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THE RETURN OF THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY OF THE WESTERN CHURCH WITHIN  
THE CONTEXT OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE CLASSICAL PROPHETS

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## INTRODUCTION

While there may still be churches in the West that take up the prophetic call against injustice their voices are the minority. Generally speaking, the prophetic church in Western Christendom is dead. Its prophetic voice has become mute. Its prophetic vision has diminished. Its prophetic call has vanished from the ears of its members. The Western Church has lost its prophetic role in the Global World. The prophets of the West have vanished. However, the prophetic call has been taken up by a new church tradition that rises upward from the ruin of oppression. The Southern Church of the developing world has taken up the prophetic mantle in its fight against injustice. The voices of the prophets cry out from the South in the form of liberation theology. This postmodern method of interpretation speaks from the social context of poverty and subjugation. In many ways, liberation theology embodies the prophetic movement of the Old Testament.

Liberation theology, precisely like that of the prophets, reintroduces the ancient words of *fpvm* (*Mishpat*) and *qdx* (*Tsedaqah*) along with their divine implications. It is in the context of liberation theology that the voice of the prophets is flourishing. Nevertheless, the prophetic call can once again thrive in the West in the church by attending not just to the South but also to the ancient voices of the prophets themselves. The prophets of the Old Testament are the original advocates for justice and righteousness. They speak up against the iniquities of society for the poor, oppressed and marginalized. They are the vessels for the Spirit of God and they utter the Word of the Lord against the evils of a tainted society. The prophets of Israel are the preachers of social, religious, economic, and political reform. It is in these sacred texts that the prophetic imagery of Western Christendom can be restored. The prophets were the foremost theologians of liberation and in their writings is the foundational model for the fight against injustice. This

prophetic model (along with the Christ event) is the building block for liberation theology. The reestablishment of the prophetic model is needed for the Western Church to regain its prophetic character.

The aim of this paper, is to examine the prophetic message of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets through the lens of liberation theology. This paper also argues that, just like the prophets, the Church is likewise called to fight against the injustices of the world. First, I will start by defining liberation theology. Next, I will introduce a model of prophetic ministry that is found within the works of the 8th century prophets. Lastly, I will then argue why the Church itself must take up the prophetic call against injustice and how it is crucial in its participation to the *Missio Dei*.

#### LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS THE VOICE OF THE PROPHETS

This section will focus on liberation theology itself and its connection to the prophetic movement in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The first part will deal with liberation theology as it is seen in its postmodern context. This is vital to the disputation of this paper because it is through this renewed lens of interpretation that the Western Church faces the horrors of subjugation in the postmodern epoch. The second voice will then deal with its prophetic connection to the 8th century prophets.

#### **What is Liberation Theology?**

Most scholars attribute the modern development of liberation theology to the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez of Latin America. To Gutierrez, liberation theology “expresses the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes.”<sup>1</sup> Liberation theology can be simply designated as an interpretive approach to Scripture

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 36.

in the social context of poverty and oppression that advocates for Christian activity on behalf of the marginalized majority. Though postmodern liberation theology finds its roots in Latin America both Africa and Asia has helped in its development. Liberation theology is directed by two cardinal principles. The first deals with theology as a vital observation that accompanies a commitment to liberation, making theology itself a “second act.” The second is the articulation of theology from the attitude of the helpless and persecuted. The goal of liberation theology is twofold: (1) to be a voice for the helpless and oppressed and (2) to charge for action on behalf of the helpless and oppressed.<sup>2</sup>

Justice and righteousness are the two major themes that flow from liberation theology because from these two themes comes liberation. To the liberation theologian, liberation of the poor and marginalized is both “a commitment to God and as the mandate of covenant response from God’s people.”<sup>3</sup> In the eyes of the liberation theologian, God is the god of the oppressed. The three major biblical sources this interpretation stands on are: (1) the Exodus event, (2) the Prophetic writings, and (3) the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Although the Exodus event is highly emphasized in Latin American liberation theology the other two still hold prominence within its wider use. In the context of the Christian religion, Christ as liberator, takes on the cardinal idea of Christian liberation theology. Liberation theologians emphasize the more tangible dimension of biblical salvation, the notion of physical deliverance from captivity and oppression.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark E. Taylor “Liberation Theology” in NIB, Vol 3, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2008. 253

<sup>3</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, “Liberation” in NIB (New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible) Vol 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. 652

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. DU Preez. “Social Justice: Motive for the Mission of the Church”, *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, 36-46 and T. Howland Sanks, “Liberation Theology and the Social Gospel Variations on a Theme.” *Theological Studies*, 41 no 4 Dec 1980 668-682

Liberation theology focuses more on the experiences of the poor and marginalized than on objective theological concepts. The liberation theologian demands for action against the injustice of the oppressor. The theology of the liberation theologian is historically rooted in the context of their social environment. T. Howland Sanks writes, “A theology that does not take sufficient account “plausibility structures” of the social in which and for which it is intended to function will be literally incredible. If theology is to be vital, it must be responsible to the social, economic, and political factors which are “real” for that society.”<sup>5</sup> Postmodern theological interpretation is founded on this principle. Liberation theology speaks of activity in both the heavenly and the earthly realm. God does not act solely in heaven, but cares for the oppressed and acts on their behalf. The Church in the eyes of the liberation theologian does not exist for itself, but it functions for others. Liberation theology is “directed toward action in the political, economic, and social spheres.”<sup>6</sup>

### **What is the Connection with the Prophets?**

So what connection do the prophets of the Old Testament have with this postmodern interpretation? The solution is uncomplicated, the message of the prophets is one of the foundations for liberation theology. As stated above, the prophets were the foremost advocates for justice. For the prophets, “justice is a socioethical norm that is used to discuss and critique the interaction between different social groups in the biblical communities. The topics of morality and socioeconomic relationships were a major issue for some of the classical

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<sup>5</sup> T. Howland Sanks, “Liberation Theology” 668 Furthermore he writes, “This implies that theology is, to some extent, determined or conditioned by those social factors. This affirmation of the particularity of every theology needs to be balanced by a historical awareness which is wider than the particular social context. That is to say, no theology and no social context is so unique, so particular, that it has nothing in common with any other theology or any other experience of the Christian community through the ages.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 672

Prophets.”<sup>7</sup> The Prophets bring the voice of the oppressed, poor, and marginalized out to the world. They speak on their behalf and call for action in the name of Yahweh. The prophets critique and challenge the corrupt social, religious, economic, and political institutions. Like that of liberation theology, Yahweh is the bringer of justice and righteousness, who hears the cries of the subjugated. The iniquity of Israel and Judah, according to the prophets, is the principal reason for the coming of the destructive Day of the Lord. Harold V. Bennet writes,

The prophets indicate that a host of problems were features of the socioeconomic landscape in the biblical community, and that these dilemmas contributed to the perennial dehumanization of a category of socially weak human beings. The oppression was not merely a passing phase in the historical experience of marginalized social subgroups; rather, it was the continuous denigration of a class of human beings.<sup>8</sup>

The Classical Prophets’ (Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah) critiques against their social environment parallel with that of the liberation theologians. This is because the prophetic call and movement is that of liberation. The Classical Prophets embodied the theological and philosophical concepts of liberation theology. The ancient tradition of the Exodus event runs strongly in the compositions of the Classical Prophets. In the eyes of the Classical Prophets, Yahweh acts on behalf of the oppressed and it is within this natural process that true justice is served. Their preaching is strongly rooted in their own social, political, economic, and spiritual setting. They speak from the experience of their calling against the forces of oppression and injustice. Terence E. Fretheim speaks of the prophets’ message having a “public character” and addressing “themselves publicly to the entire community,” because “these prophets believed that

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<sup>7</sup> Harold V. Bennet, “Justice, OT” in NIB, Vol 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. 477 He further writes, “In response to the assumption that oppression is part of the socioeconomic backdrop against which to interpret texts that deal with the dilemma of widows, strangers, orphans, and other groups that exist on the periphery of the social structure, care must be taken not to associate all ideas about oppression with purely economic phenomena. Concluding that oppression is solely an economic circumstance robs this phenomenon of its distinctions.”

<sup>8</sup> Harold V. Bennet, “Justice, OT” in NIB, Vol 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2008 476

the future of their communities was at stake.”<sup>9</sup> Fretheim further argues that the prophets view the issues of social justice “to be very public matters in which the community must become deeply involved in seeking to resolve the issues raised or it would face a disastrous future.”<sup>10</sup>

Both the Classical Prophets and the liberation theologian view the issues of social injustice as public matters that must be dealt with by the entire community. The liberation theologians of Latin America, Africa, and Asia have brought to the public eye the injustices of their community and demand for action. The Classical Prophets also called for action from their communities and demanded justice to be done or divine justice would fall upon them. The Southern Church has held up the prophetic mission of justice in the theological movement of liberation theology by taking up their model of dissent against injustice. This model, which first takes its development in the writings of the Classical Prophets, has become the driving force of the liberation movement of the postmodern era. As stated above, it is this model that the Western Church must both learn from and adapt in order to regain its prophetic voice.

#### HOW THE CHURCH CAN BECOME PROPHETIC

The goal of this section is to propose the idea of reestablishing the importance of the prophetic voice for the Western Church through the lens of liberation theology. Their message, though the oppression of the poor was a major theme, was not only centered on the lower strata of social class. There is a bigger agenda behind the preaching of the Classical Prophets which is carried on in liberation theological studies. This paper will be dissecting the texts of the Classical Prophets’ style of preaching and ideas, in an effort to understand the sublime painting of the prophetic movement against injustice.

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<sup>9</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The Prophets and Social Justice: A Conservative Agenda,” *Word & World*, Vol 28, 2, Spring 2008, 161

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 161

The focal point was not purely towards the sufferings of the miserable, oppressed and marginalized, but they also spoke up against the corruption and failures of the foundations of society. Also the prophetic model of ministry, though it concentrates on the prophetic critique of the institutions of society, paints a more extensive impression of God's justice and righteousness. The prophets did not completely despise the wealthy and those in political power. What the Classical Prophets despised the most were those institutions that allowed corruption and injustice to run astray because of wealth and force. The monarchy and the Temple were supposed to be institutions under the rule of Yahweh, however, they had become tainted by the earthly desires of its leadership and members.

Why is this important and how does this relate in regaining the prophetic voice in the West? This is significant because one must genuinely realize what it means to accept the mantle of the Classical Prophets. The prophetic voice carries "the word of the Lord" and is occupied with "the Spirit of God." This prophetic model does not just focus on their criticisms against the social injustices of the societal institutions, alike that of liberation theology, but it also emphasizes the other dimensions of their prophesying. The prophetic part of the Western Church must not only focus on the earthly socioeconomic and sociopolitical injustices. Prophetic ministry must also focus on the injustices of the religious institutions, including the Church.

### **What is Wrong with the Western Church?**

Brett Younger is correct when he writes that "[t]he church has enough ministers who want to be efficient, effective, and successful. We need passion, anger, and desire."<sup>11</sup> Younger in his article *Calorie Counting Ministers in a Starving World*, deals with the problem of the Church

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<sup>11</sup> Brett Younger: "Calorie Counting Ministers in a Starving World: Amos 5:14-24", *Review & Expositor* 110, (2): 298



lacking prophetic ministers. Younger writes, “Our vision for ministry is too small for a world where people are hungry. How can we be satisfied with maintaining an institution when children starve? How can we spend our time on the trivial when mothers have nothing to eat?”<sup>12</sup> What does he mean by this statement? Where are the ministers of the Church going wrong? Younger answers these queries as he composes,

We do not want to admit that what we have has anything to do with what others do not have. We do not want to feel guilty for an expensive car or two televisions or five different kinds of cereal in the pantry. We want to keep buying things that we do not need. We do not want to imagine how we would explain to hungry child why we do not share more of what we have. Our vision for ministry is too small to include needy children.<sup>13</sup>

According to Younger the Church has become manipulated by the infection of capitalism. The ministry has lost its prophetic purpose for they “do not want to feel guilty” about enjoying the pleasure off the expense of others. This is one of the major critiques of both the liberation theologian and the Classical Prophets. The minister does not want to challenge the injustice of the world because of the guilt they will feel. Still, I think Younger’s critique runs deeper than that. As he claims, “[w]e want to keep buying things that we do not need.” Prophetic ministry means sacrificing which many ministers, at least according to Younger, do not want to do. They want to remain in ignorance so they could continue in their unjust living. Using Amos 5:14-24 Younger claims that Amos “is angry at religious folks who do not care about starving people.”<sup>14</sup> He further writes that ministers today only care that the sanctuary being crowded and the balcony being full. They do not want to give because of the risk of being “over budget.”<sup>15</sup> Younger even claims that, even though they “have more programs than ever,” concerning the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid 296

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 297

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 297

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 297

poor; “Amos knows something is terribly wrong. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The wealthy have summer homes by the lake. They eat and drink too much. They live off capital gains while the poor do not have enough to survive.” In other words, the church is not doing its task in the fight against social injustice.

The critique and challenge of Younger loudly parallels with that of the Classical Prophets and the liberation theologians. The prophetic imagination of the Western Church has become blinded by capitalistic ideas. Ministers, “falls for the lies that state what matters is the offering plate,” and “think the purpose of worship is to keep people satisfied”.<sup>16</sup> This echoes what Amos had to face when he is told to by the High Priest Amaziah, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary and it is a temple of the kingdom.”<sup>17</sup> The message of Amos was unsatisfactory to those who were in power. Amos’ words challenged them, forced them to face their demons, and demanded for them to change. It is this message that Younger claims has been lost to the ministers of the Western Church because, “[w]e worry that we are going to hurt someone’s feelings.”<sup>18</sup>

The Western Church has lost its purpose in the world and has forgotten its calling. The leadership of the Western Church has been conformed to the world and they have put the poor at the feet of the rich man. The “economic preferences of a materialistic society, rather than Jesus, have shaped our theology.”<sup>19</sup> If this is really the problem with the Church then what is it that the Western Church needs? What sort of leaders are needed to restore the Western Church’s prophetic vision? Younger answers this question by stating that the Church needs, “Amos, John

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 295

<sup>17</sup> Amos 9:12-13 NRSV

<sup>18</sup> Younger, 295

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 297

the Baptist, St. Francis, Martin Luther, Lottie Moon, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Tony Campolo, and Desmond Tutu.”<sup>20</sup> What the church needs are those whom “want what God wants”, and “worries about what God worries about.”<sup>21</sup> The Church needs a minister who “weeps over what God weeps over,” but who are not afraid to “push for what God pushes for.”<sup>22</sup> In the other words what the leadership of the Church needs are prophets.

### **What is a Prophet?**

Thusly it is clear in Younger’s critique against the ministry of the Western Church that there is a substantial need for prophets. Yet, what does it entail to be a prophet and who can be seen to be one? To resolve this inquiry involves a twofold response because a prophet carries two distinct elements: a prophetic characteristic and prophetic ministry. One of the most known “modern prophets” is Martin Luther King Jr who was both a prophet of the African-American church and a leader of the civil rights movement. He contained both the characteristics and the ministry of the Classical Prophets and King himself was strongly influenced by the preaching of Amos. King fought for the social justice of the marginalized Negro community of 1960 America during a time when racial discrimination was the norm. King, with a fiery passion that could only be parallel with the Classical Prophets themselves, challenged the social, economic, political, and religious institutions of his day in order to bring true justice and righteousness for the Negro people. King’s message challenged the very foundation of his society and brought about great reform. He led the African-American Church (along with other prophetic leaders) with a spirit that was ablaze with the justice of God and liberation.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid 298

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 299

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 299

Even so, what was it that Martin Luther King Jr. had that gave him the characteristics of a prophet? The prophet Micah, against the teaching of the false prophets, claims that a true prophet is: (1) filled with Power, (2) filled with the Spirit of God, (3) filled with Justice, and (4) filled with Might.<sup>23</sup> It is these four prophetic elements that construct up a genuine prophet of God. So how can one see these elements within a person? The response to this question is through the actions and ministry of the prophet themselves. When a prophet is stated to be “filled with power,” they carry greater authority. Their authority comes not from society but from God. It is God and God alone who bestows upon the prophets the authority to speak God’s word. The Spirit of God is the guidance of the Holy Spirit which validates their words. To be “filled with justice,” is to have the fiery passion for bringing forth God’s justice to the world. Lastly, to be “filled with might,” is to preach the prophetic word with boldness and assurance. The Classical Prophets came from all walks of life. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, Isaiah and Hosea were of priestly stock, and some scholars believe Micah may have been a local merchant in his town of Moresheth.<sup>24</sup>

The Classical Prophets (8<sup>th</sup> Century Prophets) were not of the prophetic cult, which implied that their office is of divine appointment. The Classical Prophets saw themselves as preachers of truth and justice because of the visions<sup>25</sup> they received from Yahweh. They exposed the injustices and inequity of their society, while also offering a word of hope and salvation by making known a vision of a new transformed way of life for their community. This again goes back to the teachings of liberation theology. Those who speak for the poor, oppressed, and

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<sup>23</sup> Cf Mic 3:5-8.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. James, Nogalski, James. *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*. Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011. 511 This assumption comes Micah’s main emphasis of the marketplace in his preaching.

<sup>25</sup> These “visions” included not only the divine images but also the divine dialogue spoken between the prophet and Yahweh.

marginalized did so by revealing the corruption of their society. The liberation theologian dives deep in the muck of exploitation and savagery in order to proclaim the truth to the world. Truth brings about justice, which was a concept the Classic Prophets themselves held in their prophesying. Articulating the preaching of the Classical Prophets, Michael Candelaria writes,

Amos, the shepherd from Tekoa, petitioned for justice...be established in the gates, the provincial courts...Hosea, the son of Berri, admonished Ephraim and Judah to “observe kindness and justice”...Isaiah the son of Amoz, defined justice in concrete terms as the reproofing of the ruthless, the defending of the orphan, and the pleading for the widow...he portrayed justice as an attribute of Yahweh...Micah insisted on the doing of justice as the center of the cultus...he denounced the oppressive structures of sin headed by the political, economic, and religious dominators. He condemned the status quo as a system of injustice and violence directed against the working class, the poor of the land, and the people of God.”<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that it was their ministry that made them prophets. They spoke out against the injustice of their society in ways that demanded change. They were speaking a prophetic ministry that has been missed in the Western Church, but is strong within the context of liberation theology. The function of prophetic ministry, “becomes an important ingredient that needs to be spoken, particularly with respect to the economic structures that oppress the poor in the global village of today.”<sup>27</sup> So, the question then would be, what is prophetic ministry? According to Mark W. Hamilton in his article, *Preaching for Days to Come*, he writes that prophetic ministry is built up of four major components.<sup>28</sup>

### **Calling into Question Cherished Assumptions**

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<sup>26</sup>Michael Candelaria, “Justice: Extrapolations from the Concept *mishpat* in the Book of Micah.” *Apuntes* 3, (4): 75-76

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 76

<sup>28</sup> Mark W. Hamilton, “Preaching for Days to Come”, *The Living Pulpit*, Oct-Dec 2008. 6

The first element is that prophetic ministry calls into question cherished assumptions of the community. These assumptions to Hamilton are, “whatever severs ties between human beings as participates in divine *shalom*.”<sup>29</sup> This means that the prophetic minister in their ministry must challenge any assumption that is seen as a threat to the Peace of God. These assumptions lay in the social, political, religious, and economic realms of society. These are realms that the Western Church has been fearful to tread on due to past mistakes and ignorance. The prophet does not hesitate in challenging cherished assumptions because the prophet speaks with power, might, justice, and is filled with the Spirit of God. The prophet boldly calls out the errors of preconceived opinions and ideas in order to reveal the injustice that it maintains.

The clearest case is found in Amos 5:18-27. In this passage the prophet Amos redefines the theological concept of the Day of Yahweh. In the beginning this day is considered to have been a day of celebration and deliverance due to the Israelites’ covenant connection with Yahweh. Due to this theological understanding the injustices of Israel were not dealt with because of the lack of fear the Israelites contained. They regarded themselves as completely protected from the effects of their actions and continued to act out in sin and commit injustice. On the other hand, Amos challenges this assumption by asking “Why do you want the day of the Lord?” Amos continues by proclaiming that the Day of the Lord, “is darkness, not light”, which completely reverses the false hopes of his hearers.

Amos is able to challenge such a “cherished assumption” because he had a well-defined understanding of their traditions. The power of Amos’ preaching (as well as that of the other Classical Prophets) is not in presenting something totally fresh but to exhibit a redefined outlook on original cultural traditions. As Fretheim writes, “It is not that the prophets had nothing new to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 6.

say about social justice, but they were radically consisted more in their rhetorical strategy than in their ideas, in their forceful and intense way of speaking older understandings into a new time and place, and by the remarkable way in which they go “in your face” with respect to long-standing communal commitments.”<sup>30</sup>

The prophetic minister must be well informed in the traditions their community. The liberation theologian communicates from their cultural context and speaks out of their cultural experience. The liberation theologian knows the social, religious, political, and economic situations of their environment. This is a concept that has been lost in the Western Church in many ways. As Younger states above, the minister has become willfully ignorant of the consequences of the actions of their people. They have become too fearful to act and speak out against the injustices of their society. One of the major assumptions the Western Church must challenge is the concept that slavery is over. Yet, according to the writers of, *Modern Slavery*, “There are twenty-seven million slaves alive today.... These people are paid nothing, are economically exploited, and are under violent control.”<sup>31</sup> Most people in the Western Church knows nothing about modern slavery because it is veiled in a network of fictitious names, corruption, unforced laws, and ignorance. The prophetic ministry brings light to injustices such as modern slavery and present them to the world along with a call for action.

As Maake J. Masango writes, “It is clear that doing or acting on public theology simply means participating in the public life as churches. It means embracing a public paradigm of caring for poor people in the same way our Lord did.” In other words, in order for the Western Church to become prophetic it must act. Andy Flannagan claims that “if we truly desire to see

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<sup>30</sup> Friedman, 2008. 160

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Bales, Zeo Trodd, and Alex Kent Williamson, *Modern Slavery: A Beginner’s Guide*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2009, vii of the preface.

the political system “cleaned up,” it is much more likely to happen when those who have that passion become involved...Our engagement or lack of it reveals how much we really care. Will we simply critique like the Pharisees, or serve like Jesus? The salt and light thing really works. Light does illuminate darkness. Salt does preserve the meat.”<sup>32</sup> Liberation theology calls for the action of the Christian Church on behalf of the poor, oppressed and marginalize. It was a call in the 1950s the Western Church took during the Social Gospel Movement and it was a call in the 1960s that the African-American Church took during the Civil Rights movement. Why were these two Western Christian movements so prophetic? It is because its leaders did not only challenge the cherished assumptions of their society, but they also offered an alternative vision of reality.

### **Offering an Alternative Vision of Reality**

This is the second element of prophetic ministry Hamilton presents. Concerning this element he writes, “The creators of the prophetic books recognized a dialectical relationship between doom and hope, such that indictment always presupposes superior alternatives, while promises of relief assume that we need to be relieved of something. Yes and no always converse together.”<sup>33</sup> The Classical Prophets present this alternative vision of reality with their understanding of the Day of Yahweh. Amos had proclaimed to the Israelites that the Day of Yahweh was “of darkness, not light”, implying that it was a day of wrath and annihilation. This same concept is found within the writings of the other Classical Prophets, however Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah also give another alternative vision alongside that of Amos’ which is a day of

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<sup>32</sup> Andy Flannagan, “Five Reasons Why Christians Shouldn't be Involved in Party Politics.” *Political Theology* 12, (1) (February), 2011 6

<sup>33</sup> Hamilton, 2008. 7



regaining.<sup>34</sup> According to them, after Yahweh's wrathful punishment, Both Israel and Judah will be fixed and entirely of the depravity and injustice will be wiped away from the face of the earth.

They preached of a day when peace will rule forever (as in Micah's Messianic oracle) and the people will always be in communion with God (as spoken of in Hosea and Isaiah). Hamilton claims that, "[w]e are tempted to think that perhaps preaching can no longer engage in the business at all, and we must leave social criticism to the proliferating Christian hard rock bands and still independent movie makers."<sup>35</sup> According to Hamilton, the Church does not see any need to interfere with the "business" of providing a vision of alternative reality against social injustice. The leaders of the Western Church (along with its members) have placed all their prophetic responsibility in the hands of celebrities, politicians, and teenagers who uses the internet. However, this is not what the Church is called to do in its prophetic ministry. The prophetic minister, as seen in liberation theology, is called to promulgate a vision of hope for the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

As a mode of pastoral care, reconciliation should focus on caring for the oppressed, marginalized and rejected people of God. It should also address those who oppress them. In other words, the prophetic ministry of caring raises up the needs of the oppressed in the same way that Jesus did, according to Luke. For Jesus, pastoral care has a crucial communal dimension, initiating persons into communities that nurture the faith and sustain individuals in their efforts to lead faithful lives while under the stresses of everyday life in a predominantly secular world. These days we are challenged by a circular global village that continues to create poverty through the greed of a few rich countries.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Hos 1:10-2:1, 2:12-20, 11:1-12:1, and 14:1-9; Mic 2:12-13, 4:1-13, 5:1-9, and 7:18-20; Isa 1:27-37, 4:2-6, and 14:1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, 2008. 7

<sup>36</sup> Maake J. Masango, 2010 3

Martin Luther King Jr's speech "I Have a Dream," is the strongest example there is when it comes to the prophetic alternative of reality. In his speech King, envisions a time when there is no longer any racial discrimination between the masses of America. He envisions a time where blacks and whites could live in harmony together without hatred, strife, or envy. When King spoke, he did not speak of a time that may or may not occur. King spoke with the utmost trust that this day was coming to hand. As he proclaimed in the final words he delivered before he was shot, he may not be there when that day would arrive but that day was certainly coming. The same is for the Classical Prophets. But as they anticipated the coming of God's wrathful punishment against Israel and Judah, they also foresaw God's forgiveness and the restitution of God's people. Neol Woodbridge and Willem Semmelink writes concerning the churches in Africa,

Churches have a special function to serve as God's agents in civil society. Their prophetic witness can be a vital source of guidance for public discourse in the social arena, since, through a knowledge of the scriptures, they know 'the indisputable moral truths on which a society depends, such as the dignity of every human being' and the need for the poor to be protected against social injustices – a moral principle for which the biblical prophets stood....<sup>37</sup>

The Western Church must, in its prophetic ministry, reflect an alternative vision than what is exhibited before them. The reality of oppression and poverty must be shattered by the reality of the Gospel message. The Classical Prophets shattered the false reality of security and prosperity for the Israelites and Judeans by preaching of the coming wrath of Yahweh. They also acquainted, to those who survive this wrathful day, a reality of restoration and redemption. In the reality of the Classical Prophets, the creation of injustice will be demolished and the old ways of

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<sup>37</sup> Neol Woodbridge and Willem Semmelink, "The Prophetic Witness of Amos and its Relevance for Today's Church in African Countries for Promoting Social Justice, Especially in Democratic South Africa." *Conspectus (South African Theological Seminary)* 16, (September):2013. 85

justice and righteousness will be reinstated. However, the prophetic ministry must not only bring change to the community outside of them, but it must also bring change to the community where that ministry comes from.

### **Alternative Visions with a Clearly Religious Cast**

The third element of prophetic ministry community's relationship with God. As Hamilton rightly states, "Prophetic preaching must do more than call us to social justice. It must call us to God."<sup>38</sup> What Hamilton is dealing with here is faith. Hamilton claims that "faith in God is as demanding and rare today as it was when Luther fought indulgences as a means of grace or Wesley tried to make an aristocratic church responsible to the needs of spiritually starved Christians." In other words, the prophetic preacher always dealt with the lack of faith within the community because of the misconception of faith being the "easy way out, seeking refuge in obfuscatory feel-good language that makes meaningful change impossible."<sup>39</sup> The community's understanding of faith is shrouded by the illusions that faith has limitations. Humanity cannot see beyond its own personal wants and needs. There is no longer any imaginative trust in the power of faith. As Hamilton further states, "Faith is hard, and preaching that calls to faith calls us to something at once impossible and absolutely essential. Faith in God is hard precisely because it calls upon us to imagine things we cannot see."<sup>40</sup>

Hamilton is speaking against those communities of faith that simply limit their commitment to justice and righteous. These communities are blinded by the impossibility of the task and simply give up or do as much as "their budget" allows them to. They are shaped by the lie of their limitations. Prophetic preaching shatters that illusion with true ministry that calls the

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<sup>38</sup> Hamilton, 2008. 7

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 7

community to God. True faith, as James proclaims in his epistle, brings about true works. There are no limits when it comes to faith in God. The community must be shaped and reenergized by its faith in God and the prophetic preacher is called to do so in their ministry. As Paul proclaimed, “those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.”<sup>41</sup> Paul argues that prophesying is an amazing spiritual gift because it builds up the community of faith, bring encouragement and consolations to them. To Paul, it is the gift of prophesying that would making the nonbeliever, “bow down before God and worship him, declaring, ‘God is really among you.’”<sup>42</sup> Hamilton also makes the argument that “it has even proven possible to separate a Christian commitment to justice from faith, as though justice were the highest Christian virtue, or even its sum total.”<sup>43</sup>

The prophetic preacher is called, according to Hamilton, to recover the concept of justice coming out of faith. It is the community’s faith in God that leads them to do justice. The Classical Prophets all call their communities to return to God and in doing so justice and righteousness will reign. The two are not separate but are intimately connected. Through faith comes *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*. This is what prophetic ministry must claim to the Church. It is through their faith and trust in God that they can bring true justice to the world. This faith will both encourage and empower the community to overlook their limitations and go beyond into the realm of impossibility.

### **The Recognition and Acceptance of the Prophetic Voice**

In specifying the fourth and final element of prophetic ministry Hamilton writes, “For the church to exercise a prophetic voice, we must address and sustain prophetic preachers.”

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<sup>41</sup> 1 Cor 14:3

<sup>42</sup> 1 Cor 14:25

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, 2008. 7.

Hamilton claims that the Church must seek out those who extend the curtain of the oracle.

William S. Stafford in his article, *The Call for a Prophet*, writes, “In that America, God raised up a prophet, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His mission was to call America to embrace justice, to call us to the equality of the most moving and image.”<sup>44</sup> King’s calling to the office of prophet is at no means challenged. However, King was recognized by the African-American Church to be a prophet, which led him to be given a leadership role in the Civil Rights movement. Hamilton is stating that the Church must learn to recognize those who carries the ministry of the prophets. As stated above, all four Classical Prophets were chosen by God and given certain gifts so they could prophesy, which God is still doing today.

Unlike the Israelites and Judeans, the Church must be able to seek out the prophets within their congregations in order to restore the prophetic voice of the Western Church. Nevertheless, the Western Church is not looking out for prophets in the church. In many ways, they are telling the prophets not to prophesy. The Western Church wants a minister who will make them feel good and safe. They cannot handle the words of liberation because those words bring pain, sorrow, sacrifice, and humiliation. The Western Church does not want a minister who proclaims to them what is right and what is wrong because those concepts is up to the individual. Members of the Western Church want to persist in their tight little bubble where no damage can occur upon them. They do not desire to learn about the young woman in the brothel in Thailand, the family forced to produce bricks in Pakistan, the woman beaten and abused in India, or the boy soldier being killed in Africa.

The Western Church is afraid to seek out prophets like Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. They do not want these kinds of prophetic ministers because their

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<sup>44</sup> William S. Stafford, “The Call for a Prophet,” *Sweanee Theological Review* 49:3 (Pentecost 2006) 362

words convey a modification which is both painful and earth shattering. They do not give up because they do not desire to harm the feelings of others, but speak the truth no matter the danger. The Classical Prophets spoke the truth in order to carry out God's will. Their words were thunder, their voice shook the world and their actions caught hearts ablaze with both guilt and promise. These are the people that the Western Church is afraid to embrace but in the end they must embrace them. Hamilton writes,

Seminaries can do many wonderful things, but they cannot create prophets. Of course or field education unit can instill courage, insight, and a radical commitment to building communities of hope. The most those of us who teach in seminaries can do is to point to models, ideas, and texts and to build networks of support. The church as a whole must refocus some of its energies toward the creation of women and men who will help us articulate a vision of humankind made whole....The character of the prophet deserves more attention than we have given it.<sup>45</sup>

Not only is it the responsibility of the Church to find these prophetic ministers, but also to help cultivate them and support them in their ministry. The Western Church needs prophetic leaders to help shift the focal point of the church, which will produce an environment that will cultivate new prophets. Liberation theology is that key needed to help shift the perspective of the Western Church. Its strong emphasis of fighting social injustice carries the spirit of the prophets. That spirit can uplift the silent and broken Western Church to once again become a voice for justice and righteousness. Liberation theology brings awareness, intention, and reasons to act. As Martin Luther King Jr once wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea."<sup>46</sup> Just as the Christian Churches in America are ignorant to the injustices

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<sup>45</sup> Hamilton 2008. 8

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. *Why We Can't Wait*, New York: Signet Classics, 1963. 87

of their country so the Western Church cannot no longer ignore the injustices occurring around the world.

However, the prophet preacher must also get strength from the prophetic church where congregations take the risk of faith and service. Just as King and the other Civil Rights leaders did, the prophetic minister must have the support of the faithful. Although the Classical Prophets' preaching was powerful and validated, their proclamation fell on deaf ears because they were a lone voice "calling from the wilderness." King in his prophetic preaching was both potent and influential however most of his force came from both God and the African-American Church. Those powerful voices of liberation theology are supported by the people of their community of faith who share in their vision and passion for justice and righteousness.

#### CONCLUSION

To reason out this report, several loose ends need to be drawn up. Foremost of all, the prophetic model of ministry presented above is only one step of many that are needed for the Western Church to regain its prophetic voice. Second, even though only the writings/examples of the Classical Prophets were used the rest of the prophetic material in the Old Testament contains other useful information for the prophetic model of ministry. Likewise, the habit of the Classical Prophets was limited due to the size of the paper, although more elaboration could have been considered in several of the sections. Third, there is the lack of more precise information concerning liberation theology itself concerns both its history and influence. All the same, the major point was to get the connection between liberation theology and the Classical Prophets. Fourth, there is the lack of New Testament references concerning the prophetic call of the Church. Since the Western Church is a Christian institution, the inclusion of the New Testament

material would have supported my argument even more. However, as stated above, the purpose of this paper was the mainly focused on the writings of the Classical Prophets.

This paper is a growing study of how the Western Church can be an important force in the fight against injustice. Modern slavery, economic corruption, religious disorder, and high-grad poverty are only a few of the injustices that both the message of the Classical Prophets and liberation theology can be used by the Church to combat and there are many more still. The Western Church can learn so much from the deep wells of liberation theology. The spirit of the Early Church which preached, taught, and acted on the love, mercy, justice, righteousness, and hospitality of God can bring reclaimed. The Western Church must rekindle its prophetic passion or it will surely die. The Southern Church is growing because of its passion for social justice and its strong emphasis of communal relationships. It is the responsibility of both the leadership and laity of the Western Church to take on the prophetic ministry.



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