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Samjung Kang-Hamilton

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# Prophetic Christian Formation: Lessons from Jeremiah

SAMJUNG KANG-HAMILTON

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In Jeremiah 6.16, the prophet says, “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of the well-worn path emphasizes the wisdom of choosing some options rather than others. Like the ancient readers of the book, we also stand at a crossroads when it comes to the formation of Christians as bearers of the church’s prophetic mission.

For Churches of Christ standing at the crossroads, a renewed interest in prophetic Christian formation helps us return to ancient paths, or at least to nineteenth-century ones. As Richard Hughes has reminded us, we stand in the tradition of Barton Stone, who read the Bible in such a way that it led him to liberate slaves he had inherited and to work for peace, justice, and righteousness.<sup>2</sup> Reclaiming the ancient paths for us may mean abandoning the road we have traveled for the past two generations in order to return to one blazed by the quarter of the Bible that consists of prophetic texts that point us toward a greater awareness of the sovereignty of God and our own social responsibility. This will demand that we begin to think of the Bible as a formational document for active Christians.

Such a move not only reconnects us to the best elements of our own past, it also helps us engage our contemporary world better. The church has lost its prophetic voice in a world struggling with poverty, hatred, and fear. We have become identified with the structures of power to such an extent that we find it difficult to present a Christian counter-vision of the world. And even within the church, more and more of us find that our language and practices relate very little to the realities of the world. Thus, the need for a prophetic church has never been higher, and the need for prophetic Christian formation has never been higher, especially when we conceive of our task as “to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness of the dominant culture around us” (to use Walter Brueggemann’s language).<sup>3</sup>

At this point, let me clarify what I mean by the words “formational” and “prophetic.” As John Westerhoff has put it, “formation is an intentional effort to engage in enculturation, the natural process by which culture, a people’s understandings and ways of life, their world view (perceptions of reality), and their ethos (values and ways of life) are transmitted from one generation to another.”<sup>4</sup> I distinguish this from the narrower word “education,” which has come to focus on the transmission of knowledge by means of schooling. All education is formational, but not all formation is educational. And the shift from education language to formational language enables us to create patterns of learning and doing in church that will allow us to reclaim our prophetic heritage.

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1. The metaphor of ancient paths can have several meanings. For a discussion of options, see Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (Anchor Bible 21A; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 435.

2. Richard T. Hughes, “Churches of Christ, the Lure of Christian America, and the Loss of the Kingdom of God,” *Leaven* 13/4 (2005): 202-6.

3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 13.

4. John Westerhoff, III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000), 139.

By “prophetic” I mean that the church as a whole, and each of us as individuals, bears witness to God’s desire for justice and peace among all human beings. Prophetic formation means that the processes by which we as the church reflect upon and model behaviors, patterns of interaction, and language all reflect this vision of justice and peace. Biblical prophecy and contemporary formation have similar purposes, namely, to address the significance of God’s actions in our daily lives and to help us respond appropriately as just individuals and communities.

In reading Jeremiah, I find at least four major dimensions of prophetic Christian formation. Jeremiah invites his readers (1) to liberate the oppressed, (2) to practice justice especially through the Sabbath, (3) to listen to God, and thereby (4) to reform their community into one of hope. Each element in this list advances a Christian formation that speaks prophetically to the world.

### **DIMENSION ONE: PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN FORMATION FOR LIBERATING THE OPPRESSED**

Throughout Jeremiah, we read of Yahweh’s desire to liberate the poor, the alien, the widow, and the orphan from various forms of oppression and to reintegrate them into society as full participants. Prophetic spiritual formation takes such a desire into account, framing liberation in broad terms and recognizing that both the oppressed and the oppressor must change. The question is, how do we do this?

To take one example, Jeremiah 8.18–9.11 contains oracles in which God laments the behavior of Israel. This startling text portrays Yahweh mourning both the brokenness of Israel and the nation’s refusal to be healed. The text says

Hark the cry of my poor people  
from far and wide in the land:  
“Is the Lord not in Zion?  
Is her king not in her?”  
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me (8.19, 21)<sup>5</sup>

They are all adulterers, a band of traitors.  
They bend their tongues like bows;  
they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth;  
for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord (9.2–3)

Jeremiah’s audience experiences the consequences of its own self-oppression. While we might try to interpret Judah’s situation in terms of class struggle or the mistreatment of the poor by the non-poor, Jeremiah thinks in terms of the collective whole.

What do we learn about prophetic formation from a text like this? First, it is interesting that the book of Jeremiah expects its readers to identify with Yahweh’s grief and confusion, because it is their own. They should agree that no one should act abusively, even though they may do so. They should agree that it would be better not to lie. This becomes even clearer when 9.4–5 portrays even family life as one of deception and oppression.

Second, by asking us to sympathize with Yahweh’s plight, and thus with our own, Jeremiah is trying to foster a prophetic imagination by means of which the non-oppressed think deeply about how the most basic structures of everyday life can both destroy us and help us destroy others. As William Sloan Coffin has put it, “The primary problems of the planet arise not from the poor, for whom education is the answer; they arise from the well-educated, for whom self-interest is the problem.”<sup>6</sup> We can be sure that Jeremiah is

5. All biblical quotations in this essay come from the NRSV.

6. William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 61.



addressing the non-oppressed because they are the survivors who have the opportunity to listen to, or read, books and think about them. They—we—have the power to change the world around us.

Third, Jeremiah links the call for an end to oppressive behaviors with the holiness of God. As chapters 7 and 26 illustrate most graphically, the prophet denounced the hijacking of religion to hide or justify the corruption of *shalom*. He makes it clear that God is absent from worship where there is no commitment to the rights of the poor (7.1–7). In texts like chapter 9, he tries to reclaim the holy as the environment in which justice occurs. Framing liberating moral behavior as a religious act allows a prophetic people to initiate practices that enhance peace and justice in the world.

Middle-class congregations ignore the prophetic passion for social justice to our peril. Although the topic of justice seems impolite to most of us, we cannot ignore it much longer.

### **DIMENSION TWO: PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN FORMATION AS KEEPING SABBATH**

Beyond talking politely about the need for social justice, congregations need specific practices to help them translate words into action. One such practice surfaces with Jeremiah's discussions of Sabbath. A prose story about Jeremiah in 17.19–27 records a sermon of his about the Sabbath. In ancient Israel, the Sabbath was a highly innovative way of rearranging the lives of individuals, families, and of the community as a whole. Keeping Sabbath forced individuals to reorganize their use of time, economic resources, family relationships, and so on. Since theirs was a society based on subsistence agriculture, keeping Sabbath implied deep trust in God. The Sabbath, because it took one-seventh of a person's life out of the economy, made space for self-reflection, care for family members and friends, and ultimately worship. Torah gives at least two rationales for Sabbath—identification with God's original and ongoing creative act (Exod 20.8–11), and celebration of God's saving work in the exodus (Deut 5.12–15). While Christians have not observed Saturday as a rest day for most of the past 2000 years, the principles underlying Sabbath certainly bear fruit in our own lives when we try to turn them into practices.

Practicing Sabbath is woven deeply into the fabric of the Bible. God rests, blesses the world, and thus makes it holy. The Sabbath expresses God's love through a gift toward humanity. As Christians, we do not live out the Sabbath principle merely by taking a day off, but by adapting ourselves to the rhythm of spiritual renewal, discipline, and participation in God's redeeming and liberating work in this world.

Jeremiah knows all this; hence his sermon. It occurs in a public space in the temple, and Jeremiah uses the location as a prop. He forbids the carrying of burdens on the Sabbath and promises social health if his hearers comply. Since the wealthy and powerful would be unlikely to carry such burdens, and since Jeremiah nevertheless addresses them, he must be forbidding them to force others to carry burdens. That is, he is agreeing with the rule in the Ten Commandments that everyone should rest, regardless of their social status (Exod 20.10; Deut 5.14). Sabbath is part of a lifestyle open to God, not just a rule. It is a shared way of life, a set of activities, and a piece of time that opens space for God and others.

The connection with Deuteronomy (see Deut 28) and the need to envision the future apart from clear precedent becomes even clearer in 17.26:

And people shall come from the towns of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord.

The promise anticipates a prosperous and reunited nation that includes territory beyond Judah in the northern kingdom of Israel.

What are the assumptions behind this promise? The storyteller and his character Jeremiah assume that if the faithful avoid mistreating their dependents on the Sabbath, the nation will prosper. *All* can bring

sacrifices to God. (We should remember that human beings ate the sacrifices in community rather than merely surrendering them to God. And Deuteronomy, which heavily influenced Jeremiah, counseled them to do all this in joy.) Or, to press this insight further, humans have a social life that transcends economics and hierarchies of obedience and command. They have purpose in community, which becomes real when they share in the worship of God. The story functions to remind them to do these things.

For us also, Sabbath has a role to play in the formation of a prophetic church. Sabbath was not merely quiet time in which individuals communed with God. It was also communal time. Through such practices as testimony, storytelling, prayer, resting, and hospitality, Sabbath time provides space for us to be open to God and thus open to each other. Such an openness breaks down the barriers that separate us and allows us to provide each other opportunities for fellowship, healing, reconciliation, and maturation.

### **DIMENSION THREE: PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN FORMATION AS LISTENING TO GOD**

Such a Sabbath-keeping lifestyle is possible for those who *listen* to God. Jeremiah uses the word *shama'* ("to listen, hear") 180 times. Often he uses the plural imperative form *shim'u* reminiscent of Deuteronomy (Jeremiah 2.4; 7.2, 23; 10.1; 11.2, 4, 7; 13.15; 17.20; 19.3; 21.11; 26.13; 29.20; 31.10; 42.15; 44.24, 26; for the singular imperative addressed to the whole people, see 22.2; 28.7; 34. 4; 38.20). With the exception of 31.10, every invitation to hear Yahweh's words introduces a warning. Listening to God equals repentance and change.

Such a call reflects a major theme of Jeremiah—the sovereignty of God. As Louis Stulman has argued, "Another salient point in Jeremiah that transcends the part and unifies the whole is the claim that 'Yahweh reigns'."<sup>7</sup> As Stulman goes on to point out, "God's dynamic sovereignty is administered primarily in acts of judgment and salvation in history." This becomes clear even when the book talks about the formational aspects of suffering and redemption as they play out in Israel's history.

A famous example of Jeremiah's attempt at forming readers as listeners to God comes in 31.34 as part of a promise of a renewed covenant: "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." God's movement first to forgive and reform leads to a new knowledge of the divine/human relationship. The promise of forgiveness, when read or enacted by readers of the book, becomes a performative utterance announcing present forgiveness. This performance introduces new knowledge. Interestingly, it also rests on an assumption, namely, that after exile Israel will finally get their faith right. In spite of everything, Jeremiah counts on a new attitude and new behaviors on the part of a reformed people.

Listening to God takes many forms in a prophetic church. Practices of prayer, meditation, imagination, fasting, testimonial, and critical reflection make such listening possible. This does not usually occur through the passive hearing of sermons. God speaks to us most of all when we engage in practices of justice of peace.

7. Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Biblical Seminar 57; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 109.



John Westerhoff reports a story that Catharine Dougherty tells about her friend, the Catholic social activist Dorothy Day.

One night, when the snow was falling, there was a knock on the door of their tenement in New York. At the door was a woman looking for a place to stay. Dorothy Day commented, "Oh my, we are already full, but come in, you can sleep with me." Dougherty is said to have taken her aside and asked, "Don't you see that woman is in the last stages of syphilis?" "No," her friend responded, "I can see only the image of Christ."<sup>8</sup>

We can hear God speak only through the sounds of human need.

#### **DIMENSION FOUR: PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN FORMATION FOR REFORMING A HOPEFUL COMMUNITY**

This leads me to a fourth aspect of formation that we learn from Jeremiah—the notion that all formation is re-formation toward solidarity with others, and thus that all formation is communal. The book of Jeremiah envisions the restoration of Israel to its land and to a rebuilt Jerusalem, in which the nation will live in a new covenant with God.<sup>9</sup> The restoration in question is, as Brueggemann puts it, "social, concrete, visible."<sup>10</sup> The difficulty lies in knowing what it means to undergo such a transformation.

For Jeremiah, becoming a community of hope meant adopting practices of justice and peace. As chapter 29 makes clear, it meant settling down and waiting for God while seeking "the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray[ing] to the Lord on its behalf..." (29.7). Jeremiah advised more than pragmatism. He counseled his readers to embrace normal human life under the conviction that a universal divine sovereign sanctioned work and family life.

For us twenty-first century Christians, reformation will look like the recovery of certain practices too often lost. Sabbath we have already talked about. Another such practice is hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger into our midst as both a gift and a challenge. Another is the exercise of the gift of leadership that helps us be more inclusive. Still another is prayer for the other.

When Christian formation takes as its purpose the equipping of the whole community to welcome the other to a hope-filled life, we begin to live out Jeremiah's vision for believers. The community's life then becomes a formational process itself, as we intentionally and persistently value actions and words that transform us and equip us for deeper actions and words.

#### **CONCLUSION**

As Christian teachers forming others, we are trying to hear Jeremiah as we think through what it means to form the church, and thus ourselves, for a prophetic mission. The exilic editors of the book combined poems, stories, and sermons from their past in order to speak to a possible future in which they would not repeat the old mistakes but would seek a path so ancient that it led to God. In doing so, the book explores dimensions of a prophetic people—not merely a prophetic individual—who can model hope in their day-to-day interactions.

How do we become such a people? Let me end my remarks with a quotation and a reflection. The quotation is from James Cone, who says that "Liberation is knowledge of self; it is a vocation to affirm who I am created to be."<sup>11</sup> He means, I take it, that liberation involves more than economic redistribution, or

8. As told by John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 38.

9. See the discussion in Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 151.

10. *Ibid.*, 152.

11. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1997), 134.

increased opportunities for this or that. It means nothing short of the change of the human person. Since we are social beings, such a change necessarily involves change within the group as well.

And now the reflection: To be formed as a prophetic church, we must be willing to change in ways that we cannot fully control or easily measure. We must discover a vision of God's gracious interaction with all of us that allows us to tear down the walls that divide us from each other and to build from their ruins a house in which everyone may have a room. Then we can truly live under a new covenant in which we know God, from the least to the greatest. Then we shall find rest for our souls.

**SAMJUNG KANG-HAMILTON** IS ADJUNCT PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AT THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN ABILENE, TEXAS.

