Much has been written about prophetic leadership, especially in the charismatic side of the evangelical church. For mainline Christians, prophetic leadership tends to be understood as a particular stance toward justice and peace, a hermeneutic of suspicion toward world systems of domination. Walter Wink’s concept of “engaging the powers” is an example of this approach to the prophetic task. Evangelical charismatics, on the other hand, have tended to think of prophetic ministry as the expression of an individual’s spiritual gift that calls the church to repentance, that unmasks sin and falsity in the church, and that holds forth supernatural words of knowledge for individuals and corporate bodies. Prophetic ministry for charismatics includes foretelling and forthtelling, an intercessory sensitivity to the voice of God. Rick Joyner is one example of several well-known prophetic leaders in the charismatic tradition.

But what does it mean to be a prophetic woman in leadership in the church? In many ways, simply to be a Christian woman in leadership is to be a prophet, for, regardless of the advances of women’s rights, the world remains overwhelmingly patriarchal. For every woman who is a senator, attorney, seminary professor, or pastor in North America, thousands of other women are denied opportunities to use their God-given gifts.

At a recent theological conference I attended, the presenter raised the question, “Why do so few evangelical women make it to top levels of leadership in evangelical institutions?” A lively discussion followed, surfacing the consensus that the evangelical church makes it nearly impossible for strong, gifted, competent evangelical women to be faithful to their call and stay in evangelical institutions. Any evangelical institution that does welcome such women into top levels of leadership becomes a prophetic presence. That is especially true if women are afforded the same dignity, opportunities, and pay scale as their male colleagues.

American women, whether inside or outside the church, often encounter glass ceilings, domestic violence, economic oppression, sexual abuse, fewer educational opportunities, and more. In the developing world, the oppression of women is even more pronounced, with sweatshops filled with female laborers, sex slave trafficking, female circumcision, and other forms of deprivation and violence.

In light of all this, the presence of a woman at the helm of any Christian ship is a radically prophetic witness regardless of how much or little fanfare is made over her gender. To be a Christian institution, led by a woman of integrity, strength, wisdom, and passion, is to present to a broken, violent, patriarchal world what Walter Brueggemann calls “an alternative future,” one in which the dominating powers are overturned, not by violent revolution, but through prophetic imagination. In this article I explore some of the implications of Brueggemann’s concept of the prophetic imagination specifically in relationship to women in leadership in the evangelical church. I also draw from the insights of Renita Weems and Miroslav Volf, to whom I am indebted for a deepening understanding of the ministry of the prophet.

Brueggemann on the Prophetic Imagination

Brueggemann calls the church to restore the Hebrew understanding of prophetic ministry.

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated.

By “alternative vocation,” Brueggemann indicates the vocation of the Gospel, the radically alternative life incarnated and proclaimed by Jesus. The Christian vocation is to be profoundly “other” than the life lived according to the world’s systems of domination. The prophet is one who continues to keep imagination regarding possible alternative futures alive in those who are oppressed. Life does not have to stay the same forever and ever. The old order can be challenged, when so directed by God. The prophet provides to those who are marginalized, those who are silenced and discounted by the dominant order, the ability to “sing,” thereby energizing them and providing the means for the “emergence of amazement” at the freedom of God.

Women as Prophetic Leaders

In light of Brueggemann’s analysis, what does it mean for evangelical women to be prophetic leaders? What are the day to day realities for these women? How do prophetic women hold forth an alternative future for those who are silenced? How do they engage the imagination of the evangelical church? How do they enable marginalized people to “sing,” energized and amazed by the freedom of God? As one friend asked me recently, how do such women “survive their own anointing”?

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The first reality for prophetic women is that they must be true to their call and to themselves. By living an authentic existence these women are, in Brueggemann’s terms, "dismantling the dominant culture and nullifying its claims." Rather than being defined by the dominant culture, prophetic women are defined by the word of God. By "word of God" I mean Scripture rightly divided, but I also mean the word of God incarnate in the women through their spiritual gifts and call.

To put it another way, only God can name the prophetic woman. For every prophetic woman there comes a time of recognition of her God-given identity, her name. She is no longer Sarai but Sarah. She has turned a corner, embraced a deeper truth. She has a new name, a God-breathed identity that no one can take away, no one can co-opt. There is a foundation of freedom in this reality. She now sees herself through God’s eyes. She has become what Renita Weems describes as a "pregnant virgin," a woman who is unconquered by any but the God whose life she bears. She belongs to no one but God.

A certain kind of repentance leads to this conversion of identity. It is a repentance from cooperating with the ungodliness of the dominant culture. Miroslav Volf writes:

To repent means to resist the seductiveness of the sinful values and practices and to let the new order of God’s reign be established in one’s heart. For a victim to repent means not to allow the oppressors to determine the terms under which social conflict is carried out, the values around which the conflict is raging, and the means by which it is fought. Repentance thus empowers victims and disempowers the oppressors. It “humanizes” the victims precisely by protecting them from either mimicking or dehumanizing the oppressors. Far from being a sign of acquiescence to the dominant order, repentance creates a haven of God’s new world in the midst of the old, and so makes the transformation of the old possible.7

Where Brueggemann uses the phrases “the royal consciousness” or “dominant culture” to describe the systemic movement toward sinful domination in culture, Volf prefers “exclusion.”9 Volf’s analysis of exclusion as sin is particularly relevant to the work of prophetic women in the evangelical church.9

The second reality for women in prophetic leadership is that they no longer “live in Egypt.” Brueggemann’s use of the Exodus event as the paradigm for all prophetic work is especially helpful for prophetic women. Women as prophetic leaders have already crossed the Red Sea, already traveled the wilderness. They have learned new ways of relating in this world that are based on justice and respect for boundaries (“the Law”) and that come from the freedom of God. They neither cooperate with nor tolerate the kind of oppression that once kept them in Egypt. They understand that abuse and oppression are sins against God as well as against humanity. Therefore, they no longer participate in violence.

Sometimes, the violence is found in what Julie Ingersoll calls “the power of subtle arrangements and little things.”10 Drawing from the insights of Michel Foucault, among others, Ingersoll describes the power of gendered social groupings such as small groups, parachurch ministries, and social events to convey the subtle but relentless message of exclusion between women and men. The use of male hierarchies wherever one turns in the evangelical world does more than communicate exclusion. In some ways it models the broader cultural reality of dysfunctional and abusive families.11

Prophetic women will not be silenced and will not stay in Egypt. They determine to follow the pillar of cloud and fire, rather than the demands of those who lead or some misplaced allegiance to a flag. Prophetic women go to the mountain; they hear the voice of God; they see the bigger picture for God’s people. They are global. They do not go back to Egypt. They do not worship idols. They are utterly given over to the God who set them free, the God who is free.

They know that Yahweh hears the cries of the people, the babies sent down the Nile in leaky baskets, the mothers trying to hide newborn sons, the midwives doing their subversive part, the groans of 400 years of slavery. Yahweh hears and Yahweh acts. This is a core reality for women in prophetic leadership, the truth of the God who hears and sees and acts. The God who loves. The God who frees.

Prophetic women have seen a burning bush. The fire from the bush now burns in them, so they have become what the mystics have called “living flames of love.” They are now mystics in their intimacy with God. As has always been the case, mystics are a threat to the established order, a voice that must be silenced lest the wheels fall off the cart of the dominant culture.12 So women in prophetic leadership must learn how to “survive their own anointing.”

This is not an easy thing.

To survive, prophetic women must be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” There is a gutsy realism to prophetic women, a street-smart savvy that comes from having seen and suffered much. They are able to tell the difference between sheep and wolves; they can spot sheep with fangs and claws. They are not fooled; they know the serpent’s ways.

Yet, they are not cynics. Somehow, through the mercy and grace of God, prophetic women have the tender trust of a child in their relationship with God. They have the faith of young Perpetua and Felicity and all the other martyrs who saw their suffering not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well (Phil. 1:29). For to be a prophetic woman is to suffer.

Prophetic women know this, that suffering and hardship are part of the call. With St. Paul and every martyr they are “filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” for the sake of Christ’s body, the Church (Col. 1:24). Yet, they do not engage this ministry with grim and hard resolve. No, they survive testing...
and trouble because prophetic women are wholly dependent upon God; they are living flames of love, vessels of the holy. They are free. They are like Joan of Arc\(^\text{13}\); their hearts cannot be conquered for their hearts are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1–3).

How do prophetic women survive their own anointing? They are lovers. They are full of mercy. They are the incarnation of Micah 6:8, doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with their God. This is the unconquerable reality of Christ living within them that the dominant culture cannot overcome, the light that shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome.

For prophetic women the promise of Revelation 2:17 carries special significance: “Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.” Prophetic women are those who eat the hidden manna, who hear the voice of God, whose names are new names, written on a white stone that only God can give. Prophetic women will not be silenced, for persecution only scatters them to new mission fields. They are among us now, living, loving, acting, speaking, fulfilling the vision of God’s alternative future.

Endnotes

3. Ibid., 40.
4. Ibid., 71.
5. Ibid., 82.
8. Ibid., 87.
9. Ibid., 67.
11. Ibid., 115.
13. Legend has it that Joan of Arc’s heart was not consumed by the flames of her martyrdom.