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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Prophetic Individuality

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Introduction — the question of the individual

The problem of the individual has long been central in the West: philosophically, individuality has tended to be dominant ever since the rise of Nominalism in the fourteenth century; the human individual as thinker is the basis of Cartesianism, and the individual as egoist dominates the political thought of Hobbes; in the twentieth century, existentialism is equally based upon the individual; liberalism's central thrust is the freedom of the individual; from the US Constitution to the UN Charter, human rights are the rights of each *individual* person.

In its extreme forms the stress on the individual often seems, however, to stray into unreality and to be marked by alienation. It tries to see the individual as separate from society, and as somehow existing in isolation, so that relationships are secondary in deciding identity. But any human being lives, or comes to have identity, through relationships, as the Hegelian-Marxist tradition and I-Thou philosophies declare. The very biology of human development shows this. Each person is physically produced by the relationship of two others at conception, and exists inside his or her mother in pregnancy. The infant is not merely physically dependent upon its parents. It only learns to speak, to become a human personality at all, in relationship with them. If the child does not learn language from others, it will not learn it at all. The individual continues to be defined by relationships. Even hermits, the people with least physical contact with others, become solitary individuals by using the resources they developed in society. Experiments in sensory deprivation — the subjects being deprived of any objects of sight, hearing and touch — show that the individual deprived of the environment tends speedily towards collapse, to be lost in insanity.

Most people live their lives and achieve the richness of their individuality in continuing relationships with other people. The family, the economic unit (farm, factory, office or shop) voluntary groups and clubs, church, state, and characters from the media — all help to give a person's life its form. Thus we cannot realistically speak of a person apart from his or her relationships — the very fact of saying 'his or her' emphasises that we exist only in relationship; one sex makes no sense without the other. Yet the individual is not a mere abstraction. Each person has a distinct biological and physical reality. Our bodily reality expresses our individuality as well as our membership of groups. Two people cannot occupy the same space at the same time, and each has his or her own birth, and own death.

Perhaps the individual exists as an intersection of relationships, yet this intersection is actually a centre. The centre develops by choices between relationships, decisions for and against relationships, commitments to and rejections of participation in certain groups.

That this centre is important is one of the claims of the Bible, a claim that came sharply into focus with the word to Ezekiel that each is to be judged on his own sin or righteousness before God (Ezek. 18). Ezekiel spoke at the time of the collapse of the state of Judah before Babylon. He believed that this fall was a result of Judah's spiritual ruin, caused by idolatry and the rejection of the sovereignty of the true God. Ezekiel spoke out of a prophetic tradition which stressed the communal reality of Israel, but he was pushed into statements displaying the significance of the individual as opposed to the group. If the three great righteous men of tradition, Noah, Daniel and Job, were present in Judah, they could only save themselves, and no one else (Ezek.14:12-20). Yet in the midst of the evil community they would remain, the passage seems to imply, as righteous individuals, as God's servants. In Genesis, Noah remains part of his family. When Joshua confronts Israel with the choice to serve God or not, he still speaks of 'me and my house', who will serve God regardless (Josh. 24:14-15). But for Ezekiel, even the family was not a refuge; it was necessary to serve God in isolation. The individual, then, is not totally isolated and unrelated, but, in the choice of masters and associations, God presents himself for choice, and can be chosen by a single figure against all the world.

Thus Ezekiel arrived at his strong statement of the importance of the individual. Jeremiah, the other great prophet of the time of the fall of Judah, had apparently reached the same conclusion. Ezek. 18:2 and Jer. 31:29 quote the same traditional proverb of communal responsibility, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the childrens teeth are set on edge', and both go on to contradict the proverb, declaring that the individual will die for his own sin. Ezekiel is the one who goes on to stress that one can break the entail of sin, but it is implied in Jeremiah too. Thus the importance of the individual is based positively on one's relationship with God and one's individual accountability before God. That was a message of hope to a collapsing community. Only if the entail of sin, punishment inherited from previous generations, could be broken, could the people of Judah hope to survive. The message of the importance of the individual was an offer of liberation from despair.

Nevertheless, this prophetic individualism, though a message of comfort, was not a comfortable, easy message. This can be seen from a closer look at Ezekiel, its classic proponent. Ezekiel not only spoke of this individuality; he lived it out, with all the agony it involved. Ezekiel's life shows the value, but also points to the problems, of individuality and individualism, and as such his prophetic individuality may speak to our situation today.

We have already noted that Ezekiel's message of individuality arose in the context of the sin and collapse of his community, and was in some ways a response to it. His individuality of life was likewise a response to the community's sickness. It involved him in being separated from other people for God's sake and was an individuality created by stripping away the comforts of a life in common with others. In the 'call' vision he is warned not to be afraid of the rebellious people, even 'though briars and thorns are with you, and you sit upon scorpions' (2:6). He has to be hardened against the

people (3:8-9), and to speak regardless of their reaction (2:5,7; 3:11). This isolation and stripping, and breaking of relationships, is graphically shown by Ezekiel's failure to mourn the death of his wife (24:15ff.) Such an inability to mourn, Ezekiel claims, will come to all the people as the result of the shattering disasters they will face, and he acts as a warning to them. It is not, however, that Ezekiel does not feel the pain. He is to sigh, but not aloud. His isolation from and hardening against the people does not eliminate his suffering at the punishment of the people and at their refusal to hear (e.g. 20:49; 21:6). There is, indeed, a relationship with the people here; Ezekiel is driven by God's word to responsibility for them, but their rejection of that word means that the relationship is frustrated and broken, and Ezekiel is left alone with God, confronting God's people.

The agony of Ezekiel's prophetic individuality of isolation expresses itself, perhaps, in the extreme lengths to which he carried the prophet's symbolic actions. We have mentioned the failure to observe mourning for his wife. Ezekiel apparently lay on his side for months on end before an illustrated brick, unable to turn over, eating very poorly (3:25; 4). Furthermore, he was apparently afflicted with dumbness, which he attributed to God's action (3:26; 24:27).

Anyone who acted today as Ezekiel did would be regarded as insane. Clearly standards of behaviour were different then, and often bizarre symbolic actions were part of the prophetic role. For example, Isaiah walked naked about Jerusalem as a warning (Isa. 20:2-3), and Jeremiah carried a yoke about (Jer. 27:2). There is, however, evidence that some did consider prophets in general mad (e.g. 2 Kings 9:11). Such actions as Ezekiel's must seem strange in any society. His prophetic individuality involved great eccentricity and his dumbness, at least, seems to have been a psychological affliction. This is not necessarily to deny that God acted on and related to Ezekiel in and through this affliction. Ezekiel's isolation and resulting eccentricity thus raise questions about the nature of psychological disturbance, and the relationships between individuality, alienation and madness.

However, Ezekiel's individuality was not a way of living for himself. It was a concomitant of living for God in a society which was rejecting God. Ezekiel did not choose, and was not being driven to choose, between a life centred on his community and a life centred on the individual. His choice was between loyalty to God and rebellion against God. His individuality therefore grew out of a relationship (i.e. with God), not the absence of or alienation from relationships. Hence, for all the alienation it involved, it was not rooted in alienation, and so did not in any way glorify the alienation, or reckon individuality to be based on it. Individuality may have been shown up by alienation, but its existence does not depend upon an alienated society.

In fact, Ezekiel's message was finally one of hope, of overcoming the alienation in a new relationship to God, which would be unbreakable because based upon God's actions, not upon human achievement or desert (Ezek. 36:22-32). We have seen how Ezekiel's message about the individual was a message of hope, but Ezekiel also envisaged a new community created by God's salvation. He expressed this in his 'Torah', instructions for the new Temple and community, in Chapter 48. Indeed, his message of hope extended to a renewal of nature itself (Ezek. 34:25-31; 47:1-12).

The ministry of Ezekiel and of Jeremiah did, in fact, enable the community of Judah to survive the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its old form as a community, and to be reformed as the community of Judaism, able to live in exile — a symbol of alienation if ever there was one! — and also to return and rebuild temple and community in Judaea. The fall of Jerusalem could so easily have been fatal to the faith of the people of Judah, taking away from the exiles king, temple and land, the very central foci of their faith. In fact Ezekiel and Jeremiah, 'by their life and doctrine', gave an explanation and an example which enabled others to cope with these and emerge with a faith purified and strengthened. Thus, for all its isolation and eccentricity, Ezekiel's life was a life for others: he saw himself commissioned as a watchman for his people (Ezek. 33:1-20). The intention seemed frustrated at the time, yet Ezekiel was a creator, under God, of a new form of life, a new space for life, for God's people. This too may throw light on our assessment of the value and nature of the individual and individualism.

Ezekiel's vision of renewal, in fact, was much greater than the community of the exile and the returned community of the Second Temple which it fed. The degree of his pain and isolation produced a corresponding demand for the greatness of salvation. It looked to a reconciliation and renewal of God's people so great that it points to the hope of final salvation. The significance of Ezekiel's life and experience as a suffering prophetic individual is thus not exhausted by its work of creating a new earthly form of God's people — it points to a final form, a final consummation. Ezekiel's individuality — including the message it enabled him to pass on — coming from his relationship with God, thus finds its goal and fulfilment in God's final salvation, when God will be 'all in all'. It demands an immediacy in God's relationship to itself and God's people which is only satisfied there. And so it looks for the end of the tensions and conflict between God and man, and the individual and the community, only in God's final salvation. Thus it claims a continuing relevance to us.

Prophetic individuality as a recurring theme in the Old Testament

Ezekiel is the classic figure of individualism in the Bible: he both lived it out and expressed it in his oracles. Is he, however, unique, or can we see him as one who brings to light something characteristic of the Bible? Is he, in fact, the representative type of what we might call a 'prophetic individualism'- indeed, of an individualism which is to be found even more widely than among the prophets?

It seems that this is so. We have already linked Jeremiah with his contemporary, Ezekiel. Jeremiah's message and life were moulded by the same community and its sickness. Jeremiah suffered the same isolation from his fellows for God's sake as Ezekiel did. In some ways his sufferings were deeper. He suffered mockery and plots against his life, about which he complained bitterly to God (Jer. 11:18-23; 20:10ff.). He was unable to take a wife, and thus was cut off from the most basic human community (Jer. 16:2). His use of prophetic symbolism seems less extreme than that of Ezekiel. Perhaps we may feel that he did not experience the same degree of psychological disturbance as Ezekiel. Yet he certainly experienced at least as acute

psychological pain. Indeed, his sensibility to his people's suffering seems to have led to a pain without relief in this world; he felt his isolation very deeply and with greater conscious regret, it seems, than Ezekiel, who was able to identify himself with God against the people. Perhaps by that very pain Jeremiah seems to us a more supremely human figure than Ezekiel. Perhaps Ezekiel's very eccentricity, even disturbance, may have dulled his sense of pain a little. Jeremiah was not 'cauterised' by his predicament, but was still able to feel for and with the people, even though he saw their faults so clearly — even though at times his agony burst out in cries for God's vengeance on those who persecuted him (Jer. 11:18-20).

Jeremiah's plight, in fact, in one way carries us a stage deeper into the mystery of this individuality and alienation into which the prophets were driven by the tension between them and their society. Jeremiah's complaints show that he felt himself pitted even against God. A sense of the barrenness of his message, and doubts as to its validity, pushed him into bitter cries of protest to God (Jer. 12:1-4; 20:7-10,14-18). He accused God of deception and cursed the day of his birth. Jeremiah had to endure an isolation from the one from whom his message came, as well as from the people to whom he spoke.

Yet his agonised and isolated individuality still sprang from and was for the sake of God, and he too spoke messages of hope as well, looking for a new and deeper relationship between God and his people (Jer. 30-33; see esp. 31:31-34). He too helped in the preservation and rebuilding of God's community in and after the Exile, and his vision too looks beyond that, keeping the history of hope in God's promises open, pointing, like Ezekiel, to a still greater fulfilment.

Some of the same patterns of individuality appear, moreover, in other prophets. Amos and Isaiah felt that their identity came to be defined by God, apart from and even against their people. Amos in his visions begins by pleading for the people, but is convinced of their crookedness and so aligns himself with God against them (Amos 7). His attempted intercession, and the alignment with the people that it indicates, show again that prophetic individualism and isolation is a dialectical thing. Prophets as such were the people's representatives before God, with an office of intercession, as well as God's representatives to the people. Their individuality and isolation in fact seems in some cases to have grown out of their office as go-betweens of God and his people, when the people refused their true links with God. The prophet's individuality and isolation continues to address the now alien people, seeking to bring them too to terms with the new identity the prophet has found with God. (Of all the prophets, Amos — a man of Judah speaking to northern Israel, which he nevertheless sees as part of God's people (Amos 7:12-16) — seems to have held out least hope for the people he addressed. Nevertheless, the collection of his words is made to end with an oracle of hope; the 'canonical' view of the prophet's task seems to insist that the prophet's isolation must nevertheless offer the hope of a new community of God's people.)

Isaiah's call vision explains the prophet's individual isolation clearly. He begins with a vision of God's glory in the Temple, the symbol of God's presence and link with the people and monarchy of Judah. In his vision

Isaiah sees himself and his people as unclean in the face of the Holy God and so split off and unable to approach. Yet he experiences a call to God's side, a cleansing of his lips and the duty of going to speak for God against his people. His message was to be predominantly one of threat, but he held out some hope of a remnant (Isa. 6). The canonical book of Isaiah links him, therefore, with the new identity of God's people after the Exile, by including in the Isaianic corpus the words of related exilic and probably post-exilic prophets (Isa. 40-66). That these seem to form some sort of 'school', echoing some of the words and ideas of 'First Isaiah', seems to reinforce the case that the prophet's lonely vocation produced new living-space for others.

This prophetic individuality, moreover, goes beyond the writing prophets themselves, and is stamped upon the basic Old Testament pattern. Abraham's relationship with God entails a break with his own people and the identity formed by the group. In fact, he took wife, family and dependants with him, yet the Bible presents him very much as an individual with God, whose being with God, however, was to create a numberless people of God.

Jacob shows something of the pattern, too. His flight from home made him a man alone. We tend to moralise about the cause of this, his seizure of his father's blessing, but since Esau had sold the birthright, it would seem that the narrative regarded the blessing as Jacob's by right. His isolation sprang from his craving to be God's man, however little he grasped the implications of this. And in his isolation, at Bethel (Gen. 28) and at Peniel (Gen. 32:22-33) God meets him, and he works out his new identity with God. In the latter case, like Jeremiah, he endures God's apparent enmity, wrestling with God, and is injured in the struggle.

Moses himself displays aspects of the same pattern. In the context of this discussion, the Deuteronomic view of Moses as the greatest prophet seems fully justified (Deut. 18:15-18; 34:10). Moses is isolated from Egyptians and Israelites by his attempt, in an evil situation of crushing oppression, to do justice for the latter, which they apparently reject (Exod. 2). Moses' isolation is thus, as with other prophets, produced by alienation from an evil society. It is in this isolation that he meets God, as a lone shepherd in a foreign land (Exod. 3). Israel's faithlessness and disobedience frequently leave Moses more or less isolated at various later points in the story. He is cast in the role of the individual mediator between God and Israel, and his lonely struggles and his relationship with God bring the new life of God's people through Exodus, Covenant and Law. The perils of this position, which were seen in Ezekiel's bizarre behaviour and Jeremiah's pain, appear in the Moses story too, symbolised in the strange story in which God attempts to kill Moses, apparently because he and his son are not circumcised (Exod. 4:24-26). Prophetic individuality's forging of a new identity is portrayed again as dangerous.

A final example of the suffering, isolated individual, whose lonely agony leads to a new and deeper relationship with God, which is able to preserve others, is Job. Like Jeremiah, Job curses the day of his birth. His pain is less connected than the prophets with the evil of his society, and stems from personal disaster. Here the problem of separation from God is paramount;

alienation from others, due to the lack of comprehension and sympathy from wife and friends is secondary, though very important as part of Job's agony. Like Jeremiah, however, Job seeks constantly for a new and deeper relationship with God, and his finding of it also links him with the prophetic role. As the prophet's relationship with God made him a mediator, an intercessor for others, so Job becomes the intercessor for his friends — the very ones who had rejected him (Job 42:7-9). Their relationship with God is restored by the one whose identity has been reshaped in lonely suffering. 'Job' is a wisdom book, with no clear links at first sight with the prophetic movement, yet it seems to bring to light central aspects of the prophetic identity.

Jesus' life and death as the fulfilment of prophetic individuality

So stated, this prophetic individuality is surely a pattern fulfilled to the highest degree in the life and death of Jesus. This comes across most clearly in the gospel of Mark. It can be closely related to Mark's portrayal of the Messianic secret. Though he gives hints earlier, Jesus only reveals his identity clearly at his trial before the High Priest, and in a context in which rejection by all his hearers is inevitable and fatal. Until then no one understands him. The failure to respond is not limited to the Jewish leaders, who call him mad (cf. Ezekiel), his own townspeople, who try to interpret him as merely one of their group, and the crowds to whom he preaches, whom we see to be doomed not to understand, like the hearers of Isaiah. Those who benefit from his cures disobey his instruction to say nothing to anyone, and his disciples totally fail to understand him, and spend their time bickering about precedence in his coming kingdom. Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ is followed at once in Mark's version by the brusque order to say nothing about it to anyone, and Peter at once betrays the limitations of his understanding by expostulating with Jesus over the latter's prediction of his death. Jesus denounces him as 'Satan', for thinking in human, not divine terms. Further teaching of humility by the example of a small child has no effect, and James and John's question shows starkly the disciples' continued failure to grasp Jesus' purpose and significance. Their pathetic flight, Judas' betrayal, and Peter's denials, are the logical culmination of this. Jesus is thus *alone*, for all his efforts to relate to others, to create the new and saving community of God's kingdom. He inspires awe, bafflement and fear. These undoubtedly reflect Mark's presentation of him as showing the presence of God; the fear is the numinous dread of the OT where 'No man can see God and live'. As such it is dominant even in the resurrection scene. Nevertheless, this aloneness is also intensely human, the culmination of the sufferings of the prophets who bore the isolation of representing God in a sinful milieu. Jesus is exasperated and pained at people's incomprehension and unbelief (Mark 9:19). Both the divine overwhelmingness and the human isolation seem present in the striking picture of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Mark 10:32, which introduces the third prediction of the passion, and then the crass question of James and John, which denies Jesus' attempt to communicate his anguish. Jesus thus confronts everyone else as God's representative. The isolation, however, reaches its own climax in the Passion itself. Gethsemane reveals Christ's agony in his lonely and terrible wrestling in prayer with his Father, while the disciples, unable to watch with him, sleep.

Then all the disciples are stripped away by treachery, flight and denial; the mere concern of justice to uphold a subject's right to a fair trial is denied by the Sanhedrin's scornful malice, and Pilate's timid concern to avoid trouble. Hostile chief priests and elders, hostile and mocking soldiers, and hostile and jeering fellow-victim all cast out the Crucified One, and in that rejection it seems to him that even God takes part (Mark 15:34). Here an ultimate individuality, an ultimate aloneness is revealed, not, indeed, by the accretion of individual characteristics, habits, appearance or whatever, but by the stripping away of all links and connections with others. Jesus is producing no theory of individuality; that would be one of the accretions that is denied him. Nor is this response an inchoate Prometheanism, for it consists of a cry to the absent God. The naked aloneness still points, as did the prophets', towards fellowship, but here even the fellowship with God that stayed Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel is not to be felt. The experience of dereliction by God, foreshadowed by Jeremiah, Job and the mysterious song of the Suffering Servant, reaches its completion. Jesus has predicted, says Mark, his death as a ransom for many (10.45), that his blood will be shed for many (14:24). Many and few have rejected him. Dying according to the will of God his Father, he is faced with the withdrawal of God also. The sort of horror of nausea and dread with which existentialism has experienced individuality is here to the full. Jesus is the outcast, the stranger, the alien, stripped of all external — and internal — support. Yet in this situation he still directs his being to God. He does not go the way of alienation and withdrawal from emotion described by Camus in *L'étranger*. The one who might with total justice have commented with Sartre, 'Hell is other people', does not draw that conclusion, and so, as he passes into death, other people are drawn to him. The centurion confesses, 'Truly this was the Son of God'. As Isaiah's prediction of the rejection of Israel yet issued in the concept and fact of a remnant nourished by him, the lone suffering of Jesus issues in the new and open community of his church. That he was an outcast denies that any preconditions of status or achievement can be required of its members.

Prophetic individuality, the atonement, and the finality of Jesus' work

Jesus' agonised isolation in death is not only the isolation that sin brings on the sinner, with its breaking of his relationship with God and man. It is also the agonised prophetic individuality — itself a result of sin — which pioneers new life for the sinner. Christ fulfils the representative and vicarious functions of prophetic individuality to the ultimate degree. Prophetic individuality provides us with one dimension for understanding Christ's saving act, a way of viewing the atonement. He has created a new relationship with God in which all can live. In this new relationship and the new living space it gives, Jesus, however, unlike earlier prophets, remains personally present as its guarantor. This is shown by his resurrection and ascension, and the fact that the reception of the Holy Spirit springs from these. Thus the Spirit, our link with God, is to be seen as the spirit of Jesus, sent by him. The Spirit and the new life it brings are experienced in union with Christ — that is, we share in Christ's life. This is something more intense and far-reaching than could be said of the earlier prophets, yet it fulfils the pattern they showed.

This way of understanding Christ's work through prophetic individuality is, moreover, one that is accessible to us today. We could see echoes of the pattern in many places: Marx's lonely labours in the British Museum foreshadowing Marxism, even the young's cult of often anguished pop-stars, from whom they draw patterns of life, can be seen as distorted images of prophetic individuality pioneering new identity for people, images which may, however, make it possible to recognise the true pattern in Jesus. We have already hinted at the parallels with the existentialist pattern of alienated, authentic individual existence. A prophetic understanding of Jesus may also be helpful in communicating with Muslims. The absoluteness with which he lived and carried out the prophetic task may even be a way of commending to them his death (which they reject), since it can be seen as the culmination of a prophetic pattern, part of which they can recognise in Muhammad, with his persecution in Mecca and lonely flight to Medina. Further, the perception of Jesus' continued role as actually present in the new life created by his work provides a starting point for witness to his relationship with God, as seen by Christians.

The prophetic aspect of the biblical message speaks to us, however, in more ways than in showing what Jesus did *for* us. It raises questions about the nature of our own individuality and communal life. We need to ask how far prophetic individuality serves as an example for — and a judgment on — our own ways of living and viewing our individuality. Relating this to its use for understanding the atonement, we find that it is a model which holds together vicarious and exemplarist understandings of atonement. These have often been opposed to one another, but the NT clearly contains both. Our model also gives a picture for the way in which appropriation of the vicarious atonement takes place by faith, relying on the saving message of the prophet. It helps illustrate how the atonement brings us new life.

Can the model, however, do justice to the *finality* of what Jesus did, or does it leave it open for other prophets (e.g. Muhammad — or even Marx) to form new living spaces with God, independent of that produced by Jesus and equally immediate to God's ultimate kingdom? In reply to this question we may note the ultimacy of Jesus 'prophetic isolation' — his stripping, shown by the cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34), is complete. Jesus fulfilled completely the isolation from God and man foreshadowed in prophetic individuality. It is not possible to go further in this direction. But then, as this isolation from God leads to a new relationship with God, in which that isolation from God and man has been overcome, that new relationship is ultimate — it cannot be breached by any deeper and further separation from God. Later people, however cut off they may feel from God, in that alienation can claim and live on fellowship with Jesus and the promise of new life it brings. There is a parallel between this argument and Marx's view of the proletariat — his 'saviour' and bringer of the eschatological community. The proletariat, having lost *all* property (a picture of stripping), therefore has no exploiting interest, and is able to produce a totally non-exploitative society, as a result of its suffering and struggles in hope (the Revolution) for a new community. The structures of Marxist thought often seem like a Promethean transformation of basic biblical patterns; may it not be so in this case? In fact, members of the proletariat are never so stripped of exploitative possibilities

until their deaths, and we may well argue that Marx's dialectic can never actually be fully worked out by a class in history. Yet our model claims that that of which Marx's model is a distortion *has* been worked out in Jesus. We can claim that Christ is thus the fulfiller of Marxism, and not the other way about! In the same way, if our view of prophetic individuality is correct, it comes to its fulfilment in the death and new life of Jesus, who carries it to its conclusion, rather than in Muhammad, who does not experience its aspect of dereliction to the full.

Thus, having *totally* given himself, Jesus forms a community open to sinners without any presupposition except reliance on himself. This community claims to take up the living spaces achieved by earlier prophets. Further, they themselves looked to God's kingdom, and this, coupled with his continued personal role at the centre of the new relationship, means that this view of the atonement, to say the least, in no way detracts from Jesus finality!

Prophetic individuality is a pattern for us

Yet it also forms a pattern for our life today. It is clear that traits of prophetic individuality appear constantly in the life of the Church. St Paul's 'filling up the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the Church' may be counted here. He suffered frequent rejection and attack by the Jews, but created, under Christ, churches, new communities in which Gentiles could live, and hoped also to bring forward the new and ultimate living space for his own Jewish people (Rom. 9:1-5, 11:13-15,26-32). 'Athanasius *contra mundum*', though in fact he always had supporters, can be seen as bearing the prophetic role to safeguard the doctrine that would preserve the truth of the relationship with God that Jesus established. The eremitical monastic movement begun by Anthony of Egypt also accepted a severing from human community for the sake of the relationship with God, the authentic individuality of the monk himself, and, indeed, as a witness to the Church. The sayings of the desert fathers have sent back to us many perennially fresh insights aiding us to authentic individuality and community with God. Luther's agonised struggles with God leading to his conversion, his expulsion from the existing official church, and the resulting establishment of the new communities of the Protestant churches is another case of prophetic individuality providing new living space, and in this threefold pattern it is closely paralleled by the experiences of Whitefield and Wesley and the Methodist revival. Kierkegaard's life, with its stress on his subjectivity and his pain, is clearly related to our theme. More recently, perhaps, Barth's struggles at Safenwil and production of his commentary on Romans, and Bonhoeffer's solitary imprisonment and martyrdom conform in some ways to the pattern. So does the lonely work of pioneer missionaries. It seems clear that Jesus' prophetic individuality constitutes a calling for certain members of his Church to follow.

Is it, however, something which *all* Christians are called to share, or are some called to be the prophetic individuals, the pioneers of identity, acting as shepherds whom the bulk of the Church follow as the flock? It would seem, rather, that all those at least who survive infancy and are not severely

mentally handicapped do share in this individuality to some degree. For in a sense the prophetic experience is a model for all development of individuality. Underlying the pattern of prophetic individuality there is a process of choosing *God* rather than alternatives that go against him, and thus of defining oneself, forging one's own identity. This involves distinguishing oneself from the world, from the community. Processes of distinguishing oneself and choosing would seem to be the way in which, psychologically, we all become individuals.

Yet, in a fallen world, prophetic individuality provides a model to a greater extent than just in this basic underlying pattern. The prophet in a sense is 'called out' of his environment to establish his identity with God. Because his society is a fallen society, a society that rejects God, this involves tension with and opposition to the society. If the society attempts to play God, that is, if it seeks to dominate and control its individuals in its own image, then the very calling-out and distancing will meet rejection from the community; individuality with God will have to be achieved in opposition to the false community. In totalitarian and closed societies this struggle is clear, but there are, of course, enormous pressures to conform even in so-called open societies. On the other hand, if the society makes a fetish of the free individual as such, separate from any relationship with God, then, when the new individual identity with God returns to witness to the community and to help forward the community's life with God, it will be resisted. The individual will be accused of moralism, intolerance, interfering with others, and so on. We may relate this to Jesus' warning that all his followers can expect persecution. Especially relevant is the form this warning takes in the final beatitude — followers of Jesus are warned that they will be persecuted in the same way as the old prophets (Matt. 5:11-12). Further, the fact that this prophetic individuality includes pain and stripping relates it to the teaching that whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for Christ's sake will save it (Mark 8). The false, inauthentic life and comfortable conformity with society, or selfish individualism, is lost; the true life in relationship with God is gained. This is addressed to all Jesus' followers. It is a part of the cross that they can, in their own way, share. Every Christian is thus, to some extent, called to follow Jesus in working out his or her individuality for others, as the prophets did.

Three qualifications, however, need to be made to this statement. First, different people will share in this role to differing extents. In 1 Cor. 12 Paul uses the metaphor of the Church as a body, with its individual members having different roles, as with parts of a body. Among the roles which some exercise is prophecy, which Paul wishes all could share. Doubtless the word 'prophet' was not used by Paul in the sense of this article, but his statement seems none the less relevant. In an extreme form, prophetic individuality is not the calling of all. A church entirely made up of St Pauls, Wesleys and Luthers is not God's purpose. Nevertheless, all have some share in prophetic individuality. In 1 Cor. 12:9 (and 13:2) Paul lists faith as a particular gift given to some members, yet clearly he usually speaks of faith as a basic characteristic of all members of Christ's body. So prophetic individuality is a special calling of some members of the Church, yet all have some share in it, as they

lose their lives for the gospel's sake and so save them.

Secondly, the Church *as a whole* is called to this prophetic identity. The letter to Hebrews makes much of Christians being called to 'go outside the camp', as Jesus was crucified outside the city; to accept the experience of rejection and stripping for God's sake. This seems to be addressed not only to individuals but to the Christian community as a body, telling it not to compromise its true character in order to avoid rejection by Judaism. The Church, as Christ's body, thus should carry out the prophetic identity. For many, their chief experience of the pain of prophetic identity may come at the confrontation of God's people and the world, not as individuals. Christ died to form the new, true community of God. He called and calls his followers on earth as the representation and foretaste of the ultimate human community of God's kingdom, when individuality and community will both be fulfilled, and in harmony, not in conflict, with each other. Thus the Church should be a place where in Christ our identity can grow without the agony of rejection by our fellows. Yet here one must admit the Church is, of course, fallible, and the great examples of Paul, Athanasius, Luther, Bunyan and Wesley show that individuals will often suffer the pain of prophetic individuality at the hands of God's people, as did the Old Testament prophets.

Thirdly, however, our prophetic individuality occurs within the context of Jesus' own gaining of identity for us. We have already noted the ultimacy of this. We are now called to find our individuality in fellowship with him, and in the experience of rejection and even of Godforsakenness we in fact come only to the place he has entered with and for us. Our true identity is bound up with his. This takes us back again to consider the vicarious nature of Jesus' suffering. We have seen that this is implied by prophetic individuality as such. We have also seen that prophetic individuality pointed to the ultimate new community with God, and that Jesus' experience carried prophetic individuality to its conclusion. This points to the eschatological nature of Jesus' work, which is witnessed by the title Messiah , and Jesus' claim to stand in immediate relation to the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

This article hopes to have shown that the prophetic individuality, and individuality of 'stripping', indeed of loss of self, and an individuality for the sake of others, in which others are able to find themselves, is a valuable and important way of understanding the biblical message and its centre, Christ's work. Prophetic individuality seems to be a valuable 'range of comparison' for today, speaking to many current movements, problems and ideas. It is not proposed, of course, as *the* sole key to truth, but as one necessary way of understanding, an aspect of the gospel that needs to be grasped.

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