

When Neo-Charismatic Practices Travel Across the Atlantic

Towards a Lutheran Theology of Personal Prophecy

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the possible adoption of prophetic ministry, as it is practised at the Neo-Pentecostal Bethel Church in Redding, California, in a Scandinavian-Lutheran context. Using an empirical qualitative study design, a selection of lay prophetic ministers at Bethel have been interviewed, and the material supplemented with data from Bethel's sermons and literature. Through the empirical study, we identified some key theological themes that we find to be particularly important to assess, if personal prophecy, or similar practices, are to be used in Scandinavian churches and parachurch organizations. Some of these themes correspond to themes that emerge from Pentecostal-Lutheran dialogues, namely i) the interpretation of divine presence and ii) the evaluation of divine and human agency in particular (spiritual) practices. Following this second theme, questions concerning Bethel's theological anthropology and theology of suffering are evaluated, drawing on, amongst others, Reinhard Hütter's theology of Christian practices. Prophecy appears to be a sort of semi-sacramental practice at Bethel, and a Lutheran understanding of Christ's presence in practices offers a constructive and critical interpretative lens as we discuss the Pentecostal notion of manifest presence. In terms of the (theological) limitations of human agency in Christian practices, the Orthodox-Lutheran dialogue on divinisation, or *theosis*, proves helpful. Towards the end of the article, we draw on these elaborations on theological anthropology to discuss the relationship between notions of suffering and prophetic ministry, suggesting that an underdeveloped theology of suffering may result in a superficial prophetic ministry focusing on blessings and prosperity. Hence, Scandinavians who seek to adopt a prophetic ministry, would benefit from integrating a complex Lutheran theology of a) Christ's presence and b) the cross in their practice. Such a theological emphasis includes acknowledging that humans are at best secondary agents in ministering God's grace and mercy to others.

Keywords: Bethel, Prophecy, Kris Vallotton, Bill Johnson, Christ's presence, theosis, suffering, Lutheranism, heroic anthropology

INTRODUCTION

Prophecy is one of the hallmarks of Pentecostal spirituality (Dodson, 2011, p. 52; Synan, 1997, p. 212). Prophecy, tongues, and healing prayer, together with other charisms, manifest and reveal God's presence and power in the world. In classical Pentecostalism, the primary context for receiving prophecies is the revival meeting and the church service (Dodson, 2011, p. 52). The practice of prophecy often takes place after the sermon and the altar call, which includes prayer for personal needs, prayer for healing, and the possibility of getting a "word from the Lord" directed specifically to each worshipper's life situation. An expectancy of God's manifested power and presence increases as the gathered community tarries in the Spirit (Vondey, 2017, p. 105). As many were coming to these Pentecostal meetings from the margins of society, prophetic words could sometimes offer a liberating effect, even providing a new sense of identity (Dodson, 2011, p. 52). Together with tongues, the practice of prophecy holds a special place in the Pentecostal missionary vision, as prophetic words manifest the inbreaking of God's power into this world for the salvation of the world and renewal of the church (Dodson, 2011, p. 52).

The influential megachurch Bethel Church in Redding, California, belongs to the wider strand of Pentecostalism. Interestingly, Bethel Church offers a structured ministry of personal prophecy, where seekers can come and be ministered to, outside of church services (Wang, 2025, p. 187). Prophecy is by no means neglected at Bethel's public meetings and worship services, and it often occurs spontaneously. However, the prophetic ministry at Bethel has outgrown its original time and place at a church service or revival meeting, because of the high demand. It is simply not possible to attend to everybody that come to receive personal prophecy, and those who seek personal prophecy are encouraged to come at designated times to be ministered to in what appears to be a streamlined practice.

The international influence of Bethel Church is considerable, even in Norway, once an Evangelical-Lutheran country by law (Björdal, 2022; Finnseth, 2012). Arguably, Bethel is the no 1 source of influence on Norwegian charismatics. Over the years, approximately 230 Norwegians have studied at Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM), with 85 of them continuing their training beyond one year. BSSM is a non-credited school that every year hosts 2000–3000 students from all over the world (Kizanis, 2015; Ystebø, 2018). Further, the worship songs produced by Bethel Music are very popular. On the Spotify app alone, they have 4.7 million monthly listeners. These songs are widely sung in Norwegian churches, even in the Church of Norway (Evangelical-Lutheran), and some are even translated into Norwegian. Leaders from Bethel have been keynote-speakers at several charismatic conferences in Norway, while some Norwegian churches have experimented with practices inspired by Bethel, such as healing rooms, healing on the streets, and prophetic ministry (Eide, 2017). Unsurprisingly, Bethel's influence on Norwegian church life creates both excitement and controversy. Norwegian scholars and commentators criticize Bethel's theology and practices, like their endorsement of the Donald Trump campaign and the church's connection to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) (Holmås, 2018; Simonnes, 2021; Teigen, 2020, 2022). Such themes disturb many Norwegian charismatics who otherwise seem to retain a positive attitude towards Bethel and the Bethel-influence.

This article aims to give a constructive and critical theological assessment of personal prophecy in the light of Evangelical-Lutheran theology, and hence evaluate what is at stake theologically when a charismatic practice like personal prophecy 'travels' across the Atlantic to a different theological and cultural context. As a particular ecclesial practice, Bethel's prophecy is deeply embedded in its own context, where it has been experimented with, evaluated, and accommodated continuously for decades. As a community consisting of mostly descendants of migrants, and in a country where the free-church model is the preferred ecclesial context,

California has birthed many revivals and renewals over the last century. Most notable are the Azusa Street Pentecostal revival 1906–1909 (Hollenweger, 1972, p. 22), the charismatic renewal in the mainline denominations from 1960 (Bennett, 1998), the Jesus People movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bustaan, 2011), and the so-called “third wave charismatics” from the 1980s (Wagner, 1988). All these movements have had an impact on the larger socio-religious fabric in which Bethel’s theology and practices have been developed. However, even Bethel, once an Assemblies of God church, has been shaped by other movements and sources, like the Toronto Blessing (McClymond, 2016) and, without being fully identified with its particular theological framework (Shuttleworth, 2016, p. 234), the Word of Faith movement.

Many religious movements have a globalizing tendency; they move across borders. This is particularly true for Christianity, which is a religion with a strong universal ambition. It should therefore come as no surprise that churches in Norway, and elsewhere, often import practices and beliefs from other ecclesial contexts. However, as beliefs and practices cross borders, fundamental differences in theology and spirituality may be overlooked. The Norwegian ecclesial context is predominantly Lutheran. Norway also has a longstanding pietistic tradition, often expressed through low-church prayer house movements (Zeiffert, 2023, pp. 1, 3, 8), which also carry an Evangelical-Lutheran heritage and identity. Even the free churches are influenced by these traditions. Over the last decades, the free churches and the low-church movements have been in decline. However, the overall picture is ambiguous and rather complex, and some free churches are growing in urban areas (Almelid & Hammerstad, 2024). When it comes to the adoption of theology and practices from other ecclesial contexts, younger generations of Christians are often pragmatic in the sense that they are willing to sacrifice their denominational affiliation over a community of believers that they find to be welcoming and that offer high quality sermons and worship along with an attractive children’s ministry. This phenomenon is known as church shopping (“Evangelical Church Shopping, Explained,” 2016). Further, church-shoppers do not always fully adopt to the spiritual practices of their new community. This phenomenon may be explained by an attitude of “eclectic ecumenism” (Tangen, 2012, pp. 48–49). Further, many Norwegian Christians meet in parachurch organizations, summer camps, or at conferences like the Lutheran-based charismatic renewal movement, “Oasis” (OASE, in Norwegian) (Kizanis, 2015, pp. 15–17).

However, the interpretative framework of Norwegian Christianity is still deeply embedded in an Evangelical-Lutheran theological framework, notwithstanding their current denominational affiliation, and import of ecclesial practices from other ecclesial contexts may be critiqued. As an example, Oasis has been criticized for an uncritical adaptation of a prophetic practice similar to Bethel’s practice of personal prophecy (Gudvangen, 2013; Holmås, 2018, p. 80), and for inviting a ‘Kansas City Prophet’ as preacher (Franzen, 2024). Hence, the Oasis movement developed their own guidelines for personal prophetic ministry, which were intended to hinder misuses and misunderstandings, yet still aiming to be affirmative of a modest way of practicing (personal) prophecy (Engelsviken, 2023, pp. 369–370).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The first empirical study on Bethel Church was conducted by Abigail Shuttleworth, who investigated the healing praxis at Bethel and the accompanying theology of Bill Johnson (Shuttleworth, 2015; Shuttleworth, 2016). As a contribution to the field of social geography, Abigail Joiner explores how the presence of the Spirit is perceived as ‘real’ at Bethel (Joiner, 2021). Research on Bethel Music has focused on lyrics (Baker, 2022; Thornton, 2021), its performing

authenticity (Baker, 2023), its connection to the Toronto Blessing (Baker & Ingalls, 2022), and its impact (Perez et al., 2023). In a recent article, Mark Cartledge discusses Bill Johnson's praxis and understanding of the Eucharist in a digital age by studying how it is performed via YouTube. Cartledge asks whether the presence of Christ in the sacrament can be mediated digitally (Cartledge, 2024). In a recent empirical study on prophetic ministry at Bethel, it is argued that the prophetic ministers at Bethel have to submit to a leadership based on legal-rational logics (Wang, 2025). Marianne Eide's master's thesis about the way Bethel's prophetic practice is implemented in some Norwegian churches is thematically related to this study, but still markedly different. She interviewed Norwegian pastors and used intercultural studies in her analysis (Eide, 2017).

There are several studies on personal prophecy from other contexts, both from the charismatic movement within the Roman Catholic Church, (Csordas, 1997; McGuire, 1977), the Church of England (Cartledge, 1995), Australian Pentecostals (Harris, 2020; Harris, 2021a; Harris, 2021b; Harris, 2023), and the non-Western world (Dennis, 2018; Muindi, 2012). Samuel W. Muindi, in his study of an African Pentecostal-charismatic church, argues for a sacramental understanding of the prophetic ministry. By sacramentality he means, in short, that it is "an intense moment of a participatory interface between the divine Spirit and the human spirit in which the divine Spirit induces the human conscious dimension with revelatory impulses" (Muindi, 2012, abstract).

In this article, we draw on empirical data from interviews at Bethel as a starting point to identify and discuss some key theological themes that need to be addressed if Bethel's practice of personal prophecy is to be adopted in a Scandinavian-Lutheran context. In our view there are some crucial theological topics that stand out as particularly relevant to the discussion at hand:

- a) The interpretation of Christ's presence, and how this presence is actualized in the prophetic ministry and through the human mediator.
- b) Bethel's anthropology and its view on divine-human agency and cooperation in spiritual practices like personal prophecy.

We are convinced that a systematic-theological assessment of these key themes will clarify the opportunities, challenges, limitations, and dilemmas that are involved in the process of adopting Bethel's practice of personal prophecy in other contexts, more specifically an Evangelical-Lutheran Norwegian context.

With this article, we want to contribute to the ongoing discussion about charismatic practices in Scandinavian church life. Coming from a Lutheran background ourselves, a Lutheran, yet ecumenical, perspective will be applied to the study. The research question is therefore articulated in the following way: *Which theological themes are at stake as the ministry of personal prophecy at Bethel Church travels to Norway, and how may these themes be assessed from a Lutheran perspective?*

To address the question, the next section presents a brief outline of the methodology employed. Following that, we will present and analyse the empirical data from the research, detailing the three major themes that emerge from the analysis: those of divine presence, divine-human cooperation, and finally anthropology and the practice of personal prophecy. These are engaged in turn with a number of Lutheran theological theories as part of the discussion.

METHODOLOGY

This study is empirically informed, but driven by theory. The main theoretical constructs are (a) theological theories about the presence of Christ, and (b) theological theories about divine-human cooperation in a practice, including theological anthropology. We draw on Lutheran and ecumenical discourses to assess these questions. For (a), the question about divine presence, we found it helpful to use German-American theologian Reinhard Hütter's theory on Christian practices (Hütter, 2000). In order to discuss (b), how divine-human cooperation may be understood, we looked to the new Finnish interpretation of Luther, developed at the University of Helsinki (Kärkkäinen, 2006, p. 75). Of particular interest here is the ecumenical dialogue on the Orthodox doctrine of participation in divine nature, or *theosis*, with insights from the late Tuomo Mannermaa, Professor of Ecumenical Theology (Mannermaa & Stjerna, 2005). These theories will be elaborated in more depth in the analysis and discussion sections.

The prophetic ministry at Bethel was studied empirically as a single-case study. The methods used were qualitative interviews with nine people who served or had served as prophetic ministers, and participant observation at Bethel's campus in Redding during the prophetic sessions one Sunday in November 2019. From the interviews the espoused theology¹ of the practitioners appeared as the participants explained their experiences theologically. The participants in the study were anonymized.² As secondary sources, we have used literature from Bethel's leaders and web-based content published by Bethel and Bethel related ministries. As Bethel's literature has become rather vast over the years, we have focused on central publications from Bill Johnson and Kris Vallotton. Vallotton's theology is particularly relevant, because he is the founder of Bethel's prophetic ministry. We also observed that both Scripture and literature from Bethel's leadership are regarded as normative sources among Bethel's prophetic ministers, albeit not to the same degree, thus making the publications of these authors an important research resource.

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

The presence of Christ in Bethel's prophetic ministry

The salvific telos of Bethel's prophetic ministry is to strengthen, encourage, and comfort those who are ministered to, with reference to 1 Cor 14:3. At Bethel this telos also could be described as 'creative'. The ministry is spatial-temporally designed to facilitate such divine encounters. In a Christian context, divine encounters assume the presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, where one can come to know God (Norheim, 2022, p. 522). In light of this, we ask how the presence of Christ in the practice of prophecy could and should be interpreted, in dialogue with how the interviewees claim to experience the very same presence. In other words, what kind of theological interpretative framework may frame these experiences of divine encounter? Notably, several of the interviewees expressed ideas about participation in divine action when describing their prophetic practice.

Motivated by a hunch we got after listening to multiple sermons from Bethel and reading Kris Vallotton's training manual for the prophetic ministry, we investigated further the

¹ The language of "espoused theology" and "normative theology" is derived from "the four voices of theology," which was developed by the Action Research: Church and Society (ARCS) Project (Cameron et al., 2010).

² For the purpose of this article, the respondents have been assigned the fictional names Linda, Roger, Nelly, Martin, and Bob.

distinction between prophecy as *foretelling* and prophecy as *forthtelling*, a distinction which is essential to Vallotton's theology of prophecy and prophetic ministry. By 'foretelling', Vallotton means to know or tell the future, so that the seeker may be prepared for some future event. By 'forthtelling', on the other hand, the idea is that the prophecy is *causing* certain things to happen (Vallotton, 2005, p. 24). That is a bold claim to make, especially if we consider that God's action here is brought to life by the words of the prophetic minister.

The connection between the putative power of a prophetic word and how God's presence is experienced in the situation is expressed by Linda, who serves on the prophetic team, as follows:

There have been some prophetic words that I'll say that I feel a rumbling power in me that I know that's going to happen. Like they seem to be this... like it's feels like my spirit is like charged of power and God is riding on those words as I speak it. So [it] doesn't mean that every prophetic word that's the feeling that I have, but there have been some that, I'm like, I have no doubt that that's going to come to pass. There's some that I might [...] hope that happens. And then there's some that I have complete confidence in. And usually, they, they do come to pass.

We note that she associates "a rumbling power in me" with knowing whether things will happen. The putative connection between the sensation of God's presence and the belief in the power of the prophecy is key. A similar connection between physical sensations and the faith put in the message is also reported in Mark Cartledge's study from 1995. He describes that at an important element in the theology of the delivery of a prophetic message is the conviction that the person who prophesies is perceived as 'anointed' in the actual moment of prophecy, based on some physical sensations. Moreover, that there is an anointing power that empowers the person to speak God's message, and that this occurs sporadically (Cartledge, 1995, p. 84).

Others at Bethel have a more relaxed attitude to how presence or power is perceived. For instance, Roger first affirms that "at times I do feel like the Lord is asking me to declare something because that won't happen until I declare it." But then he expresses some reservations:

I don't profess to understand all of it. And just as a side note, we don't always know. Like, if I am foretelling or forthtelling something [that] is in the future, how do I know that it simply would have happened anyway? Whether I said it or not or whether what I said somehow, you know, cause the person to look for it and line up with that and God to do something, I don't know. And so, I don't tend to worry too much about it, because either way, I'm giving a prophetic word now that's going to come true in the future. I don't know how God is going to bring that about.

To partner with the prophetic word that *foretells* means to prepare oneself for what is foretold, plan, and act. The receiver can then choose to put faith in it, or even *partner with the prophetic word in faith* so that it becomes a reality in their life. Conversely, disbelief can hinder it, but not always.

All in all, the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel stands out as a complex and somewhat ambiguous practice. It is therefore not immediately easy to offer a theological assessment of the practice. Does the practice offer an encounter with God? If so, on what grounds may the presence of God in the practice be interpreted theologically?

In the following paragraphs, we will thus engage theological theory on practice to assess the practice in more depth. If we first look at personal prophecy as a potential Christian practice, a few points are worth noting. A practice – on a more general level – is often defined

as a socially situated act with a set of shared values, a “socially established cooperative human activity” offering external and internal goods as part of the end or pursuit of the practice (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 187).³ The practice of personal prophecy at Bethel seems to fit this definition of a practice well, but the question remains as to how we might interpret the practice as a Christian practice.

First, we need to assess more fundamentally what makes a practice Christian in the first place. It has long been argued that practices such as prayer or forgiveness are essential to the shape of an everyday Christian life and that they may therefore be labelled ‘Christian practices’ alongside practices such as hospitality and worship. There has been little interest in prophecy as a potentially Christian practice, far less the practice of personal prophecy, probably because the theological interest in Christian practices has emerged mainly in the context of US mainline denominations, where personal prophecy occurs rarely, if ever. An influential definition of Christian practices argues that Christian practices are “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (Dykstra and Bass, 2002, p. 18).⁴ Departing from this rather open definition, personal prophecy *may* be taken to be a Christian practice. It is indeed carried out over time to “address fundamental human needs,” and it is definitely practised with the conviction that God is active in the world. However, this definition of Christian practices still does not really determine clear criteria for what makes a practice fundamentally ‘Christian’ (Norheim, 2014, pp. 27-32). In other words, what, if anything, defines the practice of contemporary personal prophecy as a distinct Christian practice?

One may of course ask if the practice of personal prophecy should be understood as a semi-sacramental practice (Volf, 2002, pp. 248-251). However, the language of sacramentality seems foreign to the theology and practice of Bethel. Should the practice of personal prophecy then be understood mainly as a practice on the economy of creation (Hütter, 2007, p. 297)?⁵ That would seem equally alien to both the practice and the theological convictions involved.

To further discern theologically how the possible presence of God in the practice should be understood, we will now turn to Reinhard Hütter’s distinction between different clusters of practices. For Hütter the first cluster of (Christian) practices are practices that he argues are necessary and constitutive for the church. The end, or *telos*, of these practices is to partake in the triune God’s salvific goal for humanity. He therefore labels them the “church’s core practices” (Hütter, 2000, p. 37). In grouping different kinds of practices Reinhard Hütter draws on Martin Luther’s elaborations on the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) in the third part of the reformer’s treatise *On the Councils and the Church* from 1539. Bringing Luther into dialogue with neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics influenced by MacIntyre and others, Hütter speaks about the marks as ‘practices’.

In the treatise Luther lists seven marks of the church, as Christ has promised his presence to these marks. The seven marks are the Word, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, The Office of the Keys (forgiveness), services and ordinances, worship (praise and prayer), and

³ For a lengthier assessment of the engagement with practices in theological circles, see Norheim, 2014, pp. 7-10, 16-26.

⁴ Dykstra and Bass draw on the work of MacIntyre, but even social scientists like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, and philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

⁵ Hütter finds that theologians with what he describes as a non-sacramental Congregationalist ecclesiology “will tend to favor either practices of witness or natural, everyday practices, depending on whether they prioritize, along the Barthian lines, the economy of salvation with its proper and unique practices of witness, or along liberal Protestant lines, the economy of creation with those practices that sustain human flourishing” (Hütter, 2007, p. 298).

discipleship in suffering (Hütter, 2000, p. 129). These marks of the church should be understood as first tablet practices, Hütter argues, since they correspond to the first tablet of Moses: they create and rehabilitate the relationship between God and humans, by offering the salvific presence of Christ. On this reading, it seems like a long stretch to claim that the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel – or an adopted version of the practice in churches in Scandinavia – should pass as a first tablet practice offering the mercy of Christ.

Although it is difficult to argue that the practice of personal prophecy should qualify as a first tablet practice, it is important to note that Luther also describes other marks of the church, or for our purposes – practices. The next cluster of practices are practices relating to the second tablet of Moses. These practices are deeds and actions that all people of good will might apply, like honouring your parents, living a hospitable life, or helping a neighbour in need (LW 41:167). As practices, they are not exclusively ‘Christian’, nor are they constitutive to being church. A third cluster of marks or practices are the so-called *adiaphora*. These marks or practices may be helpful, but are indifferent, like the chiming of bells at certain times or the use of candles. Finally, Luther also highlighted that it is possible to identify a fourth cluster of marks: these ‘practices’ are better understood as malpractices of the second tablet practices. In other words, where these practices are not kept, or violated, there is *no* church. More succinctly put, where there is stealing, adultery, lying, and so on, there is no Christ, and therefore no church (LW 41:167ff).

How we evaluate the practice of personal prophecy depends on how we interpret the presence of Christ in the practice – and in the different clusters of practices, outlined above. In the sacramental disputes with the Left wing of the Reformation (like Zwingli) towards the end of the 1520s, Luther develops a typology of Christ’s presence, which we believe proves helpful to evaluate the practice of personal prophecy theologically. A Lutheran understanding of the presence of Christ recognizes both the universal presence of Christ in creation, as well as the particular presence of Christ in the sacraments. This conviction springs from Luther’s argument against Zwingli: As the right hand of God is everywhere, Christ is everywhere (LW 37:47, 55, 207).

In the treatise *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528) Luther takes this argument a step further and insists that the biblical narratives present us with three known modes in which Christ may be present – the *circumscriptive* mode, the *diffinitive* mode, and the *repletive* mode. The first mode depicts the mode ascribed to Christ from nativity until crucifixion, where Christ was bodily present at one place at a time. The second mode may be described as the spiritual mode attributed to Christ from resurrection until ascension, where Christ “occupies nor yields space, but passes through everything created as he wills.” Interestingly, this mode of presence is the mode Luther identifies as the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. The third mode tries to capture the presence of Christ in a post-ascension reality, where the exalted Christ is seated to the right of the Father. In this divine or heavenly mode, created things “cannot measure or circumscribe him but they are present to him so that he measures and circumscribes them” (LW 37:222-223; for more details see also Norheim, 2014, pp. 71-75 and Norheim 2022, p. 520).

From these elaborations, we may conclude that the first cluster of practices align with the *diffinitive* presence of Christ, as these practices offer the salvific presence of Christ. Similarly, the second tablet practices correspond to the *repletive* presence of Christ, which is a sustaining presence in the economy of creation. At first glance, it seems obvious to group the practice of personal prophecy into that second cluster, as we have already argued that it seems far-fetched

to argue that the practice actually offers the salvific presence of Christ in any qualified way, although the sharing of passages from Scripture may be seen as a way to share the Word.⁶

However, the problem with this categorization is that it does not quite capture how those who participate in the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel experience and describe it. They report that the practice is a way to partake in divine presence here and now. Roger, who also gives lectures at Bethel, asserts that

whenever I teach on this, the example I use is actually the example in creation. So, when God spoke, he spoke the world into being. And so, what I explain to people is we're, you know, we're supposed to have *dominion*. We're *co-creators with God*. We are *partnering* with him. [...] what God is asking us to do is just to *speak things into being*. And somehow, because everybody knows the creation story, I think people can understand that how God spoke and things came into being that, yes, if, you know, God asks us to partner with him, he can supernaturally make that happen as well. (Our emphasis.)

It further means that the ability to prophesy is not just a ministerial ethos or a skill that can be learned or acquired through a course on prophecy. It comes as the result of a deep spiritual encounter akin to conversion that provides a new, empowered identity (Wang, 2025, p. 203). This new identity is explained in the following manner in Bethel's literature: "We are not just soldiers of the cross; we are heirs to the throne. *His divine nature permeates our souls*, transforms our minds, transplants our hearts and transfigures our spirits. We were made to be vessels for His glory and vehicles of His light" (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006, p. 18; our emphasis). Here we see that the basis for participating in divine ministry seems to follow logically from participation in divine nature. As such, divine presence is perceived as grace, and as a result of God's work in the life of the person.

Participating in divine nature and being co-creators with God

The prophetic ministers believe that it is not only their ministry, or their ministry role, that is important to God, but even that they in themselves are significant as subjects created in the image of God. As the prophetic ministers sense the Spirit's direction to speak out divinely inspired messages, they acknowledge that they can decide whether to speak it or not. However, interestingly enough, they are more drawn to sharing optimistic messages and withholding messages of unease and trouble. If the 'revelation' they get is a 'negative' word, they would only pray about it silently and instead engage in a conversation with the Spirit about what kind of 'positive' word they could give in the situation. They affirm that their ministry is for "up-building, encouragement, and consolation," legitimating this form of charismatic prophecy by citing 1 Cor 14:3 (RSV). One minister, Nelly, contrasts this aspect of ministry to the "old style Pentecostal" form of prophecy, which, according to her, often was "very negative and it was always about the sin that the person has."

Applying the Lutheran distinction between first tablet practices and second tablet practices, this 'positive' form of prophecy may correspond to the latter.⁷ The "old style Pentecostal," which reveals sin in a person's life can be connected to Luther's second use of the Law. This implies that the Law serves as a "custodian" to bring us to Christ (Gal 3:24, RSV).

⁶ One may of course also argue that abuse of personal prophecy may be understood as a malpractice belonging to the fourth cluster, but that is beyond the scope of this investigation.

⁷ Here, we use the adjectives 'positive' and 'negative' according to the usage of the research informants, without any normative assessment on our part. The meaning will be evident in the context.

That approach may be more explicitly soteriological than the “positive” or affirmative prophecy practised at Bethel, which has a more diaconal or even therapeutic purpose. However, the practice of prophetic ministry at Bethel, or elsewhere, should be practiced as a part of a holistic approach to ministry. The question about sin and repentance would normally be addressed in the congregation, where a direct or even humbling response is not required, or in pastoral care, where a relationship is already established (Vallotton, 2014, ch. 5). Prophetic ministers at Bethel also believe that it is the Holy Spirit who will eventually convince the receiver of a prophetic message about the need for repentance. To quote one of the participants, Martin, “what better place for a person who’s not thinking right than in the presence of God where all that stuff has to leave?” Hence, the prophetic ministers work under the implicit protocol of not prophesying doom and gloom at a personal level.⁸

However, the ministers’ choice of sharing or withholding a prophetic word is more about faith and courage. It probably also has more to do with the willingness to be used by God and embrace one’s own apprehensions than protocols. Several participants talked about “stepping out in faith” to share a prophecy. The fear of being intimidated was often overcome by the confidence that God knows the hearts of the people they minister to and what may sound childish or awkward to others may have significance for the recipient. A common phrase is to “partner with God,” as Bob observes: “My job is to partner with God and declare when I feel like he says to declare.” Although boldness is encouraged, the unanimous impression is that this is done in an environment of grace which allows for trials, errors, and honest feedback.

Bob further explains that prophecy has some components to it, namely revelation, interpretation, application, and sometimes declaration. A word with declaratory power creates something as it is declared: “there’s a creative nature to prophecy at times” (Bob). The creation narrative is used to explain how a word from God has creative power.

How this really happens is not at all clear from Bethel’s literature, but it is explained as a process that starts in the soul of the individuals and spreads out from there. The mental, or cognitive aspect plays a vital role: “What many of us have not understood is that the greatness of God is actually magnified as each of His sons and daughters receive the revelation of their nobility and begin to operate in His authority” (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006, p. 85). Key to understanding Bethel’s anthropology is their view of the power of the transformed mind, based on their understanding of Romans 12:2 (RSV), which says, “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Johnson, 2005). This cognitive process must lead to a deeper relationship with God the Father: “We must want Him more than we want what He does” (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006, p. 90). One of the ministers commented that the first time she acknowledged that prophetic ministry was something for her to participate in, was when she realized that the practice rested on her relationship with Jesus, and not merely in a special gift or skill. This interpretation of personal prophecy affirms the key role that intimacy with the divine plays in such a ministry.

So far, we have explored whether the prophetic practice can be interpreted as a first tablet or a second tablet practice in the light of an Evangelical-Lutheran interpretation of practices and a theology of practice. However, what if none of these categories really offer a helpful or fitting theological assessment of the presence of Christ in the practice? Maybe the practice of personal prophecy is best situated as a sort of in-between practice, bordering both first tablet practices and second tablet practices?

⁸ For more information about prophetic etiquette, see Vallotton, 2005, ch. 7.

The attraction of the practice and possible theological implications

To further evaluate the presence of Christ in the practice of personal prophecy theologically, we need to look at the appeal of the practice, the implicit anthropology, the telos of the practice – and how these traits may be evaluated in the light of Lutheran theology. Let us first look at what seems to make the practice of personal prophecy attractive. Why does it gain so much attention, and why do so many people come to seek personal prophecy? One possible explanation may simply be that it offers therapeutic encouragement and care to people in difficult life situations, combined with a hint of promise of divine presence and possible intervention. A key finding from the conversations in the empirical research was the level of similarities to more secular self-help practices and more general appeals to turn one's life around. The practice of personal prophecy is permeated by the belief that God wants to bless humanity in all aspects, including the economic – for example, it was prophesied that the interviewer would receive a red car as a gift. In a context like the US, where there is no welfare state to offer the sort of security and comfort that Scandinavians are used to, such practices at Bethel also provide a sort of therapeutic comfort (see Wilkinson, 2016, p. 47), instilling faith that problems may be overcome. However, it is not the external goods of the practice that is the primary focus. As Martin explains,

For me, I just I know that my heart is genuinely for God and for the person. [...] I don't want to show off. I want the person to truly encounter God. [...] I want the person to feel seen. I want them to feel known. I want them to feel loved. If I'm in there for there for to love God and for God to love them, I'm kind of cut out of that equation.

The telos of the prophetic ministry is apparently therefore not to 'fix' people but to facilitate an encounter with God.

A heroic anthropology

There are many traces of a heroic anthropology both in the interviews with those who practice prophecy at Bethel and in Bethel's literature and teaching. We have already identified the belief that humans can co-create with God through prophesying and speaking things into being. This is often backed with biblical imagery that places the prophetic minister in a continuous tradition with the Old Testament prophets. This use of the Old Testament is congruent with classical Pentecostal hermeneutics. Pentecostal theology emphasizes that born-again, spirit-filled Christians are partakers in God's drama on earth and often display a "this is that-reading" of Scripture (Stibbe, 1998). Within this framework, there is no discontinuity between the 'this' of the actual phenomena, for example glossolalia, and the 'that' of the scriptural passage, for example the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2. We observed similar hermeneutics at play among Bethel's prophetic ministers, particularly evident in how they read themselves into the biblical stories. For instance, 'Bob' explains how prophecy can be forthtelling, or "causing the future," with a story from Ezekiel 37: "God doesn't say, you know, all prophesy something. You declare it and then it will happen because this is the future. He actually says, 'prophesy over the bones.' [...] So, you're causing something that had no ability in and of itself to happen before you declared it."

This approach to prophetic ministry reveals a rather optimistic anthropology, where humans are heroic partakers in God's continuing drama. One part of this anthropology is found in how prophetic ministers present a forward leaning self-understanding as vital players in God's unfolding drama in the world. Heroic, biblical narratives are used in the motivational literature at Bethel. Even Hollywood metaphoric is applied to substantiate a heroic anthropology, as for instance, with the movie *Braveheart*, where the protagonist William Wallace's courage and zeal for freedom is used as an example of ideal human and spiritual bravery (Vallotton,

2015, p. 132). Further, fictional figures like Batman, Spiderman, and Wonder Woman serve as role models, insofar as their courage and heroism is concerned (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006, pp. 161-162). Finally, the American motif of being “the land of the free and the home of the brave” is repeatedly emphasized. Vallotton laments that many Americans have forgotten that bravery precedes freedom (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006, pp. 161-162). An underlaying theme for Vallotton is that God has created and wired humans for greatness, and that through a surrender to Jesus and faith in him, humans can be healed, restored, and sanctified. As Christians in the world, humans must sometimes fight for this conviction. If they take a stand, step out in courage, and start doing something good, for example by prophesying life into a “dead” situation, they can use the God-given authority to destroy the works of the devil and promote the Kingdom of God. The language around prophetic practice indeed speaks about “supernatural ways of royalty” (Vallotton & Johnson, 2006) and depicts a journey towards improvement, progress, and victory. Altogether, joining Bethel and seeking personal prophecy may even be interpreted as a way to express the American Dream, which holds the narrative structure of a comedy, where the heroic will persevere and conquer in the end (Frye, 1983, p. 73).

This heroic and somewhat optimistic anthropology at first glance appears to be in conflict with a more realistic, or even pessimistic, Lutheran anthropology, particularly when it comes to how Lutheran theology traditionally conceptualizes the position of human beings before God (Norheim 2014, pp. 164-178). This challenge also pertains to the question of original sin, which is rarely debated at Bethel. However, are there resources in the Lutheran tradition which may be applied to enter into a critical dialogue with this particular anthropological motif, which is so salient in the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel? One key theological topic at stake here, is how to interpret the interaction between human and divine agency in a practice like personal prophecy. In the following, we will argue that a particular Lutheran engagement with the old Orthodox concept *theosis*, or divinization, may offer a way forward.

It is not difficult to see the contemporary appeal of the heroic and rather optimistic anthropology implicit in the practice of personal prophecy expressed by Bethel. After all, who does not want to join what appears to be the winning team? However, this perspective seems to run counter to some of the main features of a Lutheran anthropology, which emphasizes that human beings’ position before God (*coram Deo*) is distorted and broken by sin. Similar to some of the non-Lutheran (theological) engagements with Christian practices (Bass and Dykstra, 2002, p. 16, 24), the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel does not seem to be particularly informed by an anthropology of sin and human brokenness. An optimistic and heroic anthropology often seems to go hand in hand with a tendency towards an “idealized ecclesiology” (Norheim, 2014, pp. 49-53). The key theological problem involved is that the distinction between human and divine agency in the practice is jeopardized.

Theosis

We already concluded that the practice of personal prophecy *may* pass as a second tablet practice which may sustain the life and faith of humans, possibly a practice with a *diaconal telos* (Norheim, 2014, pp. 203-212 and Norheim, 2023, pp. 541-542). The question is whether the practice of personal prophecy should be dismissed in the light of a Lutheran anthropology, mainly due to the implicit heroic anthropology and the unclear distinction between human and divine agency, and perhaps even the possible malpractice of a second tablet practice? However, this seems to be a premature and a bit too hasty conclusion, even though the anthropology and ecclesiology expressed at Bethel may seem ever so alien to Scandinavian-Lutheran context. We have already noted that many of those coming to Bethel testify to an encounter with the divine as they come to seek personal prophecy. How should this claim be evaluated in the light

of Lutheran theology? We found that it would be dubious to claim that this is a first tablet practice offering the salvific presence of Christ. Rather, the practice is on the verge between first and second tablet practices.

However, may the practice of personal prophecy still be found to invoke participation in the divine life, in some way, according to Lutheran theology (Mannermaa & Stjerna, 2005, p. 43)? The notion of *theosis*, or divinization, has become a key term in the ecumenical dialogue between Lutheran and Orthodox theologians. The New Finnish interpretation of Luther, growing out of an Orthodox-Lutheran dialogue emphasizing salvation as divinization, has highlighted that Christ himself is present in faith, although believers cannot always perceive it themselves (Mannermaa & Stjerna, 2005, pp. 86-88).⁹ This implies that the believer is someone *who is being shaped*, always directing their confidence away from themselves to Christ. This is the point of departure for any appeal to participation in Christ (Peura, 1998, p. 91). The true subject in all of this is the Holy Spirit: according to Lutheran theology, the believer becomes *gifted* through baptism, and the gifts distributed by the triune God are given to be both received and shared – in the sense that “what God gives man receives, that it may be given to the neighbour” (Peura, 1998, p. 95). Fundamentally, the Christian decentred self is a self, shaped *by* another, *by* Christ. It is also a self, shaped *for* others, *for* the neighbour and the world (Mattes, 2002, p. 80).

These insights imply that the heroic anthropology and supernatural optimism of Bethel's theology is relativized. At the same time agency in the practice of personal prophecy is clarified: if Christ is present in the practice, it is either through the preaching of his Word (first tablet practice) or through the sustaining and caring presence for the other (second tablet practice). It is also key to underline that agency in such a practice fundamentally should be understood as God's agency, and if so, in a double manner: first and foremost, it is God's saving agency through the preaching of the Word, and secondly it is God's sustaining agency, making human action for the service of the other possible (i.e., the *repletive* presence of Christ).

Therefore, the distinction between human and divine agency in the practice of personal prophecy should take as its point of departure the fact that the presence of Christ in the heart of the believer is not a unity in divine essence, but a unity based on the justification of Christ. It is therefore not a mystical union in essence in the Platonic sense, rather it is based on God's justifying work with us in Christ: Christ in our hearts is Christian justification, and this remains the focal point of Lutheran (mystical and charismatic) theology, and even the focal point for change and ethical renewal in the life of a person, not the contemplation of God's ungraspable essence.¹⁰ This also relates to the fundamental *simul* structure in Luther's Christology; that Christ is radically present in all creation for the enhancement of life, but distinctively and radically present in a special way in the sacraments and the church core practices for the forgiveness of sins.

The practice of personal prophecy, like many of the other practices and activities at Bethel, is geared towards progress and growth. However, growth in the light of a Lutheran anthropology of a life under the cross means dying to self and being conformed to the crucified in such a way that self-assertion, self-importance, and self-despair pass. In a certain sense, even the practice of personal prophecy in the light of Lutheran theology and practice should take account of this mode of the Christian's 'progress' through life: it is about being humbled to

⁹ Here the authors even use the quotation from Luther, “Sic ut Christus obiectum fidei, imo non obiectum, sed ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest” (LW 26:129).

¹⁰ See Braw, *Mystikens arv hos Martin Luther*, 148, 235, and Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*, vol. 2, 208: “Dass im Glauben erneuerte Herz bleibt nicht in sich verschlossen, es zieht auch unser leiblichen Menschen hinein in das Bekenntnis des Glaubens und den Dienst der Liebe.”

see oneself and the world in new and fresh ways, through the undeserved mercy and sustaining presence of Christ. The freedom that may emerge from this encounter is founded in the justifying love of Christ. It paves the way for a sending to the world – sharing the good news and serving others, making no distinction between the worthy and unworthy.

A question still remains as to how this relates to a charismatic and Pentecostal understanding of God's presence. A central motif in Pentecostal spirituality is to experience God's presence (Green, 2020, p. 317). For Pentecostals, God's presence is understood as true, yet hidden and mysterious. Therefore, they long for the fullness of God's presence in the eschaton (Green, 2020, p. 318). By divine presence, Pentecostals refer both to the presence of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Over time the emphasis has moved from the presence of Jesus to the presence of the Spirit, but the underlying Pentecostal theology is that the presence of Christ is the Spirit's gift (Green, 2020, p. 318). Their emphasis is on the Spirit because "the Spirit is the energizing force who is active in the present as the relational presence of God" (Félix-Jäger, 2020, p. 343). God's presence can be experienced and enjoyed through a range of spiritual practices, among which worship stands out as central (Wilkinson, 2020, p. 120).

A common parlance within Pentecostalism is to distinguish the particular presence of God from the general presence by conceptualizing the particular as "the manifest presence of God" (Alminana, 2013, p. 58). This expression is also used by Bill Johnson, explained by reference to some Old Testament stories such as 1 Kings 8:10, when the sky filled the temple so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the weight of the glory. The manifest presence of God can be experienced when or where "God is more present than elsewhere" (Johnson, 2024). To say that God's presence is manifest implies the possibility of experiencing it in a tangible way and/or by the exercise of the spiritual gifts. However, the language of general and manifest divine presence was not evident in the interviews, and the notion of it will not be further elaborated.

As the analysis shows, the motif of divine presence in the prophetic ministry is central. We found that this presence presupposes a relationship to Jesus through faith. The notion of presence is further enhanced by a perception of God's power, which can be manifested by bodily sensations. Such manifestations of God's presence and power can instil faith in the ability of a prophecy to actually cause things to happen. This form of prophecy is called 'forthtelling' in Bethel's vocabulary. We also found that this is connected to an optimistic, or heroic anthropology, that unsurprisingly will challenge the Lutheran theology prevalent in the Scandinavian context. In the concluding discussion, we will therefore examine how these aspects may be evaluated from a Lutheran and ecumenical perspective.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The question we have set out to discuss in this article is "which theological themes are at stake as the ministry of personal prophecy at Bethel Church travels to Norway, and how may these themes be assessed from a Lutheran perspective?" Rooted in an empirical study of the practice of personal prophecy in Bethel Church, California, the article offered an assessment of key theological themes that emerged from the analysis of the empirical data. Two crucial themes that raised theological questions were identified; namely how the presence of Christ should be understood in the prophetic practice, and the nature of the anthropology embedded in the practice that affects understanding of the distinction between divine and human agency in a Christian practice. Following that discussion, a third theme is still in need of clarification, namely the question of a theological interpretation of suffering. This is a critical point for any theological alignment between the two traditions represented by Bethel as an American Neo-

Pentecostal church and the predominant Evangelical-Lutheran context of Norway. In the following paragraphs, we will offer some initial/tentative conclusions on the implications of a possible adoption of such a practice of personal prophecy in a Scandinavian-Lutheran context.

Our study suggests that the prophetic practice at Bethel could be understood as a semi-sacramental practice, a hybrid between what are labelled ‘first tablet’ and ‘second tablet (Christian) practices’. Therefore, the practice of personal prophecy has both a salvific and a diaconal telos, as the overall goal seems to be to bring people into intimacy with God in order for them to be healed, restored, and empowered by God’s presence in the encounter. As one of the ministers said, “Prophecy is translating the heart of the Father to his children” (Linda). Obviously, it does not fully qualify as a first-tablet practice, according to a Lutheran reading of practice theology and sacramental theology, but at the same time it seems too hasty to dismiss it altogether due to the lack of an outward sacramental sign. However, a sacramental aspect of the practice may be retained as far as the human actor’s involvement in it is perceived as participation in divine action and Christ’s presence in the practice can be justifiably supported.

A Lutheran-Pentecostal dialogue document from 2010 clarifies the misconception that Pentecostals make salvation dependent on spiritual manifestations. The centrality of the salvific work of Christ is acknowledged by both traditions. Further, a main concern in the document is to clarify how Christ may be encountered through the proclamation of the gospel, in the sacraments, and in the charisms (Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue, 2010, pp. 12–21). These charisms include prophecy, which, in a context of worship, is oriented toward a vivid experience of God’s presence. Pentecostals do not have a precise language to distinguish between the *circumscriptive*, the *repletive*, and the *diffinitive* modes of Christ’s presence, which have been utilized, drawing on a Lutheran Christology. Based on Scripture, Pentecostals believe in God’s omnipresence, which roughly corresponds to the Lutheran notion of a *repletive* mode of presence, the notion that as the right hand of God is everywhere, so Christ is present everywhere. In principle, no place is void of Christ’s sustaining presence, although humans face many trials and tribulations.

However, for those Pentecostals who distinguish between the general presence of God and the manifest presence of God, the traditional notion of sacramentality is challenged, as suggested by a study of prophecy in some Kenyan churches (Muindi, 2012, p. 239). In terms of the present study, we will suggest that there are still some converging perspectives on the presence of Christ, as far as a salvific telos of the ministry is retained, with a supremacy of divine agency. Hence, a semi-sacramental interpretation of prophetic practice may be acknowledged. Most forms of Pentecostalism, including Bethel, have a Christocentric view on salvation, highlighting that Christ gives the Spirit as a gift to the believer in an act of grace subsequent to conversion.¹¹ This allows for experiencing the Spirit through bodily sensations or the use of spiritual gifts such as tongues, healing, and prophecy.

In the practice of personal prophecy at Bethel, the experience of Christ’s presence is connected to an experience of God’s power. This experience manifests itself in bodily sensations and the ministers train themselves to be aware and conscious of these signs. Whenever they feel the power of God’s presence, their faith in the ability of the prophetic word to cause something to happen increases. From a Lutheran perspective, it is pointed out that biblical passages (e.g., John 13–17) clearly indicate that the Spirit works both before and after the Spirit

¹¹ This does not imply that Pentecostals and Lutherans do not understand the Spirit to be at work on a person prior to conversion: “The Holy Spirit is active both through the law that causes us to repent of our sins and drives us to Christ, and through the gospel that creates faith, justifies us and gives us Christ and new life” (Engelsviken, 2023, pp. 201, 217).

is given in Word and Sacraments, and that “by giving himself to us the Holy Spirit does not cease to be sovereign God” (Engelsviken, 2023, pp. 214-215). A direct, unmediated prophetic speech may therefore be expected based on the indwelling of the Spirit and the free actions of love, in addition to the traditional notion of sacramentality in Lutheran theology. The practice of the gift of prophecy can thus be “a manifestation of the operation of the *indwelling Holy Spirit* in and through the believer for the upbuilding of the body of Christ” (Engelsviken, 2023, p. 217, emphasis in original). But how is this indwelling of the Spirit perceived?

We found in our analysis of the empirical data that the presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit was perceived by bodily sensations, understood as manifestations of the Spirit. The experience of God’s manifest presence assisted the ministers in their service of discernment and strengthened their belief in the effect of the prophetic word. From a Lutheran perspective, we would caution against an enthusiastic emphasis on subjectivity and instead suggest that the assessment of the presence of Christ should be based on a complex Christology and a theology of faith more than on experience. Following this line of argument, the practice of personal prophecy may find its form in the context of a spirituality embedded in the proclamation of the gospel, the use of the sacraments and communal worship. If not, it would be better to regard it as a second tablet practice, with a purely diaconal telos, or even a malpractice where misuses occur.

Similarly, prophetic words that potentially fuel any version of the American Dream, should be subject to cautionary testing. Even here, Lutheran theology offers critical resources to the question at hand: setting up a prophetic practice with little more to offer than ideas of self-improvement and purely human agency, however diaconal in its purpose and wrapping, runs the danger of jeopardizing opportunities for mediating real grace to real lives. Rather, a broad, holistic anthropology, acknowledging the power of God’s grace, rooted in a theology of the cross, and accompanied by prayerful discernment may be key elements in developing a practice of personal prophecy, particularly on Scandinavian (and Lutheran) soil.

A theology of the cross is a reminder of the experience of suffering, which permeates all human life. The motif of suffering does not resonate well with the heroic anthropology inherent in Bethel’s practice of (personal) prophecy. From a Lutheran perspective, the human condition as a sinner before God is fundamental for the understanding of grace and the salvific telos of all of God’s actions towards humanity. In that light, humans are always on the receiving end of the divine-human relationship. However, the theological use of the Orthodox doctrine of divinization, *theosis*, in the Orthodox-Lutheran dialogue, allows for a theology of human agency in practices without jeopardizing the Lutheran *simul* structure: in salvation, in faith, humans are simultaneously both sinners and saints. However, Christ’s presence is even an active presence, dwelling in the believer, through faith.

Finally, these elaborations implies that humans may participate in divine action, through Christ, even in the context of practising (personal) prophecy. This is particularly evident, in a practice like prophecy, which is situated at the verge between the salvific telos and the diaconal telos of the cluster of Christian practices. Crucial to the possible adoption of personal prophecy in a Scandinavian-Lutheran context is therefore the theological conviction that prophecy is ultimately God’s agency in which the presence of Christ in the world *may* be made known, and where humans may participate as secondary or supportive actors, where even that agency is dependent on God’s agency. Similarly, this acknowledgment of Christ’s presence opens the promise and hope of change following a prophecy, provided that the theology of the same prophetic practice holds both a theology of divinization (*theosis*) and a theology of the cross. Put more bluntly, the purpose or *telos* of personal prophecy is not to offer an elusive escape route from suffering, but rather to offer a cross-shaped word of comfort in suffering.

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