The Wild Goose

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The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of the return of the prophets, the “Spirit-bearing” men and women. Yet, sometimes church-life would be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.

Wild Goose Worship Group. What a wonderful name John Bell, Graham Maule, and others chose for their group formed in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1985 to sing and write new songs and hymns for the church.

The wild goose, in addition to the dove, is a Celtic Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes God’s Spirit hovers comfortingly like a dove. But the Spirit also surprises us and disturbs our plans. Like a wild and unpredictable goose, the Holy Spirit sweeps in unexpected, astonishing directions.

“We began singing and writing new songs not primarily because we were fed up with the old ones,” Bell and Maule explain, “but because others were and because we recognize that, in every era, Jesus looks for new bottles to hold his new wine.” With their prophetic texts matched to glorious folk music drawn from African, Asian, Central American, and their own beloved Scottish traditions, the WGWG continues to enrich the worship of God’s people worldwide.

The prophets of Israel were “Spirit-bearing people,” in the Septuagint translation of Hosea 9:7. Most of them were of the wild-goose variety, I suspect, because the wayward Israelites were complaining, “The prophet is a fool, the Spirit-bearing person is mad.”

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The first Christians, as we shall see, rejected this all-the-prophets-are-dead-as-the-dinosaurs view. They, like many Jews in the first century, had been waiting anxiously for a fresh visitation of God’s Spirit. They recalled God’s promise to send a prophet before the restoration of Israel, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4:5), and longed for a Spirit-bearing person to return to their land. Just listen to the early ‘buzz’ about Jesus: some said, “He is Elijah,” while others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old;” and King Herod worried, “He’s a man raised from the dead” (Mark 6:14-15).

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As the moderator, I presided at the monthly meetings of the church. Actually, not much ‘moderating’ was required: if committee reports were
prepared carefully and the potential problems were addressed, folks were anxious to approve these reports and adjourn quickly. The Spirit was present like a dove.

In one business meeting, however, the Spirit was like a wild goose, or a whole flock of them! We were debating a committee’s proposal to build a new sanctuary. One member stood up in the back and announced: “The Holy Spirit has told me this week that we should not build this sanctuary, for if we do, the church will grow and we will lose touch with one another. Our fellowship is too precious a gift to risk in this way.” There was silence for half a minute. Then a member right in front rose to speak: “I’ve been praying about this decision too,” she reported, “and the Holy Spirit has spoken clearly to me. We must build this sanctuary in order to extend our ministries to our growing town.” Now everybody was talking at once. Several tried to speak to the entire group, while others seized this opportunity to convince a person sitting in the next chair. A few stood to be heard, and only managed to block others’ view of the commotion. Visions of the dueling prophets and prophecies in the Corinthian church flashed across my mind.

I did not have a gavel, but fortunately I am equipped with a reasonably loud voice, so as loudly as I could I urged: “The Holy Spirit speaks to us collectively as a church, when we patiently listen to and carefully weigh these prophecies.” Actually, we did need to hear both of these prophecies, for the church needed both to build more space and to heed the counsel to not mistake mere physical growth for spiritual vitality.

“The church is not a democracy,” warned the first prophetess from the back of the room. “No,” I replied, “it is the body of Christ. We are trying to listen to him.”

A man who sang in the choir asked for the floor. “I just wish all of you could see what I see every Sunday,” he began quietly. “While we are worshipping, some family or couple or local college student will come to the door and look in that big picture window at the back of the sanctuary. When they see all the chairs filled, they turn around and head back to their automobile. I wish you could see it. It would break your heart.”

The church voted overwhelmingly to build the sanctuary, and the rest of the meeting dealt with important questions such as: Would the new sanctuary have lots of clear windows and wood finish like the old sanctuary? Would it have upholstered pews or chairs, carpeting or a concrete floor (for folks liked to hear themselves sing)? Would the big cross, a gift to our church from a former pastor, be moved to a foyer or placed in the new sanctuary?

The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of the return of prophecy, and especially in the writings of Luke. Jesus opened his public ministry by
The disciples understood that Jesus' death was a "prophesied action" after the Resurrection. Not until the day of Pentecost, however, did Peter realize Jesus' death also was the ultimate "prophetic action," communicating God's intention to restore Israel and open the floodgate of prophecy. On that amazing day, Peter proclaimed, "What was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all
flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young
men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:16-17). This powerful unleashing of the Spirit occurred, Peter concluded, be-cause “God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was
impossible for him to be held in its power” (2:24).

The church compromised on the glass windows, wood finish, carpet-
ing, and upholstered pews. However, everyone agreed that the big cross
must be placed in the new sanctuary.

It was much too large for any one member to carry. So at a point dur-
ing our first worship service in the new sanctuary, the youth group carried
the big cross down the aisle, and then the choir passed it on to two church-
member carpenters waiting in the baptistery.

We know the power of seeing the crucifix in worship, for the dying
body of Jesus reminds us that he died a prophesied and prophetic death
for our sin. But I also am moved when I see that big cross, empty, for it
proclaims the Son of Man is alive. It says, “The Wild Goose is loose in our
world, forever and ever.”

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