



PATMOS

A VISION FOR OUR TIMES



THE NEED FOR PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY: THE CHURCH HOLDING THOSE IN POWER ACCOUNTABLE

by Marie Joy Pring, Ph.D.

There is a siren song that has been plaguing the Filipino church for too long: “do not mix religion with politics.” Many have fallen prey to this call. This quote by an American sociologist and preacher could be seen posted in many pastors’ social media accounts: “Mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure. It doesn’t do much to the manure but it sure does ruin the ice cream.” This distasteful image certainly leaves many aghast and leaves an impression that religion and politics should never be put together. Yet when one is reminded that the most vulnerable of our kababayans resort to scavenging restaurant bins for leftovers to wash and reheat this discarded food into a new meal infamously known as “pagpag,” one realizes that religion cannot stay silent. For our brothers and sisters living in the peripheries, the smell and taste of food from trash are not unfamiliar. The pagpag culture in Filipino urban slums is incongruent to the confession that the Philippines is the only Christian nation in Asia. Faced with this reality, religion must begin to raise its voice to challenge and critique the systems that cause this dissonance, including the leaders who operate and run these political structures.



THE NEED FOR PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY

Throughout the Bible, we discern a constant tension when it comes to political leaders: the practice of the occupants of public offices and the will of God for what those positions entail. We know very well the narrative of Saul and Ahab whose self-seeking ways failed leadership, and ultimately, to their own demises. Even David did not live up to the standards of his office; he used his power and influence to steal his soldier's wife and murder him to save face. Leaders in authority often do things their way, as Allan Storkey has put it, "they rule as they rule." Whenever leaders would forget the purpose of their power and how they should act before God, the prophets held them to account. Elijah, Nathan, and the many other prophets of old reminded the political leaders that their deepest accountability is to God and that in the name of God they should carry the task of public service and leadership with earnest faithfulness.

There is a need for the church to revivify her prophetic role, especially amidst a time of gross abuse of power. What this means for us is to go beyond lip service to God's Word, and live out a spirituality that is similar to the prophets of the Bible—a spirituality characterized by suspicion towards concentrations of wealth and authority, by resistance to principles that place causes over human beings, and by protest in behalf of the marginalized and disenfranchised. It is a spirituality of courage and profound assurance of hearing God's voice, so much so that people are willing to be in harm's way only to speak the truth. We practice this spirituality not only as individuals committed to righteousness and justice but more so as a community in a covenant to image Christ within the brokenness of our society today.

Prophetic spirituality does not stop with truth-telling. While its more pronounced task is holding leaders accountable via prophetic speech, its other task is of greater weight and is requiring greater spiritual energy: to imagine an alternative reality. Walter Brueggemann calls this prophetic imagination—a task that "holds the potential of unleashing a community of power and action...towards new social possibilities." For instance, when Pharaoh and the rest of Egypt saw families of slaves—Moses saw a nation rising. Another example is Joshua and Caleb: the other spies saw giants and saw that a life of slavery was more desirable than a life of struggle for freedom. Not, Joshua and Caleb, they knew they are not grasshoppers compared to the Canaanites, they saw a land flowing with milk and honey—the realization of the very promise of God.



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As God's community that holds people in power to account, we do not only point out what is not in line with God's Word but also direct them to a hopeful vision with our words, choices, and way of living. We do not stand before political leaders as police, we come to them as prophets—bringing instructions and direction from God's Word. What truly sustains the prophetic work in transforming society, far more than righteous indignation, is this hopeful vision of shalom. Even more, in this vision of shalom, we stand alongside those in the public office. All of us are accountable to God for what we have made our society to be.

As we enter a crucial phase in our national life this 2022, may we be unabashed in the practice of prophetic spirituality. The church needs to cease “ameliorative ambulance service,” remarked by Desmond Tutu, and begin “its call for the eradication of corruption, for an end to the abuse of power, [and for] the need to empower the powerless.” With the wisdom of God's Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we need to allow biblical values influence the public square: speaking to people in power with grace and truth, as well as envisioning together a nation of righteousness and peace.

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