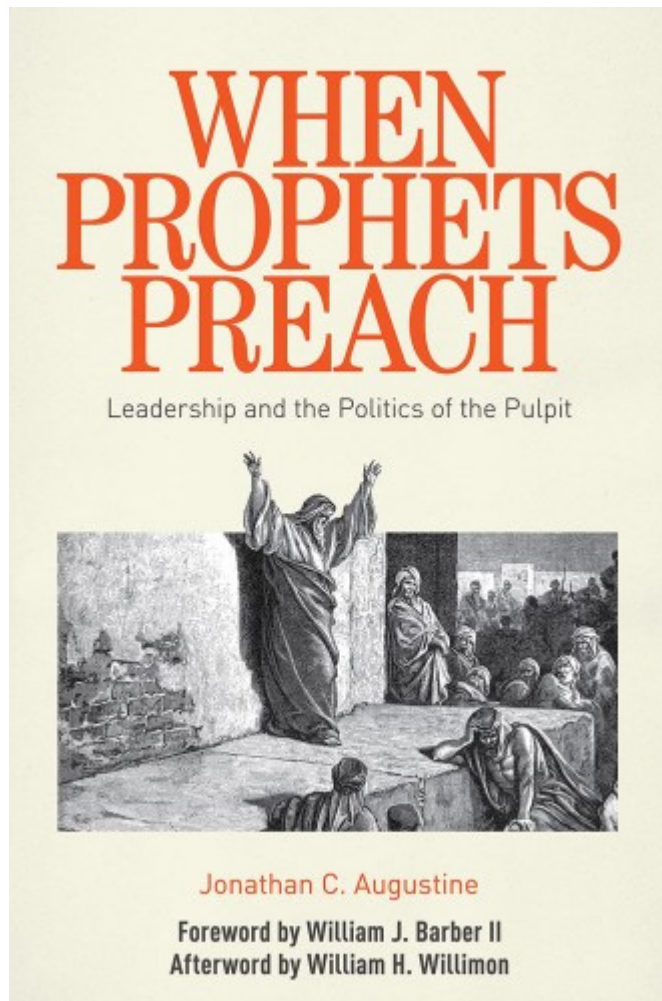


The prophetic ministry of the pulpit

Jonathan Augustine makes a strong case for preaching that is both divinely inspired and socially determined.

by [Johnathan C. Richardson](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue
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In Review



When Prophets Preach

Leadership and the Politics of the Pulpit

By Jonathan C. Augustine

Fortress

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

I've always wanted to know more about how biblical scholar Ellen Davis envisions the notion of the "prophetic interpreter," which she discusses at the beginning of her 2014 book *Biblical Prophecy*. She defines biblical prophets as those who "interpreted the faith for their time, and equally, they interpreted the times for the faithful" and suggests that prophetic interpretation rooted in that tradition can be embodied in today's church. But what does that embodiment look like? How can pastors and lay preachers bring this notion of prophecy into the pulpit?

Jonathan Augustine provides an answer in *When Prophets Preach*. Channeling the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., Augustine addresses both the church in general and clergy in particular. He makes a strong case for the importance of preaching that "is both divinely inspired and socially determined" as he recontextualizes the prophet's leadership role for the 21st century. Prophetic preaching, he writes, "is a ministry led by divine revelation and in response to specific social circumstances that often speak in opposition to the dominant culture." Augustine calls out pastors who "shy away from" this mode of preaching, wondering why so many are hesitant to let social issues show up in their sermons or influence their leadership agenda.

Augustine's work is not an indictment of the church or of preachers but rather a loving reminder to the church's leadership that sermons are an expression of biblical prophecy. Preaching can simultaneously contain "both revelations from God and responses to social situations." Referencing the work of Walter Brueggemann, Marvin A. McMickle, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Augustine recommends that prophetic preaching for our time be concerned with the "kingdom at hand" rather than waiting for the "kingdom to come."

Augustine's argument for prophetic preaching reminds me of a warning that both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth issued: Christians should never be so concerned with universal or idealistic ideas of the church that they lose sight of the fact that the church is located in a particular time and place. An underlying theme that runs throughout Augustine's book is that prophetic preaching is socially determined.

When Prophets Preach nudges Christians not to forget that the church has particular expressions. “The contemporary prophet’s work, especially in the realm of preaching, cannot be confined by the liturgical season,” Augustine writes. The tension between being pietistic and being political is generative rather than conflictual in the context of the Black Church, he posits, drawing a parallel to the way Jesus preached. In both cases, the church’s “priestly work is not in competition with its prophetic responsibility.” His observation that “the church was born in politics” serves as a corrective for Christians who forget that the church’s ministry of reconciliation started in the time of Jesus. To take Augustine’s point a bit further, embracing socially engaged preaching as a way of returning to the church’s origins can create a new form of unity—one in which the church invisible and the church visible are understood as complementing each other.

Prophetic preaching “creates an alternative narrative to the dominant culture,” according to Augustine, but preparing people to get political requires more than a narrative. Prophetic preaching needs focus, fertile ground, and prophetic leadership to mature into what Davis calls the “radical concreteness of prophetic expression, which both engages hearers in particular contexts and makes vivid God’s engagement with the world.” To this end, Augustine advises that denominations be more proactive in nurturing prophetic ministry by creating staff positions solely devoted to engagement in the political (although not partisan) domain. This form of denominational commitment can help the church remain focused on its prophetic mission.

Our present political climate is fertile ground for certain components of the gospel. According to Augustine, now is the time for the church to be prophetically political by renewing its focus upon the work of reconciliation. He adds that Christian nationalism and the immigration crisis also provide opportunities for the church to get political and preachers to preach prophetically. In naming such specific social circumstances that require prophetic redress, Augustine leaves today’s preachers no escape from the calling to preach and lead prophetically.

Bonhoeffer famously claimed that “only the obedient believe,” and Augustine contends likewise. Christian leaders who preach prophetically and act politically meet God in the process of struggling for freedom and reconciliation. After reading *When Prophets Preach* and pondering Augustine’s ideas on the prophetic nature of Christian political leadership, the most honest thing I can say is that I hope I am on my way to meet God. And I hope to see you there.