

STUDY GUIDE 5: Reality Check. Getting our bearings: the prophetic community.

Key scriptures: 1 Peter 2: 9-10
Romans 12:3-8

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE:

What do you think about your personal identity?

Western culture has made much of the importance of your story of self-definition, self-expression, self-validation, and self-creation. Most of us value the sense of meaning and purpose that comes with knowing what defines us and a story that tells us who we think we are. Our individualistic society has increasingly turned almost completely inward to find your “authentic” self. External factors such as where you were born, who you were born to, what social and religious institutions you belong to, and your relationship with God have diminished as sources of individual identity. Today’s competitive world makes the search for identity and self-esteem a lot more complex, and many individuals are weighed down by the pressure to find their significance almost exclusively within themselves.

As Christians, we don’t only have to turn inward for our narrative identity, but we have the gift of our *in-Christ identity*, given to us at salvation. The profound truth of our adoption as sons and daughters of God re-stories our identity, so that it transcends any self-worth we might have tried to draw from our achievements, possessions, looks, number of ‘likes’ or wealth. We are first and foremost beloved children - exactly as we are - of a perfect heavenly father, and we find our security and significance in the love of God.

Yet, most of us have difficulty taking the unconditional love of God to heart.

REFLECT

Read the following Henry Nouwen quote and discuss how claiming the unconditional love of God has played out in your experience:

“Our first and most important spiritual task is to claim that unconditional love of God for ourselves. We have to dare to say, ‘Whether I feel it or not, whether I comprehend it or not, I know with a spiritual knowledge that I am God’s beloved child, and nobody can take that divine childhood away from me.’”

Question: How is your sense of identity, significance and self-worth impacted by your position as a child of God and the gift of the everlasting God-reality that he sees and knows you unconditionally?

Activity: Focus on one individual at a time in your group (in agreement with the person). Have the other group members ask God for a word or a picture that encourages the individual in how God sees them and/or in their distinct role and calling.

What do you think about your corporate identity?

We have another often overlooked aspect to our narrative identity as Christians, that resonates with the reality of our personal God. Irrespective of your calling, a vital part of your identity is belonging to something bigger than yourself, your corporate

identity. The prophetic church comes before the prophetic individual; the prophetic community – carrying the radical revelation of the Triune God – takes precedence over individual prophets and involves the whole church.

Prophetic ministry tends to be overly individualistic and misses out on the depth of prophetic spirituality of the church as a whole. If we only focus on prophets, we miss out on the way the church itself can be prophetic in its very nature. In a previous study, we saw that our corporate identity is fundamentally apostolic, prophetic, shepherding and teaching (APEST) and that becoming a more genuinely Jesus-shaped church requires each of us to understand our shared APEST identity. In Romans 12:3-8, we see that belonging to one another precedes our individual gifts.

Called to be a prophetic body, four themes are woven into our communal intelligence and corporate identity as a prophetic church: 1) the very essence of the prophetic comes from the nature and purposes of God; 2) Jesus is the perfect Prophet and following him means following in his prophetic footsteps; 3) the prophetic runs right through all of scripture and the story of God's people. Embracing our shared prophetic identity is simply a continuation of the biblical tradition; 4) the church born at Pentecost is a prophetic church, and the prophetic is embedded in our DNA (Acts 2:17-18).

DISCUSS:

Read the definitions below and discuss what they mean to you. What difference does the shift in mindset make to us as members of the body of Christ, to treat prophecy and the cultivation of a collective prophetic consciousness and intelligence as part of the nature of the church rather than the mere expression of the giftings of a few individuals?

DEFINITIONS:

Collective consciousness is a set of shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes and knowledge common to a social group or society.

Collective intelligence: a group or a team's combined capacity and capability to perform various tasks and solve diverse problems.⁷ Collective intelligence has been found to be consistently predictive of the future performance of groups and teams.

The prophetic: a shared understanding and capability that enables us to corporately hold out God's reality, so that it can be clearly seen and responded to, so that transformation can take place and so that relationship can be restored.

The prophetic function is about every member sharing in a corporate identity based on Christ's own prophetic ministry. We are all prophetic because we are all part of his prophetic body. Each one of us can be a living expression of Jesus the perfect Prophet (just as we can all express his apostolic, evangelistic, shepherding and teaching ministries).

(Livesey. Holy Disruption. p. 107-108, Kindle).

TWO DIMENSIONS OF PROPHETIC FUNCTION AND CULTURE

Throughout Scripture, we consistently observe a dual focus of the prophetic: the Old Testament prophets expressed the twin concerns of safeguarding the people's relationship with God and promoting a just society. This was then mirrored in Christ's

prophetic ministry. We see him walking intimately with the Father and calling others to the same depth of relationship; we also see him overturning tables in the temple and defending the cause of the marginalised (Livesey. *Holy Disruption*, p. 109. Kindle). The full extent of our identity as a prophetic church can be understood as two primary dimensions: *Vertical* and *horizontal*.

The **vertical dimension** is *covenant-oriented*. It is God-focused, consumed with loving God, experiencing him, pursuing his presence and personal transformation. Our shared identity in the vertical dimension engages us in passionate worship, fervent prayer and intense listening.

The **horizontal dimension** is *Kingdom-oriented and recognises* that God's alternative reality challenges unjust systems, corrupt government and unethical corporations. Willingness to confront our reality and change our way of thinking makes the church attentive to God's concerns in the world for social holiness, righteousness and justice (Isaiah 58:6) that inspires prophetic people to take responsibility for naming cultural, political, institutional and systemic sin. A church engaged in the horizontal dimension of transformation will experience holy discontent, defend the poor and oppressed, and challenge the status quo.

DISCUSS AND PRAY

Most churches tend to operate in only one of the two dimensions and succumb to either progressivism on the one hand or rampant individualism on the other. What are your preferences, and where do these influences come from? How can we at CbtB and on the Bellarine find ways to bridge the divide and deeply engage with both dimensions? Share stories of your involvement and vision for both dimensions.

STUDY GUIDE 6: THE MOUNTAIN

This study aims to reflect more broadly on raising the prophetic consciousness and becoming a prophetic church and carriers of God's reality. We explore two different streams or traditions in the church to guide us in the flow of the Spirit. The first is the *contemplative stream*, and the second is the charismatic stream, both of which have scriptural support. In the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates many facets of both streams. He lived a prayer-filled life and prioritised time alone with his heavenly Father; he also lived and moved in the power of the Spirit. We explore the two traditions to stimulate the desire to seek God's heart and his presence on the journey of becoming a Jesus-shaped church.

1. Contemplation stream

Contemplative spirituality lives in the reality of God's promise that he *is already* present with us and that spiritual growth occurs when we attend to and practice his presence. Contemplative prayer is openness to God, who is always with us. It is an expression of

the heart that hungers for God and the precious reality of his presence (see Psalm 42:1-2; Psalm 27:3; Psalm 62:1; Psalm 63:1,6; Colossians 3:1-2; 2 Cor 4:18).

Contemplation is practised in two ways. Firstly, it means to retreat from the busyness of our hectic lives and focus our senses, thoughts and emotions on the profound reality that God is present. Secondly, contemplation is practised as a way of life in which we become aware of the reality of the presence of God in the details of our everyday lives and delight in his constant presence with us. Contemplative prayer is less about asking than it is an intimate meeting place with Jesus, beholding the Beloved and resting in the goodness of God. Contemplation invites us to prioritise and cultivate stillness, both external stillness and internal stillness (Be still and know that I am God; Psalm 46:10). Contemplative prayer teaches us the necessity of letting go of our sense of importance and of having to be productive and accomplish more. It requires a posture of surrender and radical openness to God, and a willingness to be overwhelmed by him.

REFLECT & SHARE

1. The three threads of contemplation are external and internal stillness, wholehearted love for God, and surrender. Can you speak to the influence of the contemplative tradition and your desire for the three threads to be woven into your life?
2. Consider the wisdom of Henri Nouwen: Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, 'Prove that you are a good person.' Another voice says, 'You'd better be ashamed of yourself.' There is also a voice that says, 'Nobody cares about you,' and one that says, 'Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful.' But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, 'You are my Beloved, my favour rests on you.' That's the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen. That's what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us 'my Beloved.' (in Livesay, Holy Disruption. P. 126-127. Kindle)
3. Tell stories of your battle with solitude and any struggles you feel free to share that speak to the 'many voices' mentioned by Henry Nouwen in the above quote.

2. The *charismatic* stream.

Eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:1)

Therefore, I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. (Rom 15:17-19)

Read the section below and discuss the role and influence of the Charismatic tradition in your life and the life of CbtB:

The charismatic tradition focuses on the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and the special gifts he brings to *all* of God's people. God is involved in every aspect of life.

God is close, active and at work in the world around us. There is the expectation that God will intervene through answered prayer and miraculous events, as well as by speaking directly through dreams, visions and prophecy. A supernatural lifestyle is available to all expectant Christians as the Holy Spirit distributes his grace-gifts, the *charismata*, through the body: miracles, healings, signs and wonders, revelations and visions (Livesey, *Holy Disruption*: pp. 130-131. Kindle). Charismatic spirituality encourages us to recognise and attend to the reality of God's voice. The indwelling Spirit searches out the deep things of God and reveals them to us. The Holy Spirit is a person to be known and a Friend to be loved, encouraging us to worship God passionately and to offer ourselves to the presence and majesty of God. This is the Friend that allows us to experience the communal dynamic that is at the very centre of God's nature. He is the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of truth and revelation, who always brings his gifts with him, especially prophecy. The indwelling Holy Spirit fosters expectancy of a Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered lifestyle and mindset of the Father's abundance and generosity with his gifts. The nearness of God's reality in the Spirit nourishes an expectation of and faith for the supernatural, for the realities of the kingdom of God to break out around us with signs and wonders. The charismatic stream invites us not only to experiment and grow in spiritual gifts in a faith-filled, worshipful environment, but also to provide a Christ-centred, Spirit-empowered, outward-focused discipleship where *charismata* are used for the benefit of all and where gifts of prophecy are taken into the neighbourhood.

READ 1 Corinthians 12: 1 - 11

SHARE & DISCUSS

What do the gifts of the Holy Spirit mean to you on your spiritual journey, which are familiar, and which are strange?

What do you believe God might be saying to you about sharing God's reality by more intentionally living a supernatural lifestyle?

What might this mean for raising a corporate prophetic consciousness of a body that carries the reality of God?