

Prophetic Music

BY J. NATHAN CORBITT

Based on biblical principles, prophetic music presents a holistic gospel message. It describes problems of poverty, injustice, and degradation of the environment but also presents Kingdom-based solutions and calls individuals, congregations, and society to responsible action.

Let me start with a confession. I am not interested in hearing any musical prophets or prophetic music in my church during the Sunday morning worship service—especially not from a Christian gangsta-looking thug, or an aging rock star who has suddenly gotten religion, or a Bob Marley wanna-be who looks like he smoked pot to get inspiration and shouts about injustice in our society and my need to repent.

I might be willing to sing a prophetic hymn from the hymnal occasionally—though if you take a look at the stock of Christian songs, few are what we might call prophetic. Truth be told, I live with so much conflict, injustice, and just plain chaos these days that I need to hear some Good News. And Good News to me is that God is in control—“Peace! Be still!”—everything is going to be all right. I need comfort.

Have you ever felt this way? Some days, I don’t want to hear about the needs of the world or be reminded of my calling to bring the gospel message to life. Prophetic music, however, does not give me an option.

PROPHETIC MUSIC OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

Prophetic music is a prophetic voice, based on biblical principles, that calls both the church and society to social justice. Because it also addresses society at large, prophetic music may not include Christian language and imagery as it addresses poverty, injustice, degradation of the environment, and other problems in contemporary culture. But effective prophetic music always presents a holistic gospel message: it not only describes the problems, but also presents Kingdom-based solutions and calls individuals,

congregations, and society to responsible action.

The heart of prophetic music is not the music really, but the rich words and their commentary on injustice in the world. These powerful words are encapsulated by culturally relevant music to highlight their meaning through emotional affect.

Using music (and other art forms) to raise critical awareness about the needs of the world—the essential goal of prophetic music—stands in a long biblical tradition. The Jewish prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos, employed drama, allegory, and poetry to jolt people into thinking about their lives. And Jesus used parables to break through to listeners who did not recognize their own role in oppressing the poor.

Outside the church walls, we can appreciate the prophetic role of some popular musicians. I can remember the civil rights movement and anti-war protests in the 1960s and 70s, when many popular songs were written and sung by artists with an acute political conscience and a biting sense of humor. Though not always motivated by a Christian belief system, these artists were influenced by their experiences in the church and a commitment to justice.

On July 2, 2005, I watched the LIVE 8 concert on television from the comfort of my rocking chair. I was not about to face the many thousands of people gathered for this concert at the Philadelphia Museum of Art just down the road from my house. It was one of the world's largest concerts to end poverty. My first thought was that a group of opportunistic artists were using the event to promote their music; what do popular and wealthy musicians know about the issue? I wondered. Yet the more I reflected on the event and those who organized it and heard the reports of people who attended, I had more hopeful thoughts. Supported and encouraged by Bono, whom many people consider to be a prophetic Christian musician, the artists were doing exactly what prophetic artists do—raising critical awareness about a justice issue and motivating others to get involved.

In debriefing the concert experience with a number of my staff who attended, I discovered that only one church had purchased a vendor table where they enlisted people to become involved through a local church ministry. There are nearly three thousand congregations in Philadelphia and many are involved in prophetic ministries. Most churches have a more traditional view about keeping the sacred and secular separate.

PROPHETIC MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

Inside the church walls, whether the music is prophetic or not usually depends on a congregation's music preferences and the leadership provided by the pastor. Some churches serve a steady diet of nineteenth-century Evangelical hymns, which in the words of Albert Edward Bailey, have a "mystic approach," a "zeal for individual conversion," and an "ideal of God's kingdom as an...eternal city in heaven." Others mix in the High

Anglican hymns that look back “with nostalgia to the historic church, its theology, [and] its liturgy” or hymns that reflect the social gospel movement that wanted “the slums abolished, poverty and sickness banished, the will to grab transformed into the will to serve, and all our faith and energy devoted to bringing into being a brotherhood on earth.”¹

Because prophets often address a contemporary form of injustice, their songs require immediacy to the problem and culturally appropriate language.

Brian Wren, who writes new hymns for congregations, sees himself as a prophet who is “called to announce the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, who breaks barriers between human beings, loves the whole world, and cares especially for people who are impoverished, marginalized, enslaved, and oppressed.” He speaks God’s

truth as he hears it, which means he must “question conventional wisdom, and encourage congregations to voice a faith, commitment, and hope more daring, and more determined, than they might otherwise venture to sing.”² Wren is less concerned about whether the congregation wants to sing his text than with “writing a hymn poem because I believe it needs to be written, in the hope that, somewhere, a congregation will want to sing it.”³

Prophetic music ministry is taking exciting new forms within the Church. For example, I belong to a congregation that has renovated its church basement to provide showers, bedrooms, and a living area for homeless families. Several church members serve as hosts, cook meals, and tend to the children, and my ministry, BuildaBridge International, provides music therapy for these children and their moms, thanks to a grant from the United Way.

Other congregations of socially active young adults are redefining the time and place for worship away from the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning in a church building. For instance, not far from my house a youthful pastor presides over informal worship in which the participants sing songs by Bono and Bob Marley that express the realities, hopes, and needs of difficult daily living. After the worship service they move to a local pub for a fellowship time where they talk, listen, and encourage one another.

Another church supports a Christian hip-hop artist who left the secular recording industry to enroll in seminary and “preach” the good news in the tough places of Philadelphia. He produces an hour-long Christian hip-hop radio program that is gaining in popularity.

These songs from the secular world, when they are incorporated into worship as described above, become prophetic hymns that instill courage, provide comfort, and send out their innovative congregations to serve in sections of the city that have been neglected by suburban churches.

TIMELY WORDS AND MUSIC

In the Germantown section of Philadelphia where I live, the latest popular music fills the urban environment of graceful historic homes. Every imaginable form of hip-hop and other contemporary music booms from car stereos passing up and down my street, through the surrounding neighborhood, and along the way to my office near center city. I am amused and educated by the kinds of music people share with the world from inside their car. I hear plenty of vulgarity, swearing, and abusive talk in the music. Knowing that many musicians speak and sing out of their own experience, I listen for meaning. What message do I hear?

Albert Nolan's classic study of Jesus' prophetic ministry and message, *Jesus Before Christianity*, describes how Jesus, drawing on passages in Isaiah, liberated the poor and oppressed.⁴ According to Nolan, Jesus saw four basic pursuits as evil and in opposition to God—the pursuits of wealth, prestige, group solidarity (“the exclusive and selfish solidarity of groups”), and power. Those who follow Christ must be concerned for the poor and oppressed without concern for these pursuits. In other words, they must be prophets who seek social justice.

Nolan draws this interesting conclusion about Jesus and his disciples: their message of good news and confrontation with the evil in society is never timeless. Rather it must be spoken to people living in a particular context of pursuing wealth, prestige, in-group solidarity, and power—to people who need to be awakened specifically to their time and reality.⁵

This is a basic reason, I think, why so few prophetic hymns are found in hymnals and why prophetic music clothes itself in contemporary musical idioms. Prophetic music tends to be an oral and contemporary phenomenon, rather than a written and historical tradition. Prophets often address a contemporary form of injustice, and their songs require immediacy to the problem and culturally appropriate language.

As their worship experience moves away from printed music and toward multimedia technology that can bring globalization to their singing, congregations have more opportunities to fight injustice and share the gospel globally, while being involved in prophetic ministry locally.

DISCERNING THE TRUE PROPHETS

Because not all prophets edify and point us toward truth, we must learn to differentiate between true and false musical prophets. We are right to mistrust some of them, particularly those who lose credibility through their abuse of wealth and power. I keep several principles in mind when I am listening to prophetic songs and hymns, both sacred and secular.

The first principle is that *prophecy is a gift to the church*. The Apostle Paul, after explaining that prophecy is given by God to edify the Christian community (1 Corinthians 12), urges us to “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.... [For] those who

prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3b).

We should pray for spiritually mature "ears" to listen to music in personal, social, and church life. Though it may difficult to pay attention to what musicians are saying because they are talking too loud, we must not let the noise distract us from really listening to their message and allowing them

to motivate us to action.

Of course, we are not called merely to be listeners. Prophecy, as I have said, calls not only for mature spiritual awareness, but also for "hands and feet" to bring the good news into being.

Testing the spirits is a necessary part of discernment, as Paul reminds the

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church at Thessalonica: "Do not despise the words of prophets; but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). When we encounter the songs of the street, or the secular world, we would do well to follow the advice given to the Israelites about prophets who might be leading them to worship other gods: "If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods,' whom you have not known, then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation" (Deuteronomy 13:12-14a).

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Finally, *the test of truth is in the prophet's fruits*, which is manifested in the harvest after a season of labor. "Whoever is not with me is against me," Jesus said, "and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23). It is the fruit of a prophet's life—how the prophet lives in consonance with Jesus' way of living and not just what he or she says—that provides the ultimate test of the prophecies. False prophets will "die of their own words and destructive lives" (see 2 Peter 1:20-2:2).

True prophets always have an engaged and engaging faith that moves outside the sanctuary. Through their words they share a vision of a just society and a call to action based on compassion. More than anything else, they create a critical awareness of the truth that Jesus taught. They awaken us to how we should be living in this day and place, both in devotion to God and in righteous relationships with our neighbors and the world.

EMBRACING PROPHETIC MUSIC

If anyone wants to start an argument in most congregations, simply request a different kind of music. They do not have to request songs by Bob Marley or Bono, just suggest that the congregation sing some contemporary Christian music rather than its favorite hymns, or black gospel rather than classical music. Asking for prophetic music can be especially touchy, for while the music of praise unites people in worship, the voice of prophecy often divides us because it addresses the failures of our common life in society.

Nevertheless, let me suggest some first steps that a congregation might take to embrace prophetic music. I will speak from my experience in the Second Baptist Church of Germantown, a wonderful and historic congregation that once was predominately white, became predominately black, and now is seeking to be multicultural. Our Princeton-educated, Mexican American pastor can “hoop” with the best of preachers. Though it is a special church and atypical in many ways, the one “hot button” is still the music.

When a congregation is proclaiming the whole gospel, which includes meeting the social needs of the community and world, *its music-making naturally should grow beyond praise and evangelism to include a call for social justice*. Its music ministry should develop spiritual sight and courage for the street, for it is outside the sanctuary walls and on the street that the faithful will encounter those people most in need of the good news. One way that this happens is the musicians move out of the choir loft and from behind the pulpit microphone to faithfully minister among the marginalized. Each Sunday as I look at our choir, I recognize members who work in city government, social service and nonprofit organizations, and city schools. They minister to the poor and marginalized in our city everyday.

A congregation should provide financial support for musicians with a prophetic voice, both inside and outside the church. Though contemporary Christian musicians have been criticized for commercializing their music, many of them are not only courageously confronting the secularized faith of the mainstream culture, but also disturbing the comfort of our sanctuaries when we ignore the poor and marginalized. The local church should expand its music ministry to include financial support for those musicians, like the hip-hop evangelist I described above, who are building bridges of love between the sanctuary and the street.

A congregation should include the voices of world Christians in its worship. A church musician once explained to me, “We don’t sing those songs. We are not political.” Unfortunately, many western Christians wrongly believe that they do not have a political orientation. Some are afraid that hymns from the third world will allow liberation theology into their church. Others simply struggle with singing in a language they do not understand. Yet the majority of the world’s Christians now live outside the western world, and if we do not sing their songs and hear their voices, we are failing to in-

vite a large part of the family to our worship banquet. When we incorporate some world hymns into worship on a regular basis, we not only will hear our brothers and sisters' prophetic voices, but also will prophetically proclaim our unity with them.

All new prophetic songs, whether they come to us from around the world or across the street, deserve our best efforts to "perform" them well

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and present them within a context of meaningful explanation. This is part of our hospitality to the artists whom we have invited into our worship, and the congregation will be more likely to welcome their songs and listen to their prophetic voices.

ENOUGH FOR THE DAY

Do not think that a congregation must give up the old hymns and change all of its songs in order to embrace prophetic music. Several years ago my wife and I needed to hear a prophetic word specific to our lives at that time and place. Though we had experienced mission work in Africa for eleven years, the serenity, safety, quiet, and convenience of suburban life had begun to lull our calling. That prophetic word came to us during worship in the suburban Wayne Presbyterian Church through an old hymn, "Give of Your Best to the Master." We reflected on the needs of the world and asked, "Are we giving our best to minister to the most vulnerable of the world's population? Are we fulfilling our calling to be the gospel in the world?" We moved into Philadelphia where I helped to found Builda-Bridge International, a nonprofit organization to share the arts with vulnerable populations.

As we were singing that same hymn on a recent Sunday morning with our congregation at Second Baptist Church of Germantown, I reflected on the following:

The transit system is on strike and my students are having a difficult time making it to class.

There's a corruption scandal in the city government.

Sixty percent—that's right, *sixty* percent—of newborns in the metropolitan area are born to single mothers, and this statistic is climbing in every section of the country.

Every day in the city's public school system half of the students are absent. Since absenteeism is a predictor of life success or failure, what does this say about the future of our youth and our country?

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has admitted that two former archbishops concealed sexual abuse by priests for decades.

Our nation's response to Hurricane Katrina has been inadequate, the healthcare system is failing the marginalized in the U.S. (and is nonexistent in the developing world), the war in Iraq continues amid the crisis in the Middle East and the threat of terrorism throughout the world, AIDS is epidemic in the developing world, human trafficking of innocent women and children exists worldwide, and on and on.

It was too much to think about. Where does one begin to address these problems anyway?

During the worship service I was comforted by the music and encouraged by the sermon. But I also was challenged and reenergized by the words of another old hymn:

Encamped along the hills of light,
ye Christian soldiers, rise....
Faith is the victory, we know,
that overcomes the world.⁶

And, for me, that was enough for the day.

NOTES

1 Albert Edward Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretations* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1977), 560.

2 Brian Wren, "Court Poet and Pastoral Prophet: The Contemporary Church and its Song-Makers," *Colloquium Journal*, 1 (September 2004), 2. This article is available online at www.yale.edu/ism/colloq_journal/jpages/wren1.html.

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

4 Albert Nolan, O. P., *Jesus Before Christianity*, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, originally 1976).

5 *Ibid.*, 92.

6 From "Faith is the Victory," by John H. Yates (1891).



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