

Not Living on Bread Alone: Theological Education as Prophetism

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Introduction

Recently I asked my friend Rene Futi Luemba, a minister from Kinshasa, Congo, to tell me what he thinks evangelical theological education should look like. He said: “The aim of theological education must be to produce prophets.” His reply was profound and demanded to be unpacked. Theological colleges should be “schools of prophets”, “bands of prophets” or “sons of prophets”—characterizations taken from the earliest stages of prophecy in Israel during Samuel’s, Elijah’s and Elisha’s times.

However, prophecy in the Old Testament was not static. Throughout Israel’s history the voice of the prophets accompanied God’s people in the best of times and the worst of times. It critiqued, challenged, condemned but also empowered, comforted and healed. Prophets took God’s revelation seriously; they took God’s people seriously; but they took their ever-changing context and how God worked in the unfamiliar, hostile surrounding world just as seriously. Today it is their writings, a rich and varied legacy of prophetic tradition contained in the whole of Scripture, which continue to be *our* theological educators. If our institutions are to train prophets, what are some of the areas these prophets are to be trained for (and by prophets I do not just mean preachers but also counsellors, youth pastors and Sunday school teachers)?

1. Alerting the Church to “Fertility Cults”

St. Paul in Romans 1:25 said that humanity “exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.” This is essentially how fertility cults work. “Since the success of agriculture and husbandry was the primary necessity upon which all else depended, it was natural that the earliest societies in the Near East associated the divine with the productivity of the land.”¹ In such cases then, objects of welfare are the source of life and the deity becomes the *means* to that desired end. The deity is thus manipulated through magic, rituals and incantations in order to secure the people’s desired goals.

In Greece we no longer worship suns or rivers. Our fertility cult has taken a more contemporary form. You may be familiar with a variety of fertility cults in your context, but ours is called secularity with a special emphasis on capitalistic endeavors; at least this has been the emphasis until the economic crisis hit like a tsunami and caused people to start reconsidering these values. Although secularity is known by its rejection of the divine, when the church adopts

¹ Joseph P. Healey, “Fertility Cults,” *ABD* 2:792.

it, it does not necessarily throw out its beliefs in the transcendent. The church is able to adapt its doctrine to a secular mindset, and indeed there are multiple secularities in the world today. The God of the church may be permitted to remain seated in our pews and to adapt to our secular way of thinking and being. But why do I call secularity a “fertility cult”? Charles Taylor comes close to describing secularity as a “fertility cult” in his book *A Secular Age*:

I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.²

The lack of allegiance to anything beyond “bread,” i.e. human welfare or flourishing, is a point characteristic of the fertility cults of old despite the fact that means of flourishing are deified or that deities are used as *means* to the desired end of flourishing. Christianity *does* value human flourishing but there remains a fundamental tension. As Taylor says, “Flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal.”³ A concern about this allegiance to flourishing is also expressed in the *Cape Town Commitment*:

[L]ike Old Testament Israel we allow our love for God to be adulterated by going after the gods of this world, the gods of the people around us. We fall into syncretism, enticed by many idols such as greed, power and success, serving mammon rather than God. We accept dominant political and economic ideologies without biblical critique⁴

The church is often unaware that its allegiance has shifted, that it is beginning to mirror the secular society because its “evangelical” rhetoric is usually maintained. The “spoken” allegiance differs, but the “acted” allegiance is often the same as that of the secular world. Prophets are thus to be educated in reflecting on the ways of society and the church and developing the ability of social and religious critique.

However, even the institutions within which prophets are trained are not immune. In Greece, as I am sure in many other countries, the majority of churches believe in lay service. No salary is offered to a theological education graduate. Very few exceptions may be made for popular preachers, but generally speaking, most ministers are tent-makers. When it comes to women, of course, there are almost zero opportunities for hire in ministry. Under these circumstances, not only is there no time for theological education for these pastors who have to balance maintaining a job, pastoring and caring for their families, but also for young people, who are at the point of considering a career, there is lack of motivation for theological education and ministry. It appears as if one does not require the other.

Even in the context of churches who *would* offer a salary to pastors, we often have a hard time recruiting students to be trained for such ministry. Theological education can simply not compete with other career options one is considering. Theological institutions could not possibly

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 18.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

⁴ *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action* (The Didasko Files; Bodmin, UK: Lausanne Movement, 2011), 11.

advertise that the economic and prestigious paybacks that theological education offers can outweigh the acquisition of those benefits from another source. I often meet Christian parents who discourage their children from pursuing theological studies since this field would never measure up to the more profitable and prestigious careers their children could have.

But this phenomenon is not limited to the European context. Elewani Farisani mentions the words of a former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, who has on numerous occasions discouraged young South Africans from enrolling for Biblical Studies. He said, for example: “If you qualify and come out of teacher training, for instance, with Biblical Studies you are not going to get very many jobs for that.”⁵ Farisani says that Mbeki regards Biblical Studies, and by extension Theology, as disciplines that “are not readily marketable except in teaching.”

In the secular capitalistic world, people have a limited amount of time and money and their interest is to invest them in the place that would generate most capital (both economic and social). Therefore, apart from those who claim to have a personal clear calling to this “leap of faith” called theological education, prospective students turn down even the minimum of one year of theological studies.

Please note that we are not critiquing the most basic natural need of humans to earn their “bread”. We are critiquing “living on bread *alone*.” There is a very thin line between the two. Secular values can be so subtle and may convince us that we are *starving*, that we in fact do not *have* bread, thus making the pursuit of theological education appear as an act of *suicide*, blinding us to its life-giving benefits for the spiritual lives of our church communities. The prophet Amos comes to mind, whose “bread-earning” was disturbed for a risky, but nevertheless, higher cause. Yes, prophets may often find themselves taking a “leap of faith” into the unknown, making great sacrifices, abandoning the nets and following a rabbi who Himself had nowhere to lay His head. But for what purpose? Why such sacrifice? In order to preserve the *meaning* of our existence, a life beyond “bread.” We need arts, we need literature, we need the humanities, but above all we need theology, His word, for this is what gives meaning to our existence. In our secular world with its “fertility religions” it will take sacrifices to preserve this meaning and pass it on to the next generation. Theological education must go on even if no one is willing to pay for it. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die,” and we do not hide this reality from our prophets. We teachers often collect money to support a student who took that leap of faith. Prophets will understand other prophets because they are the first ones to see the value of this sacrifice. Solidarity is expected not only among individual prophets but among schools of prophets. We must devise ways of helping each other and sharing the burden of preserving this treasure that has been handed down to us.

2. Exposing the Church’s Pious Talk

It is often difficult for the church to discern when they are “living on bread *alone*” because they *talk* about their reality as if living by “every word that comes out of God’s mouth”. It is an image constructed by “comfort talk” that does not always correspond to the reality it describes. Prophets are trained to discern this “pious talk” as Isaiah does in 29:13: “...this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.” It is amazing how he was able to perceive that even with the cult functioning regularly!

⁵ Elewani Farisani, “Impact on New Policy Developments in Higher Education on Theological Education,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (July 2010): 291.

This mode of existence is very subtle because the way of the church may be indistinguishable from the secular way but the manner in which the church interprets her life, thoughts and choices is dressed in “pious talk”. One example from my Greek context is how the *Sola Scriptura* principle is used by evangelicals to define themselves over against the Greek Orthodox. The principle becomes a distinctive of identity rather than an expression of the church’s practice. The reality is that there is hardly found a *Sola Scriptura* church with serious scriptural catechism for all its members, but even when a church attempts to provide such programs, they are only successful if they do not interfere with our “bread” pursuits. Moreover, only a tiny minority would regard theological education as indispensable to being “evangelical,” even an “evangelical pastor.”

“Comfort talk” is also active in the Greek Orthodox tradition which uses its doctrine of eucharistic unity in communion to define itself over against protestant denominationalism. However, on the ground, and especially in the Greek context, the situation does not correspond to the romantic realities this doctrine describes. The Orthodox church is fragmented between vocal fundamentalist and nationalistic groups opposing others of a more ecumenical orientation.⁶

The role of the prophets is to subvert the church’s “comfort talk” by pointing out the dissonance between life and doctrine. The wealth of scriptural examples of the prophets’ subversion is astonishing.

The New Testament prophet, John, in Revelation 3:17, reveals the dissonance between the church’s self-perception and the actual reality: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

In Amos’ time the eschatology of the expected “Day of the Lord” was used as “comfort talk” instead of transforming Israel’s lives in anticipation of such a day. Amos scrapes the surface of this pious talk and reveals the inconsistency between their life and eschatology.

Jeremiah in his temple sermon criticizes their *chatter*: “Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’ (7:4). A precious and holy place ordained by God had become the very thing that deceived them into false security. It had become an identity marker that had substituted the reality it was meant to signify. Richard S. Briggs uses Jeremiah’s sermon and substitutes the temple by scripture. He writes: “‘This is the Scripture of the Lord, the Scripture of the Lord, the Scripture of the Lord.’ The implied shock would be worthy of Jeremiah’s temple sermon.”⁷ What is condemned in this Jeremiah-like critique is the reliance not on Scripture’s teachings, but on using the doctrine of Scripture as an identity marker that would offer one false security. In 2007 in Budapest Chris Wright said: “My big concern is not just that the world church should become more evangelical, but that world evangelicals should become more biblical.” This statement calls us to get behind the labels and identity markers which may have deceived us into thinking that we are in fact biblical only because we are evangelical.

⁶ See Petros Vassiliadis’ description of Orthodox theological education, which in my opinion is more prescriptive rather than descriptive, Petros Vassiliadis, Eleni Kasseluri and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Theological Education in the Orthodox World,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys* (eds., Dietrich Werner et al.; Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 603-622.

⁷ Richard S. Briggs, “The Bible Before Us: Evangelical Possibilities for Taking Scripture Seriously,” in *New Perspectives for Evangelical Theology: Engaging with God, Scripture and the World*. (ed., Tom Greggs; London: Routledge, 2010), 14.

These doctrines and jargon have anaesthetized the churches to the realities and idols they have subscribed to unawares. Heidegger described this talk as “idle talk” (*Gerede*). Our interpretation of reality no longer contributes to our understanding of it. It functions like “gossip” or “passing the word around”, as he says. And because this talk is passed around it is not able to reveal something about reality, but rather it obstructs the genuine understanding of reality.⁸ Heidegger says that “an understanding of what is talked about is supposedly reached in idle talk. Because of this, idle talk discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back.” Our “traditional, doctrinal” talk about our reality can actually blind us to the reality being talked about.

When the secular tradition is subtly taking over our evangelical ways, even though we continue to call them “evangelical” then we have a case of “colonization.” Secularity establishes itself as the only “sensible” way of thinking and acting and we are conforming to it. But some of us are resisting. “Living on bread *alone*” cannot characterize us. We refuse to reduce humanity’s needs to just “bread”. Humanity survives on “bread” *and* “the Word,” or rather, it does not simply survive – that is how it is able to live *fully*! Peter Berger calls us a “cognitive minority.” He says that “those to whom the supernatural is still or again, a *meaningful* [and here I stress meaningful and *relevant*] reality, find themselves in the status of a minority, more precisely, a cognitive minority . . . a group formed around a body of deviant ‘knowledge’.”⁹ Something like . . . prophets, perhaps? Prophets should thus be trained to discern through the “pious talk” and see whether our narrative has been colonized. Are we living out our evangelical identity or have we unwittingly surrendered to a fertility cult?

3. Appropriating the Text

It is extremely difficult to define evangelical identity. One of the most “effective”¹⁰ definitions that has enjoyed general acceptance¹¹ was offered by David Bebbington¹² and more recently, Timothy Larsen.¹³ Prior to these, J. I. Packer had identified six evangelical fundamentals.¹⁴

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; repr. ed.; New York: Harper, 2008), 210-214.

⁹ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 5-6.

¹⁰ This is the description used by Mark Noll for Bebbington’s definition, Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 16.

¹¹ Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (eds., Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 1-2.

¹² He identifies the following four distinctives: *conversionism* (the belief that lives need to be changed); *activism* (the expression of the gospel in service and mission); *biblicism* (the belief that the Bible contains all spiritual truth); and *crucicentrism* (a stress on the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross), D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-17.

¹³ Larsen attempted to contextualize Bebbington’s definition by relating it to the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield. Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” 1.

¹⁴ These are: a) the supremacy of Holy Scripture; b) the majesty of Jesus Christ; c) the lordship of the Holy Spirit; d) the necessity of conversion; e) the priority of evangelism; and f) the importance of fellowship.

However, the more elements used to define evangelicalism the more uneasy our modern-day prophet, John Stott, felt with these definitions. He argued that we should avoid adding anything “alongside such towering truths as the authority of Scripture, the majesty of Jesus Christ and the lordship of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ As the subtitle of his book shows, “a personal plea for unity,” Stott was very keen on promoting unity by distinguishing between what belongs to the center and what belongs to the circumference, thus allowing as much room for variety in the elaboration of evangelical faith. Indeed Stott was one of the few evangelical thinkers who experienced evangelical faith as it is expressed globally, in a variety of forms and contexts, something which no doubt made him reluctant to homogenize evangelical thought and expression.

I will focus on the authority of Scripture, the first element mentioned by Stott, due to its recognized centrality for evangelicals and theological education in particular. The sacred text is our common world heritage, preserved and handed over to us by both persecuted poor and elite benefactors and collectors. The fact that different types of books from different authors, different ages and contexts are brought together to form a canon shows that *many* voices can simultaneously speak as *one* voice. The historical and the particular can at the same time be trans-historical and universal. No one book can exhaust truth but it is only when all voices come together, bound to each other that we can see the fullness of revelation. I think the same is true of the reader. Isolated reading communities need to enrich their understanding of God from other communities or traditions or they may be in danger of shielding themselves against any possibility of reform. One should hear what the Spirit says to *all* the churches, as we are in fact reading what the Spirit said to Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi.

Because the texts, by becoming a *canon*, have been elevated from the historical to the trans-historical, the prophet’s task is *not* to be solely a historian (that is the secular focus usually to which all of you here refused to limit yourselves). The prophet is to uphold this dual nature of the scriptures by repeatedly *rescuing* the text from the irrelevancy of being a historical relic. It is read and reread through the ages, by different communities in different contexts and is constantly appropriated in a dynamic way into their lives. We have not received a one-size-fits-all *interpretation* of the text that can dispense of the text once this interpretation is adopted, but it is the re-readable, re-interpretable *text* that is able to be in a dynamic relationship with its readers.

For this reason, prophets in *every* context must be trained in the biblical languages because this is the means through which the text is able to be revisited for fresh understandings and to be *owned* by every context. Contextual interpretation is first and foremost contextual *translation*. My own research in the Septuagint has confirmed how theologically *influenced* translations usually are. Abandoning the biblical languages in theological education would amount to surrendering the interpretation of our sacred texts to foreign interpreters. The last decades have convinced us of the indispensable role of the reader, so much so that he/she cannot be substituted by another.

But let us not fall back to the “comfort talk”. Scripture can very easily be brought in to serve our “fertility cults”, it can be used to promote apartheid, it can be used to justify nationalism, wars and oppression, promote our political parties and their agendas and establish a prosperity gospel. The Bible can even be used *against* biblical education, if you can believe that!

They are mentioned by John Stott in his *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 27-28.

¹⁵ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 27-28.

These are some of the worst examples of reading the text within a closed unchallenged community. Yes, we may be reading our Bibles but isolated exegesis of the text is not enough. Knowing the biblical languages and mastering all the exegetical tools is inadequate. We are only one book in the canon of Christ's universal body. If Christ is the truth, then all the members of His body must speak it and live it, and all members of His body must hear each other. Not only His body that is visible now on this earth, but His body that went before us, the church fathers, the reformers, all history of interpretation must be heeded. And this heeding of different diachronic and synchronic voices and traditions does not usually happen within a church or denomination, but in the context of multi-denominational theological education, in libraries, in friendly debates and in co-operative ministries. To be "biblical" is not a simple or easy task. The question is: How can we ensure that we are biblical *without* reading our "fertility cult" into the text? How can we shield *against* shielding ourselves from the disturbing voices of the prophets?

Concluding Remarks

Having been trained to study and identify our society's "fertility cults" and critically discern realities behind the surface of "pious" chatter, the prophet has done the work of putting our lenses of reading the text under scrutiny. But what now? Is the prophet able to take us back to a golden age of uncontaminated reading and an uncontaminated church? Are the prophets not a product of their culture also, limited to their community's understanding? Yes, they are. Therefore, prophets must continually defamiliarize themselves from the text as well as from their tradition by remaining open to the interpretation of the other, by stepping in the shoes of the other and looking upon their own tradition as in need of rethinking and readopting anew. Did not Isaiah look at Israel and Israel's election from the perspective of the nations? Did not Job, a non-Israelite teach us about Yahweh? Did not Abraham see his sin before God through the conviction of Abimelech, the king of Egypt? Did not the wonders among the Gentiles make the Jerusalem council understand the words of the prophets on how the booth of David is being rebuilt?

This is the burden of the prophets. They carry the weight of the people of God on their shoulders. They cannot settle, become comfortable, feel at home. The role of evangelical theological education is to encourage, support and equip prophets who will be able to identify our fertility cults which claim our allegiance. They will be able to expose our pious talk that deceives us and reveal hidden allegiances we are unaware of. They will be able to show us life beyond "bread", by rescuing our texts from oblivion, re-reading them for us and opening our ears to what the Spirit says through the other, show us truths from unexpected places.

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