

Egalitarian Prophets in the Church



By Mimi Haddad

**The struggle for justice—for good
over evil—is most profoundly waged
within the body of Christ.**

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Winter 2005 issue of Mutuality.

In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln noted the hostility and conflict between Christians across the Mason Dixon line. As the American clash over slavery split families, churches, and the entire nation, Lincoln pondered why the lines of hostility were drawn down the middle of the Church. Lincoln said, “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

While Lincoln’s address raises many theological questions, I am intrigued by his observations that the struggle for justice—for good over evil—is most profoundly waged within the body of Christ. Theologians have likewise noted that the battles fought within the Church have significant spiritual and cultural consequences. It makes sense when you consider that Christians are to reflect the living God, and that the actions of the Church speak volumes to

an unbelieving world. Christians, therefore, carry the greater moral burden.

Because of this, believers have earnestly considered the great moral issues of their day and have, as a result, engaged in significant biblical debates that, at times, the conflict seemed to tear the Church apart. In retrospect, however, we can see how the controversy over Scripture and interpretation served to clarify positions in order to understand God’s purposes.

I am thankful that the abolitionists boldly opposed slavery, and they did so from a biblical perspective even as they embrace both conflict and hardship. Deeply rooted sin does not yield without a struggle. Thankfully, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79) pressed forward, despite years of opposition. Garrison wrote, “I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.” As Christian reformers participated in the great debates of their day, their efforts clarified the importance of issues, raising

a righteous, though often a dissenting voice. That their words created tension or alarm is precisely the point. They were sent by God to wake us up!

It seems to me that God inspires prophets and reformers to make us uncomfortable. Their moral and theological challenges lead to debate where diverging biblical ideas and opinions are rigorously scrutinized within the Christian community. Ultimately, the rightness of a cause emerges and reform is made possible. While the exchange of theological perspectives may become heated, it is by listening to one another that we make good decisions. The Christian community, like a large family, must sort matters out, even though this is sometimes accomplished with intense passion and even hard feelings. In advancing biblical justice, some offense may prove inevitable.

As Christians, we are part of a tradition in which we, as the body of Christ, discern the will of God by listening to one another, even and especially to those with whom we disagree. We need not fear differences, nor pursue peace at any price, since Church history teaches that the dissenting voices are often sent by God. Consider the important creeds and councils that arose from intense conflict and debate. The rigorous biblical dialectic that shaped the creeds and councils sharpened logic and clarified God's Word such that the documents that arose from such meetings continue to serve the Church today.

Just as in the past, prophets are working in nearly every corner of the world today, prompting us to consider important issues. Tirelessly, and at great personal expense, they challenge theological imprecision, biblical inconsistency, and injustice. Their words of biblical challenge may be viewed as a form of moral dissent, which is God-inspired and therefore necessary to lead the Church to greater health and unity. One would have hoped for more dissent by Christians in Nazi Germany, or in white South Africa, for example. While we are committed to reconciliation—to remaining in fellowship with one another—we cannot attain clarity or even authentic unity by shutting down debate and discussions.

**It requires courage to carefully
and respectfully listen to an
opponent and ask whether God is
speaking through them.**

We all know pastors who oppose requests to study what the Scriptures say concerning women's leadership. They are afraid of splitting the Church, of losing members, or offending people. Many want peace at any price, but I believe this weakens rather than strengthens the Church. Sadly, avoiding healthy debate and conflict often creates siloing and echo chambers that confirms bias and can devolve into vindictiveness towards our Christian "dialogue partners."

C.S. Lewis observed that apart from courage, no other virtue exists. It requires courage to listen to a voice you may not wish to hear. It requires courage to carefully and respectfully listen to an opponent, and ask, as David did, whether God is speaking through them. We must listen, and we must also ask that others listen to us.

My neighbor oversees a branch of the Lutheran Church in Ethiopia. He was the first to ordain women in his country. His actions were courageous, even as they were met with acrimony and hostility. He anticipated this response, and when I asked him why he pressed forward, he said that the women he ordained were dedicated Christians and skillful preachers. They were gifted and called by God to spread the gospel and serve the Church. Failing to advance their ministries was to oppose the very work of God.

Let us encourage our sisters and brothers in Christ to remain in biblical dialogue beside those with whom we disagree, even when there is tension, acknowledging that we, as limited human beings, discern God's leading in this way. Allowing people to exchange ideas and learn from one another is very healthy and God-given. The challenge is to travel together, through the conflict, arriving at the other end renewed and sharper in mind and spirit. Iron sharpens iron, and we want to be sharp instruments in the hand of God.



Dr. Mimi Haddad serves as president and CEO of CBE International. She has taught as an adjunct associate professor of historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Olivet University, and has taught for institutes and organizations worldwide. She is a graduate of the University of Colorado and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (*Summa Cum Laude*). She holds a PhD in historical theology from the University of Durham, England. Mimi received an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University in 2013. She was a founding member of the Evangelicals and Women Study Section at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and Evangelicals for Justice. She continues to serve on the leadership of ETS's Evangelicals and Women.