

SOME PROPHETIC QUESTIONS THE CHURCH SHOULD BE ASKING

Most people who claim to be church would agree that in some sense God calls the church to a prophetic role in the world, and especially the part of the world that is their context for ministry. Prophets stand up and say, “Thus says the Lord.” By which they mean, among other things, “Here is God’s perspective on your present reality, on the way you are heading—leaders, nations, people—here is your destination and you really don’t want to go *there*. Consider (or reconsider) a better way!”

Prophets say such things *to* the “powers,” whether so-called secular or religious, and they address all aspects of their present circumstances, whether relating primarily to the temple with its overtly “spiritual” concerns or to the court with its political, social, and economic responsibilities. And, *always*, the prophets insist upon the coherence and interdependence of all dimensions of human life. They would stubbornly resist separation between public and private, and insist that every policy and practice of the powers has spiritual depth and consequence.

Prophets are seldom appreciated (while alive) and often hated. They remind the powers of things they know but ignore and doggedly assert the powers’ accountability to the One who, at least for now, permits them to hold power.

One other observation: Prophets functioned with great versatility and multiple strategies. They could simply utter a woe or declare a promise. They could enact God’s assessment or response to the powers’ use of power. Or they could confront the powers with questions that probed and challenged the status quo.

Indeed, sometimes the power of posing good questions far surpasses the impact of unrestrained bombast. Church and world tend to think prophets specialize in the latter. Yet Jesus, who certainly functioned prophetically, more often than not reserved the bombast for rare occasions and well-targeted audiences (mostly religious, by the way), and specialized in imaginative, suggestive strategies, such as a good story or penetrating questions.

With these musings as background, I’ve been thinking of some prophetic questions the church should be asking, particularly itself.

Since Jesus’ primary message was about the Kingdom being *here* (he meant here and now) and since the Kingdom is all about “heaven,” why does the church often have little to say about God’s Kingdom *here and*

now and so much to say about heaven, conceived as exclusively *there and then*? And, as a result, why have so few noticed the consequences of this total reversal of Jesus' Kingdom message (such as, for example, the relative devaluing of what is done *here* and the super-valuing of whatever the beyond will be; an escapist theology that views life here as only preliminary and preparatory to life *there and then*, etc.)?

How come those who confess a personal, intimate relationship with the living Lord Jesus have little or nothing to say about the things most important to Jesus, according to the gospels (the historical authenticity of which they would die—and maybe even kill—for)—things such as advocating for the poor and against the recklessly indulgent, championing the preservation of marriages that are threatened (instead of only championing the definition of marriage as heterosexual ...), decrying the glorification of violence as an answer to human conflict, or pronouncing woe on lifestyles and standards of living that reflect the view that human life consists in the abundance of things possessed.

Who will stand up to protest the number of non-terrorists being killed in our attempts to find and eliminate terrorists? Who will wonder if some of our policies are not unwittingly out-killing the terrorists?

Why doesn't someone suggest that a nation that doesn't *need* help from other nations should for that reason seek such help (to avoid arrogance, to protect against blind spots, to admit humbly that power does not guarantee wisdom and may even blind or corrupt its holder)?

Why won't the church affirm its higher allegiance to branches of the Family living in other places than to our nation-state? Or will it? And why, for many in our churches, does asking the previous question call into question the questioner's appropriate loyalty to our country? Or does it?

Why is there not as great an outcry against a conservative republican caught in obscene predatory sexual behavior with a minor as there was against a former president's sexual transgressions? And why won't the impeachers of that president want to remove any from office who are found to have covered up this latest sexual sin? Or, will they?

Why would we be more troubled about a governor who announces he is leaving his wife for his gay lover than we would be if we learned that another conservative governor had sold state contracts to her largest campaign contributors? Or would we?

And why for many of us do such questions as these seem relatively insignificant compared with the need to grow our churches? Or do they?

Of course, the list goes on, but perhaps these are enough to kindle a little prophetic spark (or just get me in trouble)!