

***Prophecy Today: Reflections from a Southern African Context***

Kroesbergen, H

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The book promotes itself as a reflection on prophecy in the southern African context with articles by a select group of theologians and scholars of religion from Zambia and South Africa. However, in effect it is mainly (with a few exceptions) a discussion of the phenomenon of prophecy in Zambia, which is a by-product of the fast-growing Pentecostal and charismatic movements, from the viewpoint of the Reformed Church in Zambia. Eight of the contributions are written by lecturers at the Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia and two are provided by lecturers at the University of Zambia. The Justo Mwale University started as a theological college for the training of ministers in the Reformed Church in Zambia. Since 1989 other churches have affiliated with the theological school, such as the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (Zambia and Harare Synods), the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

Prophecy is defined (and limited) by the contributors from the Justo Mwale University to two different concepts: in terms of Pentecostals who regard prophecy as delivering a direct message from God and at times authenticated by wonders and miracles; and Reformed believers who view a prophet as a social activist who wishes to better socio-economic circumstances of citizens. In the first case, it is presumed by the authors that prophecy displaces the Bible, it is aimed at informing the individual about his or her future and is concerned exclusively with prediction. It promises wealth, prosperity and health to citizens who are the victims of various diseases, unemployment, childlessness and other misfortunes. In many instances it is accompanied by prophets who are covetous and greedy, making



business out of their followers' gullibility. The success of the African miracle-working prophets can be ascribed to their ability to provide in the direct needs of their clients, in the same way as traditional witch doctors who promise deliverance from blockages by evil forces and a breakthrough to a life of prosperity. In the second case, (Reformed) prophecy serves as a warning call to the community, addresses societal ills and in many instances critiques government and business for its ethical failures.

The South African contributions to the compiled work are on another level. For instance, Cas Wepener and Marcel Barnard use ethnography to describe their observations at a worship service of the Zion Christian Church in Marabastad, Pretoria and conclude that healing is probably the main reason why people join the ZCC (and the main reason why people worship in Africa). Healing is understood in a holistic sense, relating to provision in the actual needs of people. Prophecy and healing in the ZCC are closely connected, with many prophecies providing injunctions for the sick and poor to receive deliverance from their difficult circumstances. Prophecies serve within the context of pastoral encouragement and form the core ritual in typical ZCC worship, surpassing the sermon or sacraments as the main element in the service. Other contributions include Etienne de Villiers's inquiry whether ethics in the Reformed and prophetic approaches exclude each other. He concludes that they can be integrated into a Christian ethics of responsibility and used to complement and inform one another. There is also an article by Fritz de Wet that was published posthumously, where he argues that the full spectrum of authentic prophetic presence in society can only be unlocked when the words and actions of a prophet are pneumatologically embedded in the redemptive acts of God in Christ.

A major shortcoming of the book is that it is limited to voices from the Reformed tradition and nearly without exception does not provide perspectives from Pentecostalist or neo-Pentecostalist side—or even represents any such literature. In the process, a caricature of African prophecy is set up as a stooge that is then shot down. In an academic work that was peer-reviewed (as stated explicitly) this limitation is fatal, in my opinion, and does not represent a scientific way of doing theology.

Fact of the matter is that Pentecostals experience prophecy primarily as a confirmation of pastoral injunctions and encouragement by using the same language as those provided in the Bible. At the same time, it is directed to individuals and addresses their direct needs. However, in many instances it also contains social critique of unjust and repressive systems, whether in the church, government, business or in society's stereotyping of specific groups of people. Rarely does it contain prediction of the future, and when it does it is in a general sense and pastorally motivated, as in "The Lord wants you to know that he holds your future in his hand and he will guide you through difficult times."

Many Reformed theologians hold a cessationist view that precludes any supernatural intervention by limiting miracles and *charismata* with a supernatural element—like speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophecy—to the era of the apostles. They are compelled to interpret "prophecy" in terms of the contemporary ministry of the pulpit. On the

other hand, the Pentecostal movement justifies its existence in terms of restorationism, as a divine intervention to re-establish the charismatic element that characterised the early church, as portrayed by the New Testament. They expect supernatural interventions as a rule rather than the exception.

African cosmology believes in a spirit world which is well-populated by evil and good spirits. They do not see any solid line of demarcation between the sacred and the secular because the spiritual interpenetrates their daily world. Witchcraft and evil spirits are viewed as causative for the occurrence of some cases of death, barrenness, bad luck and misfortunes. Moreover, Africans need provision for coping with these challenges and the uncertainties of life that are occasioned by the activities of spiritual forces. For that reason they historically consulted diviners, revered people who by virtue of sensitivity to spiritual realities and special training can decipher the supernatural causality of affairs.

Pentecostalism's success in Africa (and the global South) is due, in the considered opinion of Harvey Cox in *Fire from Heaven* (1995), to the movement's ability to provide in the socio-cultural needs of specific groups of people and to speak to the spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond the level of creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness, into what Cox terms "primal spirituality." They minister in an acceptable idiom to contemporary people. For them, the boundary between natural and supernatural becomes permeable, and mundane elements of life are envisioned as the territory for supernatural exploits with signs, wonders and miracles becoming a part of daily life. They connect to the African where the need is, in the challenges they face in their daily lives. There are several elements of neo-Pentecostalist prophecy that concern me as well. However, I think that instead of viewing neo-Pentecostalist groups' success in Africa as a threat, as several of the contributors confess they do, they should rather learn some lessons from it. Only when Reformed churches function within and facilitate the African world-view will it be successful in winning more Africans to their denominations.