

Luke Timothy Johnson

Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians

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In September of 2011, a new book came on the market by Luke Timothy Johnson – *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*. As its title says, this book offers a challenge from Luke-Acts to contemporary Christians: the challenge is the prophetic voice of Luke and Acts for the church in order that she would be able to carry out her own prophetic mission. The overall purpose of the book is to offer a scriptural vision for the life and mission of the church which needs to be grounded in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ. Hence, in the introduction, Johnson argues that Luke, in his gospel and Acts, presents Jesus and the apostles in terms of prophecy. In other words, they have the marks of a prophet: they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, speak God’s word, embody God’s vision for humanity, enact that vision with signs and wonders, and act as witnesses to God in this world. Accordingly, Johnson claims that the canonical position of Luke-Acts in the Scriptures implies their permanent normative value – this record is prophetic for every age of the church, challenging it, and calling it into question. The pertinent question is not, “Was the early church as Luke describes it,” but “How does Luke’s portrayal of the early church challenge the church in every age?” (p. 6).

In chapter one, Johnson discusses the literary shape of Luke-Acts which includes an analysis of the material, style, genre and structure. In this way, Johnson helps the reader to properly hear and understand the distinctive witness of Luke-Acts. In the material analysis, Johnson discusses the distinctiveness of Luke’s gospel and its relationship with the other synoptic gospels. The stylistic analysis discusses the way Luke used, adapted or changed sources that he used in terms of style. In the genre analysis, Johnson aims to determine the genre of Luke-Acts in order to set the interpretation of this work in a realistic framework. Finally, the structural analysis discusses the way Luke structured his narrative, especially pointing out two literary devices which give structure to the story: attention to geography and the use of prophecy.

Chapter two deals with the prophetic shape of Luke-Acts, and in this way Johnson develops the theme that he only briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. By discussing several dimensions of prophecy as a literary feature within Luke-Acts, Johnson prepares the reader for a close consideration of the prophetic character of Luke’s message. Hence the first element of this literary feature is the

fulfillment of the Torah, and the second one is Luke's use of prophecy as a literary technique. Here Johnson also discusses prophetic characterization, that is, prophecy as a way of being in the world, and prophetic narrative structure. In the final part of this chapter, Johnson argues that Luke's use of geography in his narrative has a key function within Luke's apology for God's ways in this world.

Chapter three is the introductory chapter for the rest of the book since Johnson here discusses and defines the character of the prophet, the theme that he will develop in more detail in the chapters to follow. Here he defines the key elements of a prophet: a prophet is led by the Spirit of God; speaks God's word to people; embodies God's word; enacts God's vision, and finally, the prophet bears witness in the face of opposition. The following chapters discuss these topics in greater detail.

Chapter four is entitled "The Prophetic Spirit", and here Johnson argues that the most obvious indicator that Luke conceives Jesus and his followers as prophetic figures is the prominent role of the Holy Spirit. After discussing the role that the Spirit had in the life of Jesus and in Acts, he ends this chapter with a challenge to the contemporary church (a practice that he continues in all following chapters). The challenge is offered based on the premise that Luke-Acts are part of canonical Scripture and as such speak prophetically to the church in every age. Hence, the challenge is to recognize the activity of the Spirit as the continuing activity of the living God. This implies that the church is not "answerable to itself or to its traditions, but to the presence and power that presses upon it at every moment" (p. 66). The second challenge is to recognize the voices of the prophets who are among us right now acting as God's agents and emissaries. Third, Johnson connects the activity of the Spirit with a discussion about the character of theology. He claims that theology can never be fully "systematic", but must be both inductive and unsystematic because insights into God derive from actual human experience. The final challenge is the activity of the Spirit and the character of the church. Johnson stresses that Luke's interest is not so much in the institutional arrangement of the church as much as in the assembly's response to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world since the Spirit works outside the boundaries of the community, beyond control, and in new and surprising directions (p. 71).

Chapter five is dedicated to the topic of the prophetic word, that is, to the content of the "word of God" that a prophet declares as God's spokesperson. Hence, Luke's presentation of a prophetic message is concerned primarily with the topic of repentance or conversion, and the kingdom of God. Analyzing these topics, Johnson discusses Luke's infancy account, John the Baptist, Jesus, opposition to the prophetic word, and the prophetic word in Acts. In the part "Challenge to the Contemporary Church", Johnson calls today's church "to examine themselves

with respect to the clarity and consistency of their ‘message’ to the world” (p. 89). This examination should include a proper understanding of topics like the kingdom of God, repentance, water baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the issue of power (wealth) and possessions.

Chapter six talks about prophetic embodiment since a prophetic message is not only announced verbally by a prophet, but is often embodied through physical gesture or some symbolic action. What Johnson argues here is that prophetic truth was expressed not simply in words, but also in personal behavior – in character. Hence, Johnson analyzes such prophetic embodiment in his gospel and Acts which, according to him, has several characteristics: poverty and sharing of possessions, itinerancy (being constantly on the move), prayer and servant leadership. Johnson also mentions all these characteristics when he talks about challenges to the contemporary church. He is aware that Luke’s portrayal of the early church is an idealized picture, utopian even. Yet, that does not mean that such a description has no basis in reality, “only that his portrait isolates and develops those traits that form an embodiment of the prophetic word” (p. 123).

Chapter seven bears the title “Prophetic Enactment”, and here Johnson analyzes the ways in which prophetic vision is expressed through the mission and ministry of Jesus and the early church. His main observation is that the prophetic mission in Luke-Acts stands in stark contrast to the prophetic agendas of other pagan nations, but also to two alternative prophetic programs within contemporary Judaism: the Pharisees, who sought to restore holy people on the basis of a strict observance of the Torah and a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders, and the Essene community who had even more rigorous rules of separation. Accordingly, the radicalism of Jesus’ ministry can only be fully appreciated in the light of these two prophetic movements who enacted holiness through exclusion. Prophetic ministry according to Luke included healing as one type of restoration of the people (exorcisms brought liberation to the captives, and healing of the sick was one way of restoring the people), and embracing the marginal. As in the previous chapters, Johnson ends with challenges to the contemporary church, and this time he addresses the issue of exorcisms and healing the sick in contemporary Christianity.

The final chapter of the book is dedicated to the topic of prophetic witness and Johnson begins this chapter with a short “philosophy” of witness: he defines what the witness is, how witness functions and what some unique aspects of witness are. Then he turns to Jesus who is presented as a public figure in Luke’s Gospel, and for that matter, as a suffering prophet. After that, he turns to the church’s witness in Acts, claiming that the witness of the church in Acts emulated not only Jesus’ message, but also his manner of life and ministry. Hence, his conclusion

is that the early church was just as prophetic as Jesus himself. The big question is whether the contemporary church can “be called prophetic in anything like the same manner” (p. 182). Speaking of challenges to the contemporary church, Johnson points out the need for reemphasizing the message of resurrection in today’s preaching, and he offers several reasons for this: it is the sign of God’s vindication of Jesus, the source of the gift of the Holy Spirit, it offers a unique perspective on Jesus’ ministry in the past, but more than that, “it is the perception of Jesus’ exalted rule over the world in the present” (p. 183). The second challenge concerns the embodiment of the witness that the church must offer to the world. If the church merely speaks the Gospel but does not live in a manner that is consistent with the prophetic word, such a church offers no real challenge to the world. Finally, the last challenge is in regards to the integrity of communal witness which is hard to achieve even when the power of the Holy Spirit is active. Because of this, Johnson emphasizes that today’s church needs to hear the voices of the prophets because these voices call the church to its own identity.

Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church is a book that explores the past in order to shape the present and the future of the church. It is a combination of a quality scholarly exegesis, insightful reflection, and challenging application for today’s situation in the global church. It is a book for scholars, especially those who study Lukan theology, but also for pastors and all those who are interested in the topic of the church. Although some parts could be difficult for those who are not used to reading scholarly books, the book is worth reading because Johnson masterfully connects biblical data with the present situation in Christianity. In the beginning, Johnson explains his methodological approach, his goals, and the major ideas that he will argue, and the following chapters are written according to this clear and easily recognizable structure. In this regard, the book is easy to read.

Luke Timothy Johnson is a scholar from the Roman Catholic tradition, yet his biblical theology which is faithful and limited solely to the biblical text does not reveal his theological background. For that matter, one could be easily misled into thinking that Johnson belongs to a Pentecostal or charismatic theological tradition. Yet, that is only one additional element which speaks about the quality of his work, and all of that should be sufficient reason and invitation to buy this book and enjoy this quality biblical, theological, pastoral, and critically insightful work.

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