

# On Becoming a Prophet

■ by Michael E. Cafferky



**The *Occupy* movement illustrates that the prophetic role covers a spectrum of issues, none of which can be separated from economics. Who should be the prophets sent to commerce, those outside or those inside? Michael Cafferky suggests there is a place for both, but that the most effective (and costly) prophecy comes from within. He concludes with some practical and effective suggestions for change.**

**T**he month that my wife and I enjoyed a carefree sabbatical at Ridley Hall in Cambridge, the *Occupy Wall Street* movement was having a go at being a prophetic voice in New York City. It was October, 2011. The major economic centres of the world staggered from the effects of the mortgage banking crisis, high unemployment, and the burden of growing national debts and the bitter taste of austerity programmes. The public, the media, national governments, and leaders in commerce were all seeking something more valuable than the collective value shown on the balance sheets of corporations: *the truth!*

Days before departing from the USA for Cambridge, we had heard about *Occupy Wall Street*. After our arrival, we observed the impact of *Occupy* protesters when we visited London, Edinburgh and Amsterdam. But the movement's reach became much broader than this. Hundreds of cities in scores of countries worldwide experienced the wrath of *Occupy* protesters who, more or less, successfully drew attention to growing public displeasure at the shrinking middle class, the growing economic inequality gap between the top 1% and everyone else, abuses of economic power, personal and organisational greed, ecology, and several other agenda items so numerous they proved difficult to coalesce under a single catchphrase - making it difficult for the movement to get organised in the traditional sense.

*Occupy* protesters gained notoriety as they set up tent cities in the heart of the world's financial districts, some within view of or perhaps earshot of stock exchanges, world icons of corporate power. In the process, some protesters also managed both to draw attention to and – paradoxically – divert attention away from their core messages by engaging in controversial actions such as those that took place at the entrance to London's historic St. Paul's Cathedral. Church of England officials wrestled with the problem of how to manage the presence of the protesters, how to deal with differences of opinion among bishops and priests, and whether or not to force protesters off Church property. Sympathies for and against the protesters' cause generated a range of reactions as broad as the portfolio of issues the protesters brought to their urban bivouac sites. ▶▶



▶▶ Some readers may be taking issue that I have associated the *Occupy* protesters with the work of the biblical prophet. For some in commerce the protesters were simply a group of misguided, whining radicals who don't understand economics. Getting on to a fashionable bandwagon is not the same as being a prophet. Whether you want to call them prophets or misguided protesters, or something else, the *Occupy* movement illustrates that the prophetic role covers a spectrum of issues none of which can be separated from economics.

As I reflected on the efforts of the protesters, I began to question: *Who should be the prophets sent to commerce and how can they most effectively fulfil this role? Must the voice of truth come from outside commerce? Is there a proper place for prophets to arise from inside the world of global business, and if so, how can such a prophet manage this role?*

While the work of a biblical prophet involved many tasks, a dominant emphasis was on speaking for God by drawing attention to the principles of covenant Law. It is this emphasis that is my focus here. Jesus Christ, who himself assumed the role of prophet, expanded on the broad spiritual principles of the Torah (Matthew 5 – 7). He taught that upon the two Great Commandments, supreme love to God and unselfish love to others, depend all the Law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40). Likewise, he said that the Golden Rule has the same foundation (Matthew 7:12): the Law because it is the expression of God's will in a social context, the prophets because they called for the Law to be written on the hearts of the people (2 Kings 17:13; Nehemiah 9:26; Isaiah 51:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Zechariah 7:12).

Accordingly, from time to time, as God's Spirit found necessary, prophets arose from both inside and outside the faith community. Some, like Moses, did not have a strong sense of their abilities (Exodus 6:30). Jonah tried to escape the call to service as God's mouthpiece. Some like Cyrus came from outside the faith community and served as shepherd to God's people (2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

Fundamental to the prophetic voice was the realisation of God's promise of shalom and the Messiah. Each prophet was empowered by God's Spirit, depending on the Law, building on the work of former prophets, and explicitly or implicitly pointing toward the long-awaited Messiah Prophet. The Gospel writers each acknowledged the connection between Jesus Christ and the work of the prophets (Matthew 2:15-17; 13:35; Mark 6:15; Luke 7:26; 24:19; John 7:40; Acts 7:37).

Some public prophets who have included economic issues in their messages have come as preachers from organised religion. Modern-day prophets have also emerged from among the ranks of investigative journalists, some controversial, reporting to society where they think repentance is needed. Other prophetic voices come from within labour, organising political response to intolerable



**Prophetic voice from China**

*Apple CEO Tim Cook at the iPhone production line in the newly built Foxconn Zhengzhou Technology Park, Henan province, China, after the protests on pay and working conditions*

conditions, periodically rising up in protest. Workers that make the Apple iPhone at Foxconn's plant in China recently protested, stopping production for several hours. In contrast, and comparatively less often than the others mentioned here, a business executive becomes a public voice calling for change. A few social reformers such as John Stuart Mill and Robert Owen, who were active market participants, advocated changes they believed to be important. Some of these figures have been controversial. The stronger ▶▶

▶▶ the hand that is imposed in reform, the higher the risk that such a hand will be used to manipulate for economic gain. Perhaps many other leaders in commerce are voices for change within their own organisations, voices needed if for no other purpose than to increase efficiency or increase profitability. In addition, there are doubtless others who believe that there are opportunities for moral reform at the level of the industry or economic system, and if given some encouragement, might lift their voices outside their own organisations for consideration in society.



James Tissot, *The Prophet Amos* c. 1888

Other true prophets emerged from the economic sector. Amos, for example, was not a “professional” prophet. He was a shepherd and a fig producer (Amos 1:1; 7:14). But he had the courage to talk openly about economic abuses prevalent in his time. Before his preaching ministry began, Jesus served in his community as a tradesman (Mark 6:3). If we say that the early church leaders fulfilled a prophetic function (although they were called apostles) we find that some came from the world of commerce or continued to be active participants in the marketplace as long as possible. Apostles and prophets were closely associated in the early church (Ephesians 4:11).

Peter, James, John and Paul were all market players. I think this is significant for those contemporary Christians engaged in commerce who feel the desire to give a moral lead to their firms, their industries, and the economic system as a whole.

Looking at the stories of prophets (and apostles) contained in Bible narratives we find prophets fulfilling four major functions. First, as mouthpieces for God whose Kingdom is based on truth, the prophets cried aloud and did not spare regarding moral lapses (Isaiah 58:1; Ezekiel 2:3-8). Their message was not merely a general call to improve the ethics of ▶▶

### The Function and Cost of being a Prophet

Reflecting on the work of contemporary prophets, I am struck by what contemporary Christian market players might learn from the experience of prophets as recorded in Scripture. Perhaps Scripture provides some guidance for business leaders who have moral guidance which they wish to be heard.

Priestly and Kingly offices in Israel were fixed institutions. In contrast, we don’t find in Scripture any dynasty of prophets based on blood lines. Prophets arose on a contingency basis as needed, when the priests and the kings failed to serve according to covenant principles and when the truth needed to come out. Some biblical prophets were educators (Samuel, Elisha). Some prophets were more or less professional voices coming from the ruling class (Isaiah 3:2-3; 28:7; Micah 3:11; Jeremiah 2:26; 4:9; 6:13; 8:1; Ezekiel 13:9). Some served in the court of the king giving him advice (2 Samuel 7:1-17; 12:1-15; 1 Kings 1:8-11, 32; 2 Samuel 24:11, 18). Some emerged from the families of priests. The greatest prophet, Moses, was a political leader extending his influence internationally.



Charlton Heston as Moses in the 1955 film *The Ten Commandments*

▶▶ business. Their words were clear and precise, chosen because of specific abuses of their day. Highly sensitive to the injustices present in society, prophets became public champions of covenant principles telling *how* to live faithfully. They abhorred the arrogance of greedy leaders. They warned regarding the consequences of being unfaithful to the covenant (Micah 2:12-13; Isaiah 37:21-38; Jeremiah 28:16-17). They courageously spoke of moral imperatives of their day including those relevant to the marketplace. In sum, using the magnifying lens of the covenant principles they focused on revealing the *truth*

Prophets whose work is based on truth and rightdoing are disruptive and controversial. Paradoxically, when society wants the truth, they don't always want to hear the whole truth! But true prophets are prone to dish out the truth regardless of who needs to hear it. Prophets require corporate leaders to spend time defending market actions. They stir up public support for their views. Prophetic work can result in government hearings, investigative reporting, actions by labour, law suits by aggrieved plaintiffs, the wrath of regulators, voices in the media joining them in chorus, and other unpleasant consequences.



**Speaking truth to power**  
Protestors in Egypt in 2012

about society when it was compared with principles of the covenant. Second, filled with hope about what is possible when market participants align their behaviours with the principles of the covenant, prophetic voices conveyed promises of deliverance, promises of God's presence among the people enlivening hope and encouraging faith. Third, on occasion prophets used strong - even supernatural - power, working signs and wonders on behalf of God or in reinforcement to the claims of the Kingdom of God (Acts 5:15-18; 15:12; 19:11). Fourth, taking on the function of a mediator-priest filled with zeal for the oppressed, prophets interceded in prayer on behalf of God's people (Isaiah 6:11; 15:5; 22:4; Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

No surprise: the cost of being a prophet is high. Biblical prophetic voices that pointed out the sins of the marketplace were not well received. Subjected to ridicule, threats of death, imprisonment, and murder, they lived lives of loneliness and misery. Pharaoh, after hearing and seeing enough of Moses and Aaron, abruptly commanded them to leave his court (Exodus 10:28). King Ahab and Queen Jezebel threatened Elijah (1 Kings 18-19). Other prophets were mocked and scoffed at (2 Chronicles 36:16). John the Baptist lost his life (Matthew 14:10). Peter was imprisoned (Acts 5:15-18). In effect, the prophetic voices such as Amos and Jesus that emerged from the marketplace were also drummed out of the marketplace. In this way the market can be a cruel place. Perhaps this is one reason why we don't see more prophetic voices emerge from within commerce. Speak up too critically of your own market or your own industry and you may be enacting your own economic death sentence. ▶▶



**Joe Eakins, a pilot with the Australian airline Jetstar, who was sacked after criticising the airline's plan to hire air crews based in Singapore on low wages and the effect this would have on passenger safety**

▶▶ **On Becoming a Prophetic Voice**

It might be relatively easy for persons who do not take a leadership role in the market to criticise the failings of commerce. Compared with those whom they speak against, protesters have economically little at stake by being critical of the market: no responsibilities owed to shareholders, no employees to be concerned about, no competitors to watch, no supply chain to manage, no technology to worry about, no regulations to lose sleep over, no customer expectations to manage. In contrast, those in commercial venture leadership roles have responsibilities to employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers and others. Speaking out on the social issues of business has the potential for burning social and political capital with the stakeholders who are necessary for continuing to serve the marketplace.



*Jeff Swartz, formerly CEO of Timberland*

However, much as we might be irritated by the words they say and prophetic actions they take, the marketplace would be the poorer without prophecy. One might argue that without prophetic voices, operating expenses would rise and profits would continue to fall. For example, scandals can cast a pall on an entire industry increasing suspicions and distrust both of which undermine wealth building efforts. A cogent voice with the power to organise public sentiment encourages others to constrain their behaviours which otherwise could result in expensive law suits or increases in the cost of capital.

But here is a problem: executives tend to be mute about each other. In addition, leaders of commerce must be active participants in the very social structures they know require reform. Executives fear that speaking out will encourage whistleblowers, litigants and government regulators to join the scrum. But there are times when someone from *within* commerce must become a voice for truth and rightdoing. Who better to talk about truth and right doing in the market than someone who understands the complexities of economics and who is respected for being a successful business professional?



*Scott Barnes, CEO of Grant Thornton*

Scott Barnes, CEO of Grant Thornton, started an internal blog, in part to encourage other company leaders to engage in dialogue about social issues. Jeff Swartz, formerly CEO of Timberland, is known for his willingness to speak out on topics that range from worker protection standards in his industry to volunteerism, literacy, and feeding the homeless. In the 1970s the giant Mobil Oil paid for a series of opinion-editorial advertisements where the company took a stand on selected social issues. This controversial advertising campaign was lauded by public relations experts, but not everyone was so impressed. Whether the public liked or disliked Mobil's stance on the issues it selected for its campaign, most people were better informed about Mobil as a result.

When the Enron scandal broke loose, who in the related energy industries spoke out reassuring the public that their financial statements were transparent and trustworthy? ▶▶

▶▶ What executives took the opportunity to engage the services of an independent organisation to conduct an ethical audit and then report to society the findings? Who in other industries took the leadership initiative to make internal changes and then speak openly about such changes before public pressure mounted against them? What newly appointed corporate executive is willing to speak out making a public commitment to the high road of ethics?



**Exception to the rule?**

*Antony Jenkins, Barclays new CEO announced on his appointment that he was putting five values at the heart of his plan: respect, integrity, service, excellence and stewardship*

Implicit criticism of the marketplace voiced by quietly acting on high moral standards is one way to be a prophetic voice. It can be argued that the voice of action is louder than words, but only for those who can observe the action. However, this idea also may be a convenient bush to hide behind when, as important as consistent living is for the Christian in business, sometimes a voice of truth and right doing is also needed in the marketplace. Sometimes it is the person of faith who can detect patterns of moral lapses and who may be in the best position to speak the truth. Another convenient escape is the expectation that someone else will become the voice for the ills of the marketplace, ills for which no single person or organisation has sufficient resources to affect systemic changes.

Christians in commerce can become effective prophetic voices if they consider the following ideas. First, criticisms of commerce do not have to be framed only in the negative; they can be voiced in the positive in terms of the benefits expected. King David is an example of a positive voice of hope when he *a d m o n i s h e d* commitment to the Torah (Psalm 119). Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah kept hope alive. The Apostle Paul counsels that the work of a prophet is for building up and encouragement (1 Corinthians 14:3). He calls the church at Rome to participate in such a ministry (Romans 14:19). One thing that many leaders of commerce are good at is framing a situation. When leaders in the contract catering industry began speaking about the negative results that come when one firm bad-mouths another firm, their voices energised industry leaders to make changes.



**Isaiah**  
*Michelangelo & assistants  
Sistine Chapel (1508-1512)*

Second, there may be good business reasons for doing the difficult work of reform based on truth. Reforming a marketplace or an industry may have the impact of increasing customer trust, loyalty and perhaps even the revenue that is earned. Ethical lapses may be expensive; reforms might improve efficiency or at least have no negative impact on efficiency. Contemporary prophets may give voice to the truth in terms that others can understand: the elements of the business model designed to foster profit.

Third, prophetic voices can be given in private before being needed in public or when a poignant message must be given directly. Elijah the prophet, who was known as the “troubler of Israel” to King Ahab, personally ▶▶

- confronted the monarch (1 Kings 18:16-19). In a more gentle manner Nathan the prophet served to bring King David to repentance (2 Samuel 12). Working from within an industry through trade and professional association leadership is a way to be a voice prior to ethical lapses becoming currency in society at large. Most industries face ethical issues and the



**Nathan rebuking King David**  
Orazio Samacchini (1532–1577)

leadership of the industry groups can have frank discussions that lead to industry group actions for establishing or reforming ethical industry practices.

Fourth, when prophetic voices are telling the truth, Christians in commerce can encourage other leaders to accept the truth, using it to shape new expectations, new values and ultimately new practices. These become sacred moments of opportunity to exercise moral leadership rather than remain passively driven by others.

Fifth, just as in the Bible narratives, there may be false prophets that arise to lead some astray such as those who attempted to thwart Jeremiah or Paul during their ministry (Jeremiah 14:14; Ezekiel 13:9; Matthew 7:15; Acts 20: 2 Peter 2:1). Some false prophetic

voices emerge masquerading as truth when, in reality, they are simply pursuing an economic and political agenda that is based on principles just as weak or weaker than those they criticise. It is here the Christian leader in commerce can provide moral leadership in compassionately helping others to see past the masks behind false voices to the truth. Such an approach brings poignant new meaning to what Solomon taught his son, “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart” (Proverbs 3:3). Truth is a safe guide to wisdom whether it calls for reform from within oneself, the organisation, the industry or the economic system. But truth is also the safe guide when confronted by false prophets who wish to misuse concerns about the market for personal gain.

Sixth, executives concerned about being drummed out of the marketplace can use the time-tested approach when things need to get done: organise! Banding together with other like-minded leaders to plan, create and deliver well-timed messages minimises the risks that an individual might face when trying to be a prophetic voice alone in the wilderness of moral lapses. One can argue that the marketplace is more likely to listen to organised messages than to fragmented messages from a variety of independent sources. When respected executives band together, when they show that they are willing to spend political capital for truth and right doing, it is more difficult to criticise or simply ignore them.

Finally, executives who are entering their pension years may have more courage to speak up regarding what they know is right. The stakes are lower, but reputations and political capital in society may never be higher. Executives who have the wisdom of experience will discern when it is time to keep silent and when it is time to speak out, to chide (if necessary), to call for action, or in other ways to lead morally. Want an exciting adventure during retirement? Ramp up your legacy: while you are in good health become a positive force for moral standards in the marketplace! ■

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