
PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP: MAKING PRESENT THE TRUTH OF ECCLESIAL HOPE

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Abstract

In an article for this journal, Walter Brueggemann extended his work on the prophetic imagination to outline prophetic leadership. This paper engages those proposals in conversation with others, critiquing and extending them within an ecclesial context. This paper suggests, first, that prophetic leadership should not only tell “truth and hope” as Brueggemann contends. It should also constitute an embodiment and enactment of the truth and hope, which is eschatological reality made present. Second, in enacting truth and hope, prophetic leadership in the church is tasked with directing believers toward faithfulness in the act of interpretation which is their expression of eschatological reality in the concreteness of their present context.

Introduction

Prophetic leadership has been engaged by a number of scholars in the context of their primary expertise in disciplines including Old Testament, New Testament, and pastoral theology. One of the most thoughtful treatments comes from Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar who has given considerable attention to the nature of the prophetic, not least in his reflections on the

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prophetic imagination.¹ Brueggemann's 2011 article in the *Journal of Religious Leadership* accepts the prophetic as core to pastoral, or ecclesial, leadership and seeks to develop what might be meant by prophetic ministry.² This paper will engage the proposals that Brueggemann made in that article and survey a number of reflections offered by other thinkers in order to critique them and, further, to extend them within an ecclesial context.

Speaking Counter-Imagination's Truth:

Walter Brueggemann on Prophetic Leadership

Brueggemann sets his proposal regarding prophetic leadership between two extremes, each of which he rejects. First, the so-called conservative characterisation of the prophetic as “prediction in the sense that the Old Testament prophets ‘predicted’ Christ” is denied on the basis that the prophets were, in fact, immersed in the present, focused more on their own context than longer-term extrapolations. Second, Brueggemann has no time for what he calls the progressive perspective, namely that the prophetic means an “advocacy for social justice...a convergence of authoritarian certitude, anger, righteous indignation, and scolding advice.”³ Instead, he prefers to associate the prophets with speech which—in its elusiveness and use of metaphor—operates rhetorically to counter the dominant consciousness, that is those ideologies holding society captive to the dominant regime. Prophetic speech, in brief, “aimed to *reimagine the world as though the character of YHWH were a real and lively and engaged agent in the reality of the world.*” As such, “the prophetic task was to *re-utter* YHWH as a living, decisive agent in a world that largely assumed that YHWH was an

¹ See especially Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001); *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2012).

² Walter Brueggemann, “Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter Imagination,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(1) (2011): 1–23.

³ Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 1.

irrelevant memory.”⁴ From this definition of the prophetic, Brueggemann suggests analogical implications for prophetic ministry in contemporary America. In doing so, he recognises that to have argued that prophets are more concerned with the present than future prediction has implications for the prophetic as a whole. Specifically, the prophet always inhabits a particular community, and it is from this community that their prophetic ministry arises.

Practical theologians recognise a similar dynamic: the researcher is socially located. Contextualization has implications for the theology that is constructed, for experience influences not only the questions asked but also the kind of answer that may be given and the sources that may be consulted. Without inflicting upon the reader a full theobiography,⁵ two personal observations might be helpful to contextualise my interest and proposals. First, I write as a British Christian who has spent a decade in ecclesial leadership and a number of years teaching and researching as a practical theologian. My particular interest is leadership in what might be called the Anglo-Western context, a context named and described in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research.⁶ The Anglo-Western context includes not only the United Kingdom but also the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The dimensions of the dominant consciousness that I think of when reading Brueggemann’s work include individualisation, a favouring of me over us, and McDonaldisation, which celebrates optimisation of time and economic cost (in the context of increased product output) to such a degree that I fear we, as Christians, may

⁴ Brueggemann “Prophetic,” 1, 3.

⁵ I use Pete Ward’s term here (*Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* [London, England: SCM, 2008], 4).

⁶ Cf., Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2016), 430–451; Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, global ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2013), 350–352.

have forgotten what 'church' was meant to be about. Though the intent of this paper is not to present the case for this assessment of the dominant Anglo-Western consciousness, I suspect that it is better to make explicit here that perspective, which would otherwise hover implicitly just below the surface.

The second theobiographical remark is that I have long been fascinated by the prophetic. Ever since my first year as a Christian, when I heard a young man speak in the first person as if it were the Lord speaking to the others praying with us, I have been drawn to the gift of prophecy. Over the years, even as I learned that first-person prophecy is rarely pastorally wise, I learned also that the prophetic could, in fact, be more than a gift. For, in some people, the prophetic becomes a whole way of seeing the world and a very particular expression of Christian spirituality. It becomes too, I suspect, a particular mode of ecclesial leadership, one in which all leaders can, and will to a certain degree, operate—and yet which only some leaders will engage deliberately and intentionally as their primary mode of leadership. It is this fascination with the prophetic in conjunction with an ongoing interest in ecclesial leadership that birthed this paper: my history and experience have influenced my theological and pragmatic questions and further, no doubt, the kinds of answers that I will offer. That my own spirituality finds so much resonance in Brueggemann's characterisation of the prophetic task must, in no small way, be relevant here. In the same way, ten years of ecclesial leadership in a context where often the dominant ecclesial consciousness seemed to operate much as I have described above surely influences the theology that I construct in this paper. I do not think these influences to be disadvantageous; rather, I celebrate them wholeheartedly. Yet I also accept that those who inhabit a different subcommunity might consider these to be obvious biases and thus they warrant a mention here.

Just as it is not my intention to assess the exact nature of the dominant consciousness of the church in my own

subcommunity so much as to delineate the contours of the prophetic in the context of leadership, Brueggemann also moves quickly from his consideration of the contemporary American context toward its implications for the prophetic task. Yet in this consideration, he does conclude that fundamental to the dominant consciousness in the U.S. context is a rejection of divine agency, such that YHWH is reduced “to a helpless support or an innocuous bystander but without a capacity for free agency.”⁷ This, he claims, can be conceived as the ideological foundation on which cultural patterns, including the hegemony of capitalism and the prevalence of Enlightenment rationalism, stand. Whereas “most ‘prophetic ministry’ is constituted by nagging about particular issues,” what really matters to Brueggemann is to work “at the level of elemental imagination” whereby the underlying assumptions of the dominant consciousness are named and challenged.⁸ Although the exact manifestations of the dominant consciousness as described by Brueggemann and as implied by me differ slightly, this is to be expected. The particularity of the issues may indeed vary from one subcommunity to another. Yet the basic nature of the dominant consciousness and of its underlying assumptions is, I suspect, the same from one nation to another and, indeed, from one epoch of history to another. The Jewish prophets of the Old Testament and the prophets of today express pain in relation to the same status quo: namely, the denial of God as a living and active agent.

What is more, for Brueggemann the only place where a prophetic subcommunity may draw upon the memories of a different heritage, and may re-present those in the context of a richly coded discourse that gives form to an alternative consciousness,⁹ is among the people of God. Only here can “the provocative language of agency...be

⁷ Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 3–5.

⁸ Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 5–6.

⁹ Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, xvi.

spoken concerning God” and only here can speech be embodied in active practices of hope.¹⁰ This speaking in relation to God is presented by Brueggemann as twofold. Prophetic leadership means telling truth and telling hope, one in the face of denial and the other in the face of despair. For the task of the prophetic leader is to dismantle the dominant consciousness and to make denial of its perniciousness impossible. Yet it is also to reenergise the ecclesial community from despair in the status quo toward new vision. This truth and this hope can be uttered because of God. Truth is grounded in divine agency: because of it, there is an “answerability that is inescapable in God’s creation” and which demands that the truth of human failure be told and that “the rock-bottom reality of having departed a compelling relationship with YHWH” be admitted.¹¹ Hope, too, is grounded in that same divine reality. For it is YHWH’s agency that grounds the declaration of the “newness that God will permit and will enact.” In the face of despair comes the utterance of hope’s promise, “a newness wrought out of God’s presence in the world.”¹²

Beyond Prophetic Speech: Enactment and Embodiment

Without doubt, Brueggemann offers us a breath-taking view of the prophetic in the context of leadership. A habitus in ecclesial leadership of telling truth and hope will be formative in significant ways for both the ecclesial leader and the church, and the practice of discerning the appropriate administration of each will be the work of a lifetime to perfect. When set in the wider context of his comments on what it means to be a prophetic subcommunity,¹³ it is clear that Brueggemann offers an

¹⁰ Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 6; *Prophetic*, xvi. Note, however, that Brueggemann does not present prophetic *leadership* in terms of embodiment, but only in terms of utterance. This, I shall argue here, is an important omission in his proposals.

¹¹ Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 11, 21.

¹² Brueggemann, “Prophetic,” 20–21.

¹³ Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, xvi.

unparalleled articulation of prophetic leadership, indeed one that has influenced my theology and practice significantly. Yet I would add nuance to these proposals for I believe that his *Journal of Religious Leadership* article did not go far enough in expressing the breadth of what is prophetic leadership. However, I suspect that the nuance that I add here is, even so, wholly consistent with what he has said elsewhere about the prophets. For, although Brueggemann's emphasis in this article is on telling truth and hope, it is clear elsewhere that he sees the prophets as a mediation of the presence of Yahweh in Israel.¹⁴ Accordingly, the following remarks will ideally be seen as a way to develop the main themes of his article rather than to criticize it.

In order to build my theoretical foundation and begin making my proposal, I turn now to certain other writings on prophetic leadership and ministry. Most notable among these is the work of John Johnson. His first related piece was a more general article on the topic of the Old Testament offices as paradigmatic of pastoral identity. In addition to the *triplex munex* of prophet, priest, and king, which had become foundational to describing the ministry of Christ, he argues for a fourth office—that of the sage. He suggests that these offices constitute “models [which] Jesus brought to fullest expression and...Paul seemingly emulated” and that “[f]inding pastoral identity in an Old Testament setting seems logical.”¹⁵ In relation to the prophetic strand, after exploring its Old Testament context and its expression in the ministry of Christ in the gospels, John Johnson makes proposals concerning the office of prophet within contemporary Christian ministry. Specifically, he offers three roles for the pastor as God's spokesperson: to be God's mouthpiece, especially in the preaching of God's word; to carry the word like a burden, which again is

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997), 571.

¹⁵ John E. Johnson, “The Old Testament Offices as Paradigm for Pastoral Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 182–200, 185.

expressed in terms of preaching; and to bear the price of a message and stance that are unpopular.¹⁶

John Johnson's second article came five years later and focused more narrowly on the prophetic role of pastors. Again, the emphasis is primarily on the task of preaching. The prophet waits for God's word and his enabling power before proclaiming the message, a message of passion and prediction, judgment, comfort, and protest. Without doubt, the act of speaking God's word is central in this paradigm. Yet an additional respect in which the prophetic shapes pastoral ministry is highlighted, which Johnson calls prophetic performance. The prophetic comprises not only utterance but action, a life of identification, obedient sacrifice, and obedience.¹⁷ Gerry Breshears makes a similar claim when he suggests that a prophet "speaks for righteousness by both word and deed."¹⁸ In his discussion of leadership roles in the Old Testament, Marty Stevens, too, recognizes that Old Testament prophets might not only speak for God but might also act as divine messengers who communicate through their actions.¹⁹

Here, the writings on prophetic leadership and ministry stop. The writings suggest that prophetic leadership is more than just *telling truth and hope*. Prophetic leadership also comprises *enacting that truth and hope*. Yet this is still insufficient. Those authors whose interest is not limited by the category of leadership, but who consider the prophets and the prophetic more widely,

¹⁶ Johnson, "Old." For a similar emphasis on speaking as the core of prophetic leadership, see Anthony L. Blair, Jo Ann Kunz, Steve Jeantet, and Danny Kwon, "Prophets, Priests and Kings: Re-imagining Ancient Metaphors of Diffused Leadership for the Twenty-First Century Organization," *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* 9(2) (2012): 127–145.

¹⁷ John E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Office as Paradigm for Pastoral Ministry," *Trinity Journal* 21NS (2000): 61–81.

¹⁸ Gerry Breshears, "The Body of Christ: Prophet, Priest, or King?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37(1) (1994): 3–26, 19.

¹⁹ Marty E. Stevens, *Leadership Roles of the Old Testament: King, Prophet, Priest, and Sage* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2012), 32, 47, 51.

take us further. They develop a concept of *prophetic embodiment*, drawing out how the prophets in their very being could be the means by which eschatological truth and hope might be made present.

Most helpful in identifying this third alternative to prophetic utterance and prophetic enactment in the work of a prophet is Luke Timothy Johnson. Although his interest is prophecy in Luke-Acts, he frames his study by a survey of prophecy in the biblical tradition more broadly, identifying two essential aspects: “prophecy-as-prediction” and “prophecy-as-way-of-life.” The first involves a God who is sovereign over human history communicating “through oracles spoken by prophets”; the second involves “a way of being in the world” such that God’s sovereign purposes are brought to bear on human history through prophetic utterance and through the prophet’s acts and character.²⁰ In the context of this second aspect, a prophet, empowered by God’s Spirit, “hear[s] a deeper word within the ordinary speech of human life and...see[s] in what everyone else sees some further reality that they do not seem to see.” This hearing and seeing enables the communication of the divine perspective in the contemporary human context (utterance)²¹ and funds the prophet’s work in realising that perspective in those concrete human circumstances, an “active...working to shape a people obedient to the Lord” (prophetic enactment).²²

In addition to utterance and enactment, Luke Johnson describes embodiment as a further facet of the prophetic task, an expression of God’s word “through the symbolism of the body.” Prophetic embodiment is said to include Moses’s act of writing the divine commandments on two stone tablets and then later, in response to Israel’s apostasy, his destruction of those tablets. Johnson also

²⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 40–41.

²¹ Johnson, *Prophetic*, 44.

²² Johnson, *Prophetic*, 48–49.

notes that the books of Hosea (e.g., 1:2) and Ezekiel (e.g., 12:11) contain examples of such embodiment. However, prophetic embodiment is not limited to such bodily symbolism as indicated by texts such as these. Luke Johnson suggests that “the spirit-led person’s very character conforms to the word of God, meaning the prophet lives out bodily the vision for humanity that God intends,” an embodiment of God’s word in the prophet’s unwavering obedience to the one whom they hear speaking that word.²³

Prophetic embodiment is also discussed in the published form of Jacqueline Grey’s Presidential Address to the Society of Pentecostal Studies in 2017. Here she presents the three children of Isaiah 7–8 as functioning as signs embodying Isaiah’s message. In identifying these examples, I find her conception of embodiment as other than enactment much clearer than that indicated by the examples chosen by Luke Johnson, which could as easily be understood as enactment than as embodiment. Hebraic thought conceived the body as holistically intertwined with worshipping life and, accordingly, embodiment is important in understanding texts of this provenance.²⁴ Thus, rather than being only ancillary, and even perhaps extraneous, to communication, this embodiment is itself the communication by which the divine perspective on contemporary reality is communicated.²⁵ Although she does not labour the point, Grey recognises a distinction between enactment and embodiment, noting that in this portion of Isaiah, it is not

²³ Johnson, *Prophetic*, 45–48. Bruce C. Birch explains that being a divine representative means speaking God’s word. In addition, it entails “embody[ing] and enact[ing] that Word,” whether within or outside of the structures of power (“Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership,” *Ex Auditu* 22 (2006): 10–25, 14–16). Though he does not expand on how embodiment and enactment differ, Birch can perhaps be seen as making a similar point to that of Luke Johnson.

²⁴ Jacqueline Grey, “Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” *Pneuma* 39 (2017): 431–456, 434.

²⁵ Grey, 435. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (London, England: SCM, 1968), 18.

only prophetic actions that communicate divine activity but also that the children, as embodied beings, “function as tangible representations of the divine word.”²⁶

Although Grey’s emphasis appears to be more on prophetic embodiment of a message, Dale Launderville argues that, in Ezekiel at least, the prophet is connected “with an inexpressible Reality” such that whilst “fully human[,] yet he embodies another dimension of reality in his person”, “symbolically reveal[ing God’s]...glory”. To those to whom the prophet prophesies, then, he does not only bring a message but also the invitation to participate in this reality.²⁷ Mark McEntire makes the point that “[w]hen the spirit becomes a human capacity—as it does in Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, and 36:26—it creates new symbolic possibilities.”²⁸ That is, in giving to the prophet his Spirit, God not only communicates a message but makes it possible for the prophet to bring divine reality to bear upon those around them, and to invite those others to participate in the same. This possibility of bringing God’s coming kingdom, of “carry[ing] into the actual world of the present day elements which belong to the *eschaton*,” is described by Jacques Ellul as “a prophetic function.” For the prophet lives the coming reality rather than simply predicting it, making it present in their historical, concrete context.²⁹

Perhaps, then, we can understand the prophetic as involving speaking (utterance), doing (enactment), and, at a deeper level, being (embodiment). Without doubt, all three are interrelated: it is especially difficult to draw hard boundaries between prophetic enactment and prophetic embodiment, and any attempt to separate these three

²⁶ Grey, 438.

²⁷ Dale Launderville, *Spirit and Reason: The Embodied Character of Ezekiel’s Symbolic Thinking* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 11, 14–15.

²⁸ Mark McEntire, *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices: Introducing the Prophetic Literature of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 134.

²⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed., trans. Olive Wyon, (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 38.

aspects will prove ill-conceived. Nevertheless, the benefit of naming each of them is to help us see how the prophetic, and prophetic leadership, must be more than only telling truth and hope. As Abraham Heschel notes, the authenticity of the utterance “derives from...identification of a person and a word”; further, the prophet “is one not only with what he says; he is involved with his people in what his words foreshadow.”³⁰ This interaction of persons, being an ongoing encounter between God and prophet and between prophet and people, includes words and yet also operates at the wordless level of identification, a living of life together.

It is the “doing” and “being” of this life together that is, I would suggest, capable also of acting as a vehicle of the prophetic and that has been insufficiently explored in the context of proposals concerning leadership as prophetic. Yet in giving body to these forgotten aspects, I do not wish to be misunderstood as seeking to minimise the power of prophetic utterance in ecclesial leadership. As Brueggemann rightly comments in his work on the exilic prophets, it was the words of these prophets which themselves “*wrought* the new actions of God.”³¹ Thus, in exploring leadership as prophetic, I celebrate all three aspects of the prophetic—utterance, enactment, and embodiment—suggesting that they are doing more than simply telling truth and hope. Rather, they make present, in some sense, the truth and hope of the divine eschatological reality.

Prophetic Leadership as Eschatological Inbreaking

In moving now to develop what might be meant by prophetic leadership, it will be helpful to clarify my focus. First, I believe that leadership as activity is the most fundamental category. Although leadership can refer either to the persons who are leading or to the actual

³⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, vol.1* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 6.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1986), 2.

roles or positions of leadership,³² for either of these categories to carry meaning requires that we first know what leadership is. Thus, we must begin with leadership as activity. This, I believe, is best understood in terms of a process of influence toward a goal that involves at least one leader and one follower.³³ Despite a plethora of definitions within the leadership literature, this is regarded by most scholars as a reasonable starting point in characterising leadership.

I have argued elsewhere that the proper end of ecclesial leadership as activity is the deepening of Spirit-enabled participation in the life of Christ, a reorientation of humanity to God that is expressed concretely as a kind of kenotic/ek-static neighbour-love.³⁴ This is the overarching and primary goal toward which ecclesial leaders are to direct the church, one that places personal relationships located in the Spirit-mediated love of Christ at the centre of its ecclesiology. Implicitly, leadership as the process of influencing believers to this end inevitably comprises a related responsibility. Leadership must also ensure that the church, as this matrix of relations of neighbour-love between those who have received the Spirit, is a place where Scripture and Christ-enacting community practices remain the markers of reality and the yardsticks by which the church discerns the reality of life in the Spirit. I will argue, in due course, that the process of influence toward the goal of deepening Spirit-enabled participation by the church in Christ's life is consistent with a prophetic frame. Before developing this claim, however, we must first answer the question on which such an assertion will depend. Namely, what can be said regarding the nature of the process of influence constitutive of ecclesial leadership?

³² Keith Grint, *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³³ Northouse, 6; Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, N.Y.: Praeger, 1991), 180; Yukl, 23.

³⁴ Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2019).

The process by which believers are influenced toward the goal already named—this deepening of their own participation in the neighbour-love which expresses Christ's life and ministry—is, unsurprisingly, a relational one. A leader loves those in the church with the intention to bring them into an encounter with the Spirit-formed presence of Christ in that leader and in the Scriptures that testify to Christ. In such an act of love, a leader invites another to a response of love, a response that constitutes deeper participation and a fuller commitment to Christ as he is found in the church (and specifically in this particular relationship). When that other responds to love with love, leadership's goal is attained and influence may be deemed successful or effective. To be clear, this process of influence is not an explicit directiveness that this other should respond in one particular way, nor is the leader's act of loving the other such as to be a mere means to an end. The other is loved for his or her own sake and yet influence here flows from the fact that the leader's invitation into loving, mutual relationship brings the one being led into a place of Christ-encounter. In other words, the telos is thus made available for participation, and the response of deepened commitment (expressed as neighbour-love) is invited. In essence, then, to exercise this kind of leadership influence is to establish a relational field of influence such that leadership's telos, the eschatological presence of Christ, is made accessible—in the Spirit, through the one exercising this leadership—for participation by the so-called follower.³⁵

Such a process of influence might be understood as Aristotelian praxis: it is an action that includes its ultimate telos and is informed by it.³⁶ In contrast to *poiēsis*, praxis is not merely a means to its end, a means that will become redundant once that end is attained. In the same way, the expression of neighbour-love is not a means to the end,

³⁵ Lynch, chapter 6.

³⁶ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2001), 49.

which is participation in the divine life of love. Rather, the expression of neighbour-love is a praxis, the activity of loving its own fulfilment:³⁷ the telos, which is inclusion in the divine life of love, is not separable from the activity of loving neighbour for God's sake. Accordingly, the praxis of love which is ecclesial leadership's process of influence is not so much a means to the declared end, a step along the journey toward a goal wholly independent of that step or journey. Rather, the ecclesial leadership influence which is love is a present apprehending of ecclesial leadership's telos, participation in the divine life, and an embodiment of that life as it bears eschatologically upon the present (and, in particular, as it bears upon the person in front of the leader). For to participate in the divine life is to participate in a reality that is fundamentally eschatological and that is thus both now and not yet, breaking in upon historical existence. Such participation operates to invite (or influence) others toward that same telos.³⁸

Now, finally, I can return to my assertion that the process of influence toward ecclesial leadership's overarching goal or end is consistent with a prophetic frame. It is the leadership act of bringing eschatological reality to bear upon the present reality of the ecclesial community that draws my attention in this respect. Leaders, I am suggesting, are intentional about their capacity not only to point to divine reality as the church's goal but indeed to embody that reality, or bring it to bear within history, in order that other believers might participate in it more fully.³⁹ Leaders, like the prophets

³⁷ Christopher P. Long, *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 2004), 128.

³⁸ This rather compressed articulation of a leadership dynamic is more fully explored in Lynch (chapters 4–6 and 9–10) and the discussion above is defended there in further detail.

³⁹ This eschatological inbreaking can be brought to bear upon the present through any believer for, having received the Spirit, believers participate in the life of the Coming One. Nevertheless, a degree of intentionality in bringing this inbreaking to bear in the lives of others *in order that they might respond in deeper commitment to Christ* is what

before them, are interested not only in a reality that is on the horizon and yet to come but also in a reality which, though eschatological and therefore in some sense still future, is also accessible for participation now even within the confines of present experience. As Luke Johnson showed us, prophecy can be understood as prediction and as way of life. The former involves predictive oracles, presumably regarding the future. As to the latter, we might perhaps say with Gerhard von Rad that, as instruments of Yahweh, the prophets engaged in symbolic acts which operated as “creative prefiguration[s] of the future”, “project[ing]...a detail of the future into the present” and thus “begin[ning]...the process of realization”.⁴⁰ That is, the prophets not only engaged in prediction but also brought God’s eschatological purposes to bear upon the present.

It is in this latter sense particularly that I propose that the activity of ecclesial leadership is essentially prophetic. Whether through words, acts, or simply the person of the leader as embodied, the leader brings divine reality to bear upon the present. In their intentional loving of another, they bring the same invitation as the prophets brought, one which we have seen Launderville characterise as the invitation to participate in “an inexpressible Reality.”⁴¹ Words will likely be part of this offered relationship of love, yet words, even words of truth and hope, will only have their power because they are the overflow of relationship with one who embodies and enacts the divine life of the Spirit.

Prophetic Leadership as Facilitating Discernment of Christopraxis

Ecclesial leadership, then, is prophetic in that it not only tells truth and hope but also makes that eschatological truth and hope of the divine life really

marks a praxis of neighbour-love as a leadership process. Simply put, all can intentionally exercise this kind of leadership, but not all do.

⁴⁰ Von Rad, 75.

⁴¹ Launderville, 11.

present. This is not the sole point of contact between ecclesial leadership and the prophetic mandate, however. The prophets not only embodied this “inexpressible Reality” in which they invited others to participate. They further were able to operate as sense-makers, helping God’s people to discern how to embody practically this eschatological reality within the bounds of a still historical and concrete existence. The prophet’s work in pointing to the future hope is to “illumine what is involved in the present,” even to such a degree that “the main task of prophetic thinking is to bring the world into divine focus.”⁴² Tercio Junker is more explicit. For him, prophets not only reclaim the memory of the past and anticipate the transformative future which they envision but, further, analyse critically the present reality. They are, he says, “multidimensional analysts.”⁴³ In words from Heschel’s magisterial work, *The Prophets*, the prophetic, then, constitutes “*exegetis of existence from a divine perspective.*”⁴⁴ This exegesis is the foundation for an act of interpretation, a discernment of what Ray Anderson calls Christopraxis.

Christopraxis recognises that God is, in Christ, already acting by his Spirit in the realms of humanity’s historical existence.⁴⁵ To discern Christopraxis thus means asking not what Jesus would hypothetically do in a particular concrete context but, first, asking what Jesus is presently doing there and, second, exploring how humanity can join with this activity. Discernment in this sense is, of course, other than acts of interpretation which purport to be an objective “standing outside” of reality in order to apply a set of hermeneutical principles, even biblical ones, to that reality. Christopraxis assumes an epistemology that

⁴² Heschel, 12, 24.

⁴³ Tercio Bretanha Junker, *Prophetic Liturgy Towards a Transforming Christian Praxis* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 10.

⁴⁴ Heschel, xiv.

⁴⁵ Anderson draws this term, *Christopraxis*, from Jürgen Moltmann, using it to denote “the continuing ministry of Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit” (*Shape*, 29).

is participative,⁴⁶ where the act of discernment occurs in the context of the encounter with another subject, namely Christ. To affirm such an understanding of discernment is not to deny the centrality of Scripture in shaping ecclesial life. Rather, it recognises that “Scripture itself is anchored in the normative and objective reality of Christ who continues to enact the truth of God through his reconciling presence and ministry in the contemporary situation.”⁴⁷ As such, though not employed as a set of “biblical principles” in the hands of a so-called objective interpretation, Scripture is not irrelevant to the hermeneutics of Christopraxis. In fact, Scripture is core in pointing “to the living, ministering Christ” such that, for Anderson, “written Word is made Word” by the ministry of Christ itself.⁴⁸ Together, then, the Word and the Spirit who makes Christ present in the church operate as poles marking for us the “place” of this encounter with Christ, the place where the reality of God may be discerned and participated.⁴⁹ Discernment of Christian practice is itself dependent upon participation in – or, we could even say, upon embodiment and enactment of – the reality of God in the space between these poles. That is, the more we inhabit, or practise, this ecclesial life in Christ as it is marked by Word and Spirit, the deeper our discernment of it and the fuller our potential participation in it.

Brueggemann also presents the prophetic task as one of interpretation. The prophetic subcommunity, he says, must engage in criticism and energising: a critical naming of the prevailing culture within a particular concrete, historical context and an energising of persons and communities toward the embodiment in active practices

⁴⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1971), 105.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Shape*, 56-57.

⁴⁸ Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2014, 99 n.33.

⁴⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London, England: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 210–222.

of hope of an alternative reality.⁵⁰ The naming of the prevailing culture is itself an act of interpretation. So also is the formulation of ways in which an alternative hope might be practised: such work is an interpretation or a discernment of how the eschatological truth and hope of the divine life might work their way more deeply into lived experience.⁵¹ Facilitation of such discernment requires leaders to turn believers' attention to the hermeneutical frame just described:⁵² as believers attend, on the one hand, to the witness of Scripture and, on the other, to the practices of community by which those who participate in the Spirit re-enact Christ's life, they encounter the continuing ministry of Christ through the Spirit. As such, leadership facilitates others to discern (and eventually participate in) what – amongst the individual and collective narratives of their own concrete historical existence – is truly Christopraxis, the eschatological truth and hope of the divine life, and what is not.

Ecclesial leadership may thus mean a leader offering time and presence to believers who want to engage in sense-making conversations as they wrestle with how best to frame their reality in light of the eschatological truth and hope, and then to live accordingly. Scott Cormode writes about this in terms of “making spiritual sense.” He offers four assertions in this respect: “1. People construct their own meaning when they make sense of situations. 2. Leadership is about making meaning. 3. Leadership arises from the mutual efforts of the people in the community to make meaning. 4. Finally, while the leader oversees the

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, 9–19.

⁵¹ Truls Åkerlund characterises this prophetic discernment of present realities in light of God's presence and activity as cohering with a particular scholarly perspective on leadership that understands the essence of leadership activity in terms of sense-making, the influence of others through the framing of reality by symbol and narrative (“Preaching as Christian Leadership: The Story, the Sermon, and the Prophetic Imagination,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 13(1) (2014): 79–97).

⁵² Anderson, *Historical*, 210–222.

meaning-making process, he or she does not control it.”⁵³ To help a believer make sense of the reality is to recognise, in Cormode’s words, that “no part of life is detached from God” and that theological meaning inheres in all reality.⁵⁴ Interpretation of reality in relation to divine truth and hope at a concrete level asks concrete questions. These might include the following: Where is God in my present reality? How can I participate in what he is already doing in my life and the community around me? Where might my current interpretation of my concrete reality be helpfully reframed by recognising God’s presence and activity in the world? What practices of affirming truth and enacting hope might be indicated for me?

This kind of interpretative work might be engaged in regularly by mature believers yet, for many, it will be more episodic, usually triggered by experiences of dissonance in their lives that will force the negotiation of new meaning. The dissonance may flow from an experience of pain that brings a person’s existing repertoire of theological meaning into question, requiring the creation of new meaning. Alternatively, it may flow from the failure not of a person’s existing theological narratives so much as the experience of growing tension in relation to the cultural narratives that the person has espoused. Whatever the trigger for the act of discernment, ecclesial leaders who understand their work through a prophetic lens will help that person to bring his or her concrete experiences and existing narratives for those experiences into an encounter with the eschatological truth and hope of the divine life, with a view to bringing the concrete reality of existence into conversation with the reality of God. In this way, a leader may help others to engage in the process of discerning, and then participating in, Christopraxis.

⁵³ Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2006), 9.

⁵⁴ Cormode, 11.

The same holds in the collective context of a local church as corporate entity, where the sense-making is most likely to be apparent in the larger context of making decisions in relation to matters that concern parts or even the whole of the local church. Whoever is invited to participate in ecclesial decision-making—and different models certainly exist regarding who is so authorised in a particular context—decision-makers will benefit from the facilitative work of ecclesial leaders. Ecclesial leadership here will bring historical and eschatological reality into conversation, framing and retelling the Great Story to shed light on, and make sense of, how God might already be ministering in Christ (Christopraxis) in the particular local church's story and context. This framing and retelling might happen in non-verbal ways. Particularly, I note the power of ritual and practices.⁵⁵ Practices are not value-free: they carry a particular narrative, or vision of the good, and engagement in practices forms a person more deeply in that particular vision of the good.⁵⁶ Further, being communal,⁵⁷ practices also operate to form practising communities in a unified narrative.

The interpretative power of communal practices is also recognised in leadership outside of the Christian context. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal write persuasively of what they call leadership's symbolic frame. They recognise the impact not only of story or myth to shape the direction of an organisation; communal rituals also have a place in “imbu[ing]...the enterprise with traditions and values.”⁵⁸ For the symbolic frame, community culture is framed, and repeatedly reframed, through story and practice. In fact, Bolman and Deal define its practitioners as prophets

⁵⁵ Cormode, 96–107.

⁵⁶ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 57–68.

⁵⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 218.

⁵⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 5th ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 244, 258.

and poets,⁵⁹ leaders who “lead by example...use symbols to capture attention...frame experience...communicate a vision...tell stories...[and] respect and use history.”⁶⁰ In the same way, prophetic leadership will not only make the divine reality historically present but will look for opportunities to tell and retell the story of life in Christ. In drawing heavily upon the narrative of Scripture and the Christ-enacting community practices that together are the markers of reality and the yardsticks by which Christopraxis may be discerned, such leadership will facilitate the decision-makers’ work in order that corporate practices of hope—Christopraxis—might be identified. Thus may believers speak, enact, and embody the truth and hope of divine life.

Conclusion

Brueggemann’s contribution in outlining prophetic leadership is significant. My contribution here can be, at most, a nuancing of his proposals. Yet I believe this nuancing is important and, indeed, that it is fully consistent with Brueggemann’s theological programme beyond his article published in this journal. As he notes, the prophets’ words wrought God’s works.⁶¹ We might thus reasonably infer, as I have, that they brought the eschatological reality of the divine life to bear in the present context. Further, and again as Brueggemann notes elsewhere, the task of the prophets is one of criticising the dominant consciousness and reading the community’s tradition for the promises of God by which an alternative consciousness becomes energised with possibility.⁶² This is not fundamentally other than an act of interpretation along the lines laid out above.

As the prophets made divine reality accessible for fuller participation by the people of God by speaking, enacting, and embodying it, they also interpreted it for

⁵⁹ Bolman and Deal, 355.

⁶⁰ Bolman and Deal, 366–369.

⁶¹ Brueggemann, *Hopeful*, 2.

⁶² Brueggemann, *Prophetic*.

their historical context, and interpreted their context in light of it. So, too, those who engage in prophetic leadership in the ecclesial context fundamentally do two things. They are intentional in making divine eschatological reality present in a special way for the sake of others and they also facilitate believers' work of interpretation, a discernment of appropriate ways of living from that eschatological reality into their quotidian context of working and resting, playing and loving, mourning and celebrating, living and dying.