease, and a prophet paints a picture of an alternative reality in the hope that people will be inspired to work toward this image. Prophets exert their influence through word, action, and embodiment.

This does not mean, however, that a prophet is automatically a leader. The role of a leader is not simply to exercise influence; it is to use that influence so that a group achieves a common goal. This is a significant distinction that helps explicate the difference between a prophet and a prophetic leader.

In order to bring about change so that the common goal is realised, prophetic leaders require certain skills. Three of the most important ones are acting strategically, involving others, and building a coalition.

### *Acting Strategically*

The calling of a prophet is to criticize and energize. Prophets draw attention to what is wrong and paint a picture of what might be. Prophets hope that by doing this they will influence people, who will, in some way and at some stage, change. Prophetic leaders will do more than this. Prophetic leaders will speak and act strategically<sup>91</sup> so that the influence they exert results in change. They consider

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<sup>89</sup> Mark van Vugt, “The Origins of Leadership,” *New Scientist*, 198(2660) (2008): 42–43.

<sup>90</sup> Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership*, 7th ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, 2016), 6.

<sup>91</sup> Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, *Learning to Lead* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 193.

how and when to speak to achieve the greatest impact. Prophetic leaders are not simply concerned with exerting an influence; they are equally focused on enabling a group of people to achieve the goal that has been identified.

Elijah in the Hebrew Bible illustrates this. The alternative reality Elijah embodies is that Israel's peace and security are found through faithful obedience to Yahweh. His initial encounter with King Ahab, where Elijah declares there will be no more rain, leaves many questions unanswered. The threat of drought is intended to influence Ahab and the nation. At this stage, however, it is unclear how this will be anything more than a heroic protest or a pious fantasy.

As the narrative unfolds, however, it becomes evident that Elijah is a leader as well as a prophet. The drought has laid the necessary groundwork for a dramatic encounter with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, "a contest (which) is designed to press the people to choose."<sup>92</sup> There Elijah demonstrates publicly and unarguably that it is Yahweh rather than Baal who is the source of life. "When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!'" (1 Kings 18:39). Elijah was not simply a prophet who influenced the nation, he was a leader who had the skill and ability to act strategically so that his goal (Israel turning back to Yahweh) was realised.

Rev. Cameron's confrontation with Corbyn bears the hallmarks of being opportunistic rather than strategic. Corbyn was visiting the city where Cameron lived. No evidence has emerged that the confrontation was one part of a strategy that would lead to the change Cameron desired.

### *Involving Others*

A prophetic leader aims to bring about change. An essential strategy is to create and nurture a prophetic community so that the envisioned alternative becomes a reality and its impact is magnified by being lived out in many lives.

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<sup>92</sup> Lissa Wray Beal, 243.

This pattern can be discerned in the Quaker pamphlet *Speaking Truth to Power*. Its authors recognise that the prophetic vision (in their case, that of pacifism and nonviolence) may be deeply embraced within their own community, who are utterly convinced by it and who in turn exert a quiet influence as they live their daily lives. Their concern was to do more than this: “The urgent need is not to preach religious truth, but to show how it is possible and why it is reasonable to give practical expression to it in the great conflict that now divides the world.”<sup>93</sup> The pamphlet was an attempt to create a movement of people who would move pacifism from the privacy of personal living into the arena of politics and public life. It sought to show the relevance of nonviolence in a world dominated by “violence, totalitarianism, and social revolution”<sup>94</sup> and why “something other than military preparedness (was) needed to prevent disaster.”<sup>95</sup> The aim of the pamphlet was to create a movement that would change the nature of the U.S. government’s response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union. In that sense, it was not simply prophetic, it was an example of prophetic leadership.

The model of the heroic leader striding ahead is deeply embedded. Prophets, like Elijah, who courageously speak to power appear to embody this. Their willingness to go against the tide and to challenge the status quo inevitably marks them as different. They cannot help but be an example that simultaneously attracts and repels others. If there is something inevitably heroic about the prophet, the same is not necessarily true of the prophetic leader.

The prophetic leader’s concern is not simply to articulate an alternative reality, it is also to craft a path by which it can be realised and nurture a community that will embody and share this path. In his influential book *Community*, which explores how community is created and nurtured, Peter Block challenges the conventional view that “the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable.” Instead, he advocates “the art of

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<sup>93</sup> American Friends Service Committee, iv.

<sup>94</sup> American Friends Service Committee, 11.

<sup>95</sup> American Friends Service Committee 13.



convening” where leaders do three things: “create a context that nurtures an alternative future ... initiate and convene conversations that shift people’s experience... (and) listen and pay attention.”<sup>96</sup> As a consequence, it might be that the most effective prophetic leader is less prophetic than the pure prophet. That is, the requirement to engage with, nurture, and create a prophetic community might require a person who is more in tune with the mainstream in order to be able to relate to it and harness its commitment. Prophetic leaders need to be able to “cultivate and form the people.”<sup>97</sup>

### *Building a Coalition*

Prophets are convinced that change is needed. Passionately and imaginatively they describe, enact, and embody an alternative reality. Achieving significant change is rarely easy. According to John P. Kotter, who identified “creating a guiding coalition” as one of the key steps in bringing about change, significant change usually happens when various groups come together to campaign for it.<sup>98</sup> A prophetic leader is someone who has the capacity to form and sustain coalitions<sup>99</sup> and who has a measure of “institutional intelligence.”<sup>100</sup> They need to have the ability to identify allies, befriend others who, though they have different agendas, share their vision, and work out how these different groups can cooperate to leverage change. Inherent in this is the willingness to compromise on minor matters in order to achieve some major change.

Compromise is not a characteristic associated with prophets, who tend to be passionate idealists<sup>101</sup> rather than pragmatists. As with acting strategically and engaging others, the capacity to form and nurture a coalition might mean that the pure prophetic

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<sup>96</sup> Peter Block, *Community* (San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett Koehler, 2008), 87–88.

<sup>97</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey Bass, 2006), 145.

<sup>98</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), chapter 4.

<sup>99</sup> Roxburgh, 163.

<sup>100</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Institutional Intelligence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2017), 15.

<sup>101</sup> Hirsch, 51.

instinct is moderated. It is, however, through possessing and using these leadership skills that the prophetic leader is able to create sufficient momentum so the prophetic word or act is not simply a valid protest or an inspiring vision, but is turned into something concrete and transformation becomes a reality.

The prophetic leader, then, is more than a prophet. Prophetic and leadership capacities are blended within them. The prophetic leader is a person who knows how and when to act, and who is able to engage others and form alliances so that the alternative future becomes a reality.

### **Conclusion**

A senior church figure recently said, “the character of the Church of Scotland has always been to strive to speak truth to power.”<sup>102</sup> Because I have a leadership role within this church, this implies that part of my calling is to offer prophetic leadership.

The report of Rev. Richard Cameron’s encounter with Jeremy Corbyn left me disturbed. Part of me wondered whether this was because I preferred the safety of anonymity and the comfort that comes from being uncontroversial. Did my calling include a responsibility to speak out and up even when doing so might result in ridicule and rejection?

The questions I have explored in this essay have helped me reach a degree of resolution. I have shown, first, that to be a prophet means to paint a picture of the alternative reality that God desires. Second, the prophetic role is part of the essential nature of the church, which, particularly in a post-Christendom era, can help it play its part in God’s mission to the world. Third, prophetic leadership, while related to the prophetic role, is not identical to it, but involves a blend of being prophetic and being a leader.

This generated three insights that helped me frame the encounter between Cameron and Corbyn, not with a view to

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<sup>102</sup> John Chalmers, Assembly Trustees Webinar Follow Up (Church of Scotland, by email, June 1, 2020). This is a noble aspiration, but because the Church of Scotland is a National, that is a Christendom, Church, I wonder to what extent it has managed to speak to power. Exploring this would be an essay in its own right.

forming a judgment about that incident, but in order to illustrate some of the issues that I and others face as we strive to work out, in practice, what it means to offer prophetic leadership. The fact that I remain ambivalent about that incident illustrates the complexity of the prophetic role and how hard effective corporate discernment is in practice.

First, it is evident that Cameron spoke to power. However, did Cameron speak truth? Prophecy is inherently subjective. The fact that an individual is convinced they have received a word from God does not mean they have. Since prophets see what others are not seeing and say what others are not saying, they find themselves always slightly out of sync. The tendency to become an isolated loner must be resisted, for it is only through being part of a community that their prophetic insight can be tested and validated as truth.

Second, did Cameron inspire as well as criticise? While prophets draw attention to something that should change, they are more than a voice of protest. The positive dimension is just as important. They provide an alternative. They describe a different reality and energise people to work toward it. Constructing a new reality is as important as dismantling the existing one.

Third, was Cameron offering prophetic leadership? Prophetic leaders do not simply focus on one act. They consider how that one act fits into the bigger picture, what its impact will be, and how it might leverage the change that is envisioned. They are willing and able to moderate the pure prophetic instinct in order to influence others so that a common vision is articulated and progress toward it is made.

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