

The Prophets Still Speak

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
To the Leader	4
Session 1. Prophetic Calls	5
Session 2. Amos and Micah: Calling for Social Justice	9
Session 3. Isaiah of Jerusalem: Calling for Righteous Leaders	13
Session 4. Hosea and Jeremiah: Calling for Single-Minded Devotion	17
Session 5. Ezekiel and “Second” Isaiah: Calling for Chastened Hope	21
Session 6. “Third” Isaiah and Jonah: Calling Forth a Broader Vision	25

Writer: Steve Shussett

Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. In some instances, adaptations have been made to a Scripture or a confession to make the language inclusive.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included here. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgment, proper credit will be inserted in future printings once notice has been received.

© 2012 CMP, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), A Corporation, Louisville, KY. All rights reserved. Except where permission to photocopy is expressly granted on the material, no part of these materials may be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

Steve Shussett, serves as the teaching (executive) presbyter of Lehigh Presbytery in eastern Pennsylvania. He is also a spiritual director, retreat leader, editor of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, and writer for a variety of publications. He previously served as associate for spiritual formation for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and as a pastor in Virginia and Maryland. He is a graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, where he received his Doctor of Ministry in Christian spirituality. Steve and his wife, Alicia, have two teenage children, Rachel and Daniel.



Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Prophetic Calls

Scripture

Isaiah 6:8; Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; Exodus 3:1–6; Galatians 5:22–23; Deuteronomy 30:19

Main Idea

Prophets were those called to speak on God’s behalf. While their words were originally meant for a particular context, the power of God’s vision continues to reverberate today. Prophets were frequently reluctant to share God’s message, aware of their inadequacies and anticipating resistance to their message.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Recognize prophets as those who speak on behalf of God.
2. Identify the similarities and differences in the call stories of four prophets.
3. Witness that others have met resistance and felt inadequate to God’s call, yet persevered in sharing the divine message.

Resources Needed

Bibles
Participant’s books
Newsprint
Markers

Leader Prep

To be a prophet is to communicate important truths on behalf of God to the people of a particular time and place. There are those in our lifetime who continue in that tradition. By the power of the Spirit, the witness of the biblical prophets echoes through contemporary truth-tellers, with old words taking on new meaning in our time.

Many today are most familiar with Old Testament prophets whose message of repentance and destruction was directed toward peoples who strayed from God's path. We may overlook that some of the greatest words of hope and trust come from the mouths of the prophets or that God's call to justice and mercy was spoken through them.

This session focuses on the call stories of four prophets: Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jonah. Despite the differences in their contexts and messages, each of these displays two traits common to other Old Testament prophets. Each feels inadequate to the task assigned by God, due to a self-perceived lack of ability or experience, and these prophets show reluctance to face the opposition of those charged by God. That these biblical prophets felt such things may be a comfort for participants in your group who might be called to speak a prophetic word in their own circumstances.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Ask: *Who have been truth-tellers in your life? When have you been a prophet to another?*
- Dr. Tull writes, "Like great literature, prophetic words written for particular occasions continued to speak from generation to generation." Ask: *Which prophetic texts from the Bible have been especially meaningful to your life?*
- Say something like, "Holy One, we are not here by chance or choice, but by Spirit, and we have come not just for ourselves, but also for your world." Together read Isaiah 6:8. Then say, "And God said, 'Go.' Amen."

Head

- According to Dr. Tull, “Early scribes sometimes edited or extended the prophets’ words, adding stories or even supplementing with later prophetic messages.” Ask: *What does this mean for your understanding of Scripture? How does this affect the truth of the biblical text for you?*
- Have participants read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, alternating line by line. Dr. Tull writes that to Israel, “Jeremiah steadily gives the same unwelcome message.” Sometimes the good news is hard news to hear. Ask: *When has God’s word to you been challenging for you, or painful to hear?*
- While Dr. Tull observes that some contemporary prophets “couch their politics in God language,” it is also true that in North American politics, regardless of position, there is ample use of God-talk. Ask: *How can we tell if someone is speaking on behalf of God or is simply using God language for his or her own purposes?*

Heart

- Read Exodus 3:1–6. It is suggested that the burning bush was intended to test Moses: only someone with patience enough to perceive a bush that was burning without being consumed would be patient enough to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Read Galatians 5:22–23. Ask: *What gifts has God given you that have served others well?*
- Dr. Tull writes, “Jeremiah turns from a message of condemnation to one of hope for a future he will not live to see, just as Moses did not live to enter the Promised Land.” Contemporary prophets, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Oscar Romero, suffered similarly. Ask: *How important is it for you to know you will see the outcome of a project? What difference does that make?*
- Ask: *When have you, like Jonah, felt God leading you to something difficult, but you went the other way? What resistance or fear led to your decision? What was the outcome?*

Hands

- Of Moses, Dr. Tull writes, “He and Aaron meet resistance not only from the pharaoh, who scoffs at his message and pressures the slaves to work harder, but also from Israelites who suffer from Moses’ interference.” Ask: *Which is harder for you to accept, resistance from outside a community or inside? What is your response to resistance?*
- No one plans to be a prophet. Dr. Tull writes, “It is not evident that ‘prophetic ministry’ was any established career path.” Ask: *How has God prepared you for service to others through abilities and life experience?*
- Create two columns on newsprint headed with “I’m not enough” and “God is enough.” Have participants list ways in which they feel inadequate and ways in which God has prepared them for serving God in the world.

Depart

- From the list of ways in which participants could better familiarize themselves with God’s Word, have them select and commit to one of the listed practices in the coming week.
- God’s Word is a two-edged sword, building up and breaking down for the good. Ask: *What might God want you to begin doing or continue doing? What might God want you to cease or change?*
- Say something like, “God builds us up and breaks us down, for our good. What does God say to us through the prophet Moses?” Together read Deuteronomy 30:19.

The Prophets Still Speak

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
Introduction to <i>The Prophets Still Speak</i>	4
Session 1. Prophetic Calls	5
Session 2. Amos and Micah: Calling for Social Justice	11
Session 3. Isaiah of Jerusalem: Calling for Righteous Leaders	18
Session 4. Hosea and Jeremiah: Calling for Single-Minded Devotion	25
Session 5. Ezekiel and “Second” Isaiah: Calling for Chastened Hope	31
Session 6. “Third” Isaiah and Jonah: Calling Forth a Broader Vision	37
Suggestions for Further Study.....	44

Prophetic Calls

Scripture

Exodus 3:1–14 Moses' call from God in the burning bush in Midian

Jeremiah 1:4–10 Jeremiah's story of God's call to him, which began before his birth

Isaiah 6:1–13 A message the prophet Isaiah is eager to convey, until he finds out what it is

Jonah 1:1–3; 3:1–5 The story of the prophet Jonah, who unsuccessfully flees from his calling

Prayer

God of the prophets, you call individuals who are not necessarily gifted, except with conviction. Open us to hear your word to us.

When your word is difficult and we fear opposition, give us courage, and grant us success. Amen.

Introduction

The prophets of the Old Testament spoke urgent words to their contemporaries about the times in which they lived. They wrote about faithfulness, about trust, about doing justice, about international relations, about reasons for hope in suffering and uncertainty. But like great literature, prophetic words written for particular occasions continued to speak from generation to generation. Ancient scribes, perceiving that timely words can also be timeless, assembled the prophetic words, hand-copying them from one generation to the next for two millennia. Early scribes sometimes edited or extended the prophets' words, adding stories or even supplementing with later prophetic messages, creating complex and not always fully congruent books. This scribal activity has given us access to these ancient words. Because of their work, we too can hear through the prophets God's word to us, and learn what it means today "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Who was a prophet? The short answer is that prophets spoke (or wrote) on God's behalf. Beyond this, the question becomes

more complex. The category of “prophets” comprises fifteen books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and twelve shorter books from Hosea to Malachi). The books vary in length, subject, and genre. Some consist of poetic sayings, others of narrative, some of both. They range from sixty-six chapters to a single chapter. They also range from the eighth century B.C. to much later, perhaps the third or second century before Christ.

Not all biblical prophets are recorded in discrete books named after them. The books of Samuel and Kings record the deeds and messages of several prophets, many of whom are not named. Women prophets appear in Scripture as well, though not in their own prophetic books: Moses’ sister Miriam, the judge Deborah, Huldah in Josiah’s time, Isaiah’s own wife, and Noadiah in the time of Nehemiah.

Scripture does not say how most prophets began. It is not evident that “prophetic ministry” was any established career path. The most important prophets seem to have taken roles held today by social critics and commentators, editorializers and essayists who attempt to see and speak larger truths. Only a minority, notably Martin Luther King Jr. and other outspoken public theologians, couch their politics in God language. However, for ancient prophets politics and theology were inseparable.

Some stories tell of a few prophets’ beginnings. These stories may offer insight into the ways Christians too might be called to serve in particular ways. Most of the stories feature dismay at the message or the individual’s ability to convey it. In this session, we will examine four such accounts.

Moses at the Burning Bush

The best-known story of prophetic call involves Moses, who was raised as an Egyptian prince, but who found himself opposing Egyptian slavery and, after a fierce battle of wills against Egypt’s pharaoh, led the Israelite slaves away. His birth and early life are narrated in the second chapter of Exodus amid stories of harsh treatment. After an attempt to help a slave ends in violence, he flees from Egypt. Years later, as a young man of eighty, Moses is tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he sees a bush burning (Exodus 3:1–3). From the bush God speaks, telling Moses that God has seen the Israelites’ suffering and is sending him to bring them out of Egypt. The reluctant Moses raises one objection after another. God does not argue, but continues to instruct. At some points, God accommodates

Moses' pleas, permitting him, for instance, to take his brother Aaron as spokesperson.

At first Moses is no more successful carrying out the divine commission than he had been previously, when following his own sense of wounded justice. He and Aaron meet resistance not only from the pharaoh, who scoffs at his message and pressures the slaves to work harder, but also from Israelites who suffer from Moses' interference. After further confrontations with the pharaoh, accompanied by escalating destruction and a series of plagues culminating in the deaths of the firstborn of every Egyptian family, Moses is able to free the Israelites. Even then, they are pursued by Egypt's army, and reach safety only when the sea parts for them but closes over pursuing soldiers. That decisive event, it turns out, is only the beginning of Moses' tribulations as he leads the people for the next forty years.

Moses is never referred to as a prophet in this account. In fact, God names Moses' brother, Aaron, Moses' prophet (Exodus 7:1), and the narrator calls Moses' sister, Miriam, a prophet (15:20). Only after Moses' death comes the comment "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Only after Moses' death comes the comment "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Jeremiah Called from the Womb

In view of Moses' struggles, the prophet call does not seem a privilege. While few seek unpopularity, Scripture's faithful prophets seem to attract it as a matter of course. Moses is Israel's first reluctant prophet, but not its last.

It consists not only of prophetic speeches, but also, like Exodus, stories of the prophet's deeds and dealings. Many have noted that Jeremiah's call resembles that of Moses, and that many themes of his book resemble themes in Moses' final speech in Deuteronomy. Scholars suspect a direct connection between the two books.

Whereas Moses brought the people to live in the land that would become Israel, Jeremiah lived at the far end of their time as a nation, after they had settled the land, acquired a king, and experienced some four hundred years of the dynasty of King David of Judah. By Jeremiah's time late in the seventh century B.C., the Assyrian empire

had conquered most of the original lands, and the small city-state that remained, Jerusalem of Judah, was being encroached upon by the next great empire, Babylon. Very little was left of what had once been a small but prosperous independent kingdom. The major political question for Jerusalem's rulers was whether, and how much, to accommodate or to resist Babylonian pressure.

As the book's introduction reveals, Jeremiah prophesies for several decades, from the end of King Josiah's reign until the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 B.C. Through this time, Jeremiah steadily gives the same unwelcome message: Babylon's threat actually comes from God, who is punishing an unjust society. Unlike Moses, who resisted Egypt's empirical power, Jeremiah urges leaders not to resist Babylon, whom God has destined to conquer their land. A nation weakened by its own leadership's ethical lapses does become more vulnerable to external threats. Yet, what makes abstract sense becomes quite offensive when it involves our own land and our own God—as it was to many of Jeremiah's own contemporaries.

In Jeremiah 1:4–10 the prophet describes God's call, originating long before: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (v. 5). Like Moses, Jeremiah objects that he cannot speak. For him it is not because his tongue is slow but because of his youth. Throughout the book, we see a prophet who, like Moses, struggles with his call, because the words he must say are too harsh, and the opposition too vehement. Though his convictions lead him to speak as clearly as anyone could, he frequently complains to God of the difficulty of the message. As the nation is indeed exiled to Babylon, Jeremiah turns from a message of condemnation to one of hope for a future he will not live to see, just as Moses did not live to enter the Promised Land.

As the nation is indeed exiled to Babylon, Jeremiah turns from a message of condemnation to one of hope for a future he will not live to see, just as Moses did not live to enter the Promised Land.

Prophetic Vocations and Particular Messages

It is not clear whether Isaiah's call to speak a message of doom to his fellow Jerusalemites in the eighth century B.C., more than a century before Jeremiah's time, is his first prophetic call or is simply a call to speak a particular message during a segment of his career. The fact

that it does not follow the pattern seen in Moses' and Jeremiah's stories, and the fact that this narrative occurs in chapter 6, after five solid chapters of prophecy, suggest the latter.

Isaiah relates his story as a vision occurring in the year that King Uzziah of Jerusalem dies. Instead of a dead human king, Isaiah sees the living divine king, enthroned in Jerusalem's temple. The vision depicts extravagance and awe, from the smoke that fills the room to the praises of attending seraphs. At first, the prophet is afraid. But one of the seraphs brings him a burning coal with which to touch his lips, purifying him. When he hears God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8), he loses all reluctance, and unlike Moses and Jeremiah, eagerly volunteers, saying, "Here I am; send me!"

*When he hears God asking,
"Whom shall I send, and
who will go for us?" (v. 8),
he loses all reluctance, and
unlike Moses and Jeremiah,
eagerly volunteers, saying,
"Here I am; send me!"*

But the message God gives is as unwelcome as those given to Moses and Jeremiah. In fact, it is paradoxical: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand" (v. 9), a message designed not to sharpen hearing but to prevent it. Isaiah's response—"How long?"—is probably not a temporal question ("How many years, please?") so much as a plea for mercy, such as the psalmists often made. (See, for example, Psalm 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:9–10; and 90:13.) The devastating final word from God is that this will continue until the land is utterly desolate.

Prophetic Reluctance and Divine Grace

Even when it meant deliverance for his people, Moses was reluctant to speak against the pharaoh. Jeremiah and Isaiah were understandably reluctant to speak against their own people. One more story reinforces the image of reluctant prophets. Here the prophet does not speak to his own people at all, but is told to preach to an enemy nation, calling it to repentance.

In the only prophetic book comprised entirely of narrative, Jonah is told to preach against Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. God says, "Cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Whereas Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah talked back to God, Jonah simply flees, taking the next boat west. When God dramatically brings him back through a sea storm and

an accommodating fish, and sends him again to Nineveh, Jonah sets out, but his delivery is minimalist in the extreme. He goes one-third of the way into the city, saying, “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3:4). He does not appear to elaborate on his message, or even to reveal its source. Ironically, though, he succeeds more than any other prophet: the Ninevites immediately and sincerely repent, and God forgives them. It is only then that we discover that this was why Jonah fled. Just as other prophets did not wish to speak against their own nation, Jonah did not wish God to extend grace to enemies.

Just as other prophets did not wish to speak against their own nation, Jonah did not wish God to extend grace to enemies.

Spiritual Practice

To what is God calling you today? Is it a welcome message or a difficult one? Clear or indistinct? Spend a few moments mindfully keeping your heart open to the Spirit's promptings.

Questions for Reflection

When have you felt God's urging to do something difficult?

What was your response to God's urging?

In what ways did your reaction to God's urging evolve over time?