

The Wild Goose

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

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.”¹ 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.”

By the first century, among the Jewish leadership it was a widespread

opinion that the prophets were like spiritual dinosaurs, creatures of the past. The Jewish religious writing “from Artaxerxes [465-424 B.C.] to our time ... does not deserve the same credibility as the earlier work,” Josephus believed, “since the prophets have no true successors” (Against Apion 1:8). The Babylonian Talmud shares this view: “When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter prophets, were dead, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel” (Sota 48b).

Perhaps we hear echoes of this view in the New Testament when the Apostle Paul and the Gospel writers use “the law and the prophets” as a short-hand phrase for all inspired Scripture. The “prophets,” like the law-giver Moses, lived long ago and now their piercing, holy words are available only in the Book.

Indeed, for a long time the rabbis had divided the Hebrew Scriptures into three parts: the law, the prophets, and the other writings. “Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them,” Ben Sirah’s grandson had explained confidently around 180 B.C., “and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom” (The Prologue to Sirach). Much later the rabbinic tradition would call scripture Tanak(h), which is simply an acronym for Torah (law), Nevi’im (prophets), and Ketubim (other writings).

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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Sometimes church-life might be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.

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

selecting a prophet's call experience, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1), and then promising, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His ministry would mirror the work of Elijah and Elisha (4:25-27). Indeed, when Jesus raised a dead man, holy fear seized the crowd "and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!'" (7:16).

Not everyone welcomes a prophet. When the political establishment, in the person of Herod Antipas, threatened him, Jesus shot back, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem'" (13:32-33). Earlier, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had warned his closest disciples that before he came in his prophesied glory, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:22; cf. Matthew 16:21-23, Mark 8:31-33). Soon the point was driven home for Peter, John, and James, when they saw Moses and Elijah, respectively the founder and prophetic restorer of Israel, appear with Jesus, "speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (9:31).

As Luke tells the story, the disciples fully understood that Jesus' death was a *prophesied action*

only after the Resurrection. The risen Jesus explained his suffering and death to the terrified disciples gathered on the Resurrection Sunday evening, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44).

Not until the day of Pentecost, however, did Peter realize that 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, there finally happened "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

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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, because “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, carpeting, 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 during 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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