

SPIRIT-BAPTISM AND THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

PROLOGUE

"I sat there among them, *stunned*, for seven days."
Ezekiel 3:15, NRSV

The prophetic imagination

It has been another long hiatus away from *Perichorus*. But for more than a year and a half now, I've found myself captivated by the title of Walter Brueggemann's book, *The Prophetic Imagination*.¹ Brueggemann begins by sharing how he decided on the book's title. He thus recalls his early fascination with Paul Ricoeur's observation on the "the word of the Lord"—the *d•b•r* of God. Ricoeur argued that by His Spirit, God speaks a word through the medium of human imagination. Brueggemann argues that Ricoeur's work shows us how "texts—in particular biblical texts, are acts of imagination that offer and envision 'alternative worlds.'"² God thus endows humans with "the generative . . . power of imagination."³ When God grants us a glimpse into His own heart, we see more clearly His own dream towards creation. We thus receive what Brueggemann calls, an "alternative consciousness." This is an alternative consciousness that is antithetical to the prevailing consciousness of our present age.⁴

Brueggemann spent his whole career exploring the "prophetic imagination." He in fact defines the entire Old Testament as a historical "enterprise of counter-reality."⁵ Brueggemann has long argued that the God's providential shaping of the Old Testament Scriptures, illustrates how He bestows upon His people, a capacity for "subversive" imagination. It all began when He liberated the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. For in doing so, He created within their hearts, a vision for a new world. The prophetic imagination thus involves the capacity to "generate, evoke, and articulate alternative realities, realities that counter what the prevailing consensus declares impossible."⁶

According to Brueggemann, the "prophetic imagination" is both an epistemological (how we know what we know) and linguistic (how we say things) gifting of the prophet. It is linguistic in that the effective and appropriate delivery of prophesy is usually spoken through the symbol-rich genres of story, poetry, song, lyric, lament, and doxology. Brueggemann calls these genres the "language of amazement." This points to their power to "amaze" and capture our imagination towards realities vastly but wondrously counter to oppressive realities often dominating the human condition, and creation altogether, within this present evil age.⁷ I believe that Brueggemann had indeed well conceptualised the performative and creative power inherent within any "word" spoken by the Holy Spirit, particularly when such a "word" (Heb. *d•b•r*) arises from the biblical narrative.⁸

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress; Fortress Press, 2001).

² Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, x.

³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, x.

⁴ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 76.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 68.

⁷ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 21, 40, 45, 67.

⁸ The prophet ministers through "means of word, spoken word and acted word, to contradict the presumed reality of his or her community;" "the speech of God" thus seeks to create "an alternative future;" Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 63, 64; Terence E. Fretheim, "Word of God," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992; 1997).

Brueggemann also recalls how the title, *The Prophetic Imagination*, reflects the influence of Abraham Heschel. In his classic text, *The Prophets*, Heschel examines the “consciousness” of Israel’s Old Testament prophets.⁹ Heschel gives special attention to the prophet’s consciousness of God’s *pathos*. *Pathos* refers to how God feels towards a situation threatening His creation, especially the divine-human relation and dialogue. “Prophetic utterance . . . is as if the words gushed forth from the heart of God, seeking entrance to the heart and mind of man.”¹⁰

Heschel’s nuance is not on the prophets’ consciousness into the human situation. He rather focuses on how God discloses His heart and feelings about the divine-human relation.¹¹ God enables the prophet to hear His voice. When the prophet hears God’s voice, the prophet therefore “feels His heart. [thus] He tries to impart the *pathos* of the message together with its *logos*.”¹² Reflection upon Heschel’s insight led Brueggemann to conclude, “the prophetic must be imaginative because it is urgently beyond the ordinary and the reasonable.” Therefore “established institutions and social conventions are deeply inhospitable to such imagination.” It is this reality which makes true prophets something of “extremists” within a given setting.¹³

Brueggemann’s aim is to explicate how the prophetic imagination ought to inform and shape the Church and all Christian ministry. Brueggemann argues that: “The tasks of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness . . . [that is an] alternative to the consciousness . . . of the dominant culture around us.”¹⁴ In other words, Brueggemann is attempting to help the Church realise that her existence and purpose within the human situation, ought to be deeply informed and shaped by the prophetic tradition. This prophetic tradition underlies Jesus’ vision towards the church, when He identifies believers as “salt” and light” as were “the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:12).

I should recall one other reflection Brueggemann shares, regarding how he arrived at the phrase, “prophetic imagination.” He mentions that shortly after his book was published, he by chance came across Frederick Asals’ study on the Roman Catholic novelist, Flannery O’Conner. The title of Asals’ book is, *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*.¹⁵ O’Conner was well-known for her “savage” and stinging critiques of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet she remained throughout life, a Catholic. What most caught Brueggemann’s attention however, was the coincident title of Asals’ sixth chapter: “The Prophetic Imagination.” This confirmed to Brueggemann that, “the joining of ‘prophetic’ to ‘imagination’ leads inescapably in an artistic direction in which truth is told in a way . . . that assures it will not be readily coopted or domesticated by hegemonic interpretive power.”¹⁶ He then quotes Asals’ text on O’Conner life: “As a writer of fiction, Flannery O’Connor simply had no interest—no imagination for a socially desirable Christianity.”¹⁷ Asals perceived that this was most unfortunate not only for O’Conner, but even more, for Roman Catholicism:

“. . . as the institutional guardian of the prophetic Word, the church has hardly been hospitable to the individual voice crying, ‘Thus sayeth the Lord.’”¹⁸

⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962; HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2001), xxi.

¹⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 7.

¹¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 623-625.

¹² Heschel, *The Prophets*, 31.

¹³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, xv.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

¹⁵ Frederick Asals, *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, GO: University of Georgia Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, vx.

¹⁷ Asals, *Flannery O’Connor*, 227; quoted in Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, xv.

¹⁸ Asals, *Flannery O’Connor*, 215; quoted in Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, xiv.

Pentecostalism at the crossroads

Now here is the story behind my own fascination with this enchanting phrase, *prophetic imagination*. It began in April last year, 2007. A comment was sent to *Perichorus* in response to my blog entry titled, *The Vocational and Prophetic Purpose of Spirit-Baptism; Part 1 of: Our Need For A Fresh Baptism In The Holy Spirit.* The question reads:

"What is your understanding between Lukan, Johannine, and Pauline Spirit-baptism?"

I immediately replied that I would provide, within three weeks, a response. At that moment, I did have an immediate answer; but I've not yet shared the answer.. And up to now, my answer remains the same, although certainly broader and more complete. Yet I still have not responded to the email. Now, almost a year and a half has passed. But I've yet to answer the question: "*What is your understanding between Lukan, Johannine, and Pauline Spirit-baptism?*"

For several reasons I've been restrained from answering the question. One has been the sheer preoccupation with other diversions and endeavours. These have oftentimes kept me away from the blog; at times, other endeavours have also diminished motive towards uploading blog entries, particularly towards this comment. These diversions have included matters such as work or domestic concerns, or having to focus on ministry endeavours. But there has been times I simply lost motive towards expending any effort into the blog.

But I believe that the main reason why I've not yet responded to the comment, is that when it came, I found it conveying a depth warranting some extended reflection. After all, that same question has preoccupied biblical and theological studies for more than thirty plus years. Even more, it directly points to the distinctive message and ethos of Classic Pentecostalism. It even more points to why this movement exists as a needful communal *charism* within the larger Christian faith and in the world as a perennially prophetic and apocalyptic witness to the coming Kingdom.

So after receiving the question, I spent several weeks seeking out how I might best articulate a response. But diversions began cropping up. Yet when time permitted, I continued to engage the question. Soon I found myself amassing endless typed paragraphs with no seeming conclusion. Eventually, I found myself having to wholly step back away from it. It all reminds me of Ezekiel's encounter of the Spirit:

"I sat there among them, **stunned**, for seven days." (Ezekiel 3:15)

But I am now about to respond to the question. The question sent me however on a different journey. That journey focused even more on how the Pentecostal experience of Spirit-baptism ought to grant us, as Brueggemann so aptly argued, a *prophetic imagination*. Even more so, my answer to the question has now evolved into an extended discussion regarding the fact that Pentecostalism today is at a crossroads. For in spite of its existence within the global Christian tradition and movement as a seminal witness to the coming Kingdom, Pentecostalism is now waning as a revival movement.

Pentecostalism wanes because as a revival movement, so many of its communal centres and streams throughout the world, are now both knowingly and unknowingly retreating from the movement's seminal and perennial role within Christianity. It also wanes as all revival movements do, when they fail to negotiate the eventual and critical crossroads they must inevitably face. A crossroad between death as a dying, magisterially controlled traditionalism, or evolvment into a living yet matured tradition that is nonetheless faithful to its perennial calling and purpose— through its most enduring paradigms, values, and ethos, as a needful communal *charism* within the larger Christian faith tradition, as a perennially prophetic and apocalyptic witness to the coming Kingdom.

There is hope however for the movement's continued role as a renewal movement within the greater Christian movement and in the world. From the Azusa Street Revival, Pentecostalism emerged as a prophetic "voice," both within the universal Church and to the world. It has existed as a voice that is congruent to a peculiar ethos, story-world, and value-

system, which arose from its distinctive experience of the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit, through “latter day” outpourings of the Holy Spirit. The future of Pentecostalism hinges on whether we can once again recover our “prophetic imagination.” To envision a renewed emergence and manifestation of this “prophetic imagination,” through the renewing of an authentic Pentecostal ethos and spirituality, thus defines the intent of this discussion.

For now, this discussion comprises the following four parts:

Part 1: The Revolutionary Power of Pentecostal Spirituality

Part 2: The Decline of Pentecostalism as a Revival Movement

Part 3: A Vision for True Pentecostal Revival

Part 4: The Prophetic Purpose of Spirit-baptism

The prophetic purpose of Spirit-baptism

Part 4 of this series will exclusively provide an answer to the question regarding the meaning of Spirit-baptism in view of how the imagery varies between the Lukan, Johannine, and Pauline writings. It will thus exclusively answer the question, “What is your understanding between Lukan, Johannine, and Pauline Spirit-baptism?” I have almost completed the draft for Part 4; but its still not ready for publication. It requires a just few more clarifications and touchups, which I hope to resolve within the next few weeks.

My answer will essentially affirm that the Classic Pentecostal experience of Spirit-baptism is indeed primarily a vocational-prophetic anointing of the Spirit, which is essentially nonsoteriological in purpose. The essay will thus also affirm that the such an experience is a distinctive doctrine taught through the narrative of Luke-Acts, as a highly focused development and continuation of Old Testament themes which often narrowed God’s presence and power, into a vocational and prophetic anointing of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s portrayal of the Spirit is indeed therefore, instructively narrated according to Old Testament images of the Spirit as the presence and power of God, minus much of the soteriological nuances associated with the Spirit throughout Paul’s writings.

I want to argue that we must appreciate and approach the idea of Spirit-baptism as a metaphor. A metaphor that is capable of multiple meanings, according to its placement and use within a given text. We cannot approach this metaphor of Spirit-baptism in a reductionist manner. For as a metaphor, the idea of Spirit-baptism is capable of different meanings, in different biblical texts. It can thus in different context, refer to different experiences or encounters with the Holy Spirit. Concerning the tradition of Luke-Acts however, I am therefore convinced that there the metaphor foremost and symbolically, describes initiation into the vocational prophetic anointing. This anointing is available to us through what we should rightly call, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I want to thus affirm that the metaphor of Spirit-baptism within the context of Luke-Acts, can and should be rightly understood, appreciated, and called, the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit.

While the Pentecostal experience of Spirit-baptism is essentially nonsoteriological in purpose, the experience nonetheless creates in the believer’s life, a *prophetic imagination*. The Holy Spirit empowers believers with this prophetic imagination, through which we envision and bear witness to realities of God’s kingdom that radically challenge and subvert the prevailing and oppressive false realities indicative of this present evil age. It is this *prophetic imagination*, which thus enables us through the Pentecostal anointing of the Holy Spirit, to speak the “word of the Lord.” This “word of the Lord” speaks into the futility of this world’s age. But it is also a creative word which envisions and contributes to the creation of a new world order, which is even now, emerging out of the ashes of this present age.