

## PROPHECY, ART, AND INSPIRATION: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PROPHETIC ARTS

by Ang Wei Yang

### Introduction

In recent years, many Pentecostal churches have set up a prophetic arts ministry department, where prophetic artists are seen painting in church during worship services. While this is a phenomenon that is gaining momentum, relatively little has been written on it in the scholastic world. The definitions proposed by prophetic artists are varied. Some view prophetic arts as visual expressions of the prophetic ministry mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:3, whose purposes are to strengthen, encourage, and comfort.<sup>1</sup> Others consider prophetic arts as “a physical demonstration” of worship, where the act of painting itself is worship unto God.<sup>2</sup> Another definition focuses on the spontaneity of prophetic arts and defines it as “divinely inspired unpremeditated and unrehearsed artmaking.”<sup>3</sup> While prophetic arts may have different meanings among these artists, one common denominator is knowing the Holy Spirit is the source of inspiration.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of prophetic arts; (2) define what is “prophetic arts.” To provide clarity to the discussions, in this paper, “prophetic arts” refers to the artworks, while “prophetic painting” refers to the act of painting the artworks.

This paper argues that the process of inspiration in prophetic painting is dynamic, where God and the artist collaborate in the process

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<sup>1</sup>Barnabas Bay and Theresa Tan, “Prophetic Painting: The Art of Worship,” *CityNews*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.citynews.sg/2018/11/29/prophetic-painting-the-art-of-worship/>.

<sup>2</sup>Justine Ocampo, “Prophetic Art: 3 Artists Discuss What It Means to Deliver a Message from the Father,” *Thir.St*, March 11, 2020, <https://thirst.sg/what-is-prophetic-art-worship-painting/>.

<sup>3</sup>Wendy Manzo, “Towards an Understanding of the Spontaneous Prophetic Artist in the Pentecostal Church,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 23, no. 1 (2022): 36.

of painting, where the Holy Spirit gives the message, and the artist gives expression to the message. This paper also argues that prophetic arts should be defined as artworks that the artists paint to report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds through artistic inspiration. Many of the prophetic arts in Pentecostal churches can be included under this definition. However, a wider understanding or purpose is needed to explore other manifestations of prophetic arts.

### **The Role of The Holy Spirit in Inspiring Prophetic Arts**

Before discussing how the Holy Spirit inspires prophetic artists in prophetic artmaking, it is helpful to examine how he inspires Scripture writers and discuss the differences between inspiration in Scripture writing and inspiration in prophetic painting. Steven Félix-Jäger's contributions regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in artistic inspiration provide a good foundation for this discussion.

#### Inspiration

In Christian theology, the term “inspiration” typically refers to the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the writers in the process of inscription that renders the faithful record of the revelations, which qualify the writings to be the Word of God.<sup>4</sup> In the aesthetics world, the concept of “inspiration” refers to “the motivational insight that an artist experiences” before the creation of a work.<sup>5</sup> Patrick Sherry proposes that the concept of “inspiration” can “serve as a bridge” between the Holy Spirit and aesthetics and calls for a broadening of the understanding of “inspiration” beyond biblical inspiration and subsuming it under the communication of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> According to Sherry, this claim is aligned with the older theological traditions, and restricting the concept of “inspiration” to the process of Scripture writing is a contemporary theological development.<sup>7</sup> Broadening the understanding of “inspiration”

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<sup>4</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 169, Kindle.

<sup>5</sup>Steven Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics: Theological Reflections in a Pentecostal Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 81.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics*, Second Edition (London: SCM Press, 2002), 100–106. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 81–82.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 107. Ibid., 82.

would allow one to understand “inspiration” to mean the “way in which God through His Spirit lets us share in His creativity.”<sup>8</sup>

Félix-Jäger draws a parallel between the inspiration in Scripture writing and the inspiration in artmaking. He subscribes to a dynamic view of inspiration for both which views the process of Scripture writing or artmaking as a collaboration between God and humans to form something.<sup>9</sup> This view humanises the process of Scripture writing and inspires the process of artmaking.<sup>10</sup> Such a view may be problematic as the Scripture is authoritative and artwork is not. While this paper agrees that God does not bypass or dictate the writers or artists in the process of creative work, this paper argues that the inspiration in Scripture writing is more extensive and intensive than artmaking.

### Inspiration in Scripture Writing

The questions that need to be addressed now are: (1) How does God inspire? (2) What is the difference between the inspiration of Scripture writing and that of prophetic painting? Erickson discusses five theories of inspiration in his book:

1. The intuition theory holds that inspiration is a permanent natural endowment, which religious geniuses possess, and the Scripture is a great religious literature reflecting their spiritual experiences.<sup>11</sup>
2. The illumination theory maintains that the Holy Spirit only heightened the writers’ sensitivity and perceptivity to discover truth without special communication of truth or guidance in the content written.<sup>12</sup>
3. The dynamic theory emphasises the collaboration of God and humans in the writing of the Scripture.<sup>13</sup> The human writers give voice to divinely guided thoughts, allowing one’s

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 103. Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 87.

<sup>10</sup>Shane Clifton, “Steven Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics: Theological Reflections in a Pentecostal Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 18 (March 6, 2016), <https://aps-journal.com/index.php/APS/article/view/9495> (accessed November 16, 2023).

<sup>11</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 174.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

distinctive personality to be expressed in the choice of words and phrasing.<sup>14</sup>

4. The verbal theory insists that the Holy Spirit's influence is so intense that each word chosen by the writers is exactly what God wants to use to express the revelation.<sup>15</sup>
5. The dictation theory teaches that God dictated the Scripture to the writers, instructing them exactly what to write.<sup>16</sup>

The intuition theory and illumination theory should be ruled out with regards to Scripture writing as the former would mean that the Scripture is a compilation of the spiritual experience of the religious geniuses, while the latter would mean that the Scripture is a compilation of observations of the writers under heightened spiritual condition. Under these theories, Scripture can only be considered as humans' writings, not God's Word. To consider the Scripture as God's Word, it must be truth communicated to us by God. Therefore, the inspiration can only be dynamic, verbal, or dictation.

This paper argues in favour of verbal theory concerning the inspiration of Scripture writing. First, stylistic differences can be observed among the different writers. If God is the dictator, being an unchanging God, it is unlikely that the style of writing would change. Second, Erickson rightly points out that God can providentially prepare and equip writers with the necessary repertoire to express God's message in the exact words that he wishes to use. This makes it possible for the Scriptures to reflect the writers' stylistic distinctions and God's selection of the exact words.<sup>17</sup> Third, the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament indicates that the lexicological and grammatical features are vital to interpreting God's message.<sup>18</sup> If inspiration is dynamic, the writers have the freedom to express the divinely directed thoughts in their own words. In this case, the lexicon and grammar are not as important as the thought expressed. If the New Testament writers regarded the lexicon and grammar of the Scriptures with great intensity and drew theological inferences from them, the intensiveness of the inspiration must be down to the selection of the exact words. Therefore, it is likely that verbal theory is more applicable to the process of Scripture writing.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 185.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 180.

### Inspiration in Prophetic Painting

Steven Félix-Jäger cited Garberich's categorisation of the popular views of how artists understand the source of their inspiration:<sup>19</sup>

1. The supernatural.
2. Dreams or unconscious/subconscious manipulation of ideas.
3. An unfathomable mystery.<sup>20</sup>
4. A lightning bolt or eureka moment.
5. External images.
6. The result of problem-solving.

The first category, the supernatural, is more applicable to our discussion of prophetic arts as prophetic artists believe that the Holy Spirit is their source of inspiration. As discussed above, the intuition theory and illumination theory are merely human reflections and observations, God did not communicate his truth to the writers. These can apply to categories 2-6 in Garberich's categorisation.

It is necessary to differentiate the extent of inspiration between Scripture writing and prophetic painting. First, the Scripture is authoritative while prophetic arts are not. Therefore, the Holy Spirit doesn't need to dictate how the artists paint the content. Artists are free to give artistic expression to the message. Second, the Old Testament prophets often convey their message through visions, however, the vision was not the message, but the occasion for the message.<sup>21</sup> Understanding the message of the prophecy does not require an interpretation of everything in the vision as the features of the vision are incidental.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, prophetic arts as visual expressions are only occasions for the message, not the message itself. This allows flexibility in expression and it is not necessary for everything in the artwork to be interpreted to convey the message. Therefore, exact expression is not required. Considering these points, this paper argues that while the Scripture is verbally inspired, prophetic arts are dynamically inspired, where the

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<sup>19</sup>Mark David Garberich, "The Nature of Inspiration in Artistic Creativity" (PhD thesis, Michigan State University, 2008), 70, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

<sup>20</sup>Garberich differentiated "mystery" from "mystique." His defines "mystery" as "the inability to determine what exactly is taking place at crucial points in the creative experience. Garberich, "The Nature of Inspiration in Artistic Creativity," 77.

<sup>21</sup>Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 508. Kindle.

<sup>22</sup>Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 508.

artists give expression to the divinely directed thoughts in a way that is distinct from the person.

The implications of considering prophetic painting as dynamically inspired are that:

1. Prophetic painting is a collaboration between God and the artist to convey his message.<sup>23</sup>
2. It acknowledges the importance of developing artistic skills.<sup>24</sup>
3. It allows artists to draw inspiration from various areas and incorporate them into their work.<sup>25</sup>
4. God does not bypass or supplant the artist's humanity but secures it.<sup>26</sup>
5. The expression of prophecy in the prophetic arts can be limited by human factors.

This understanding of the inspiration is consistent with the experience of the prophetic artists. Many of them claim that they try to ask God for the message he wants to convey, and they are conscious of what and how they are expressing.<sup>27</sup>

### Pentecostal Imagination

Félix-Jäger discusses the importance of imagination as a concept that precedes inspiration.<sup>28</sup> He contends that divine inspiration can be seen “either as God endowing the imagination through some religious experience from which the artist could draw, or by bypassing the imagination and inspiring the artist directly, or perhaps as a combination of the two.”<sup>29</sup> The first scenario presupposes that imagination stores past experiences from which one can draw inspiration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>J. Scott McElroy, *Finding Divine Inspiration: Working with the Holy Spirit in Your Creativity* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2008), 32. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 87–88.

<sup>24</sup>McElroy, *Finding Divine Inspiration*, 23. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 88.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Steven Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 113. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 88.

<sup>27</sup>Bay and Tan, “Prophetic Painting”; Ocampo, “Prophetic Art.”

<sup>28</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 89.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Félix-Jäger builds on James K. A. Smith and Amos Yong's works in defining the Pentecostal imagination. Smith articulates that one's worldview is more a matter of imagination than the intellect and the imagination is fuelled by the images that are attained by senses.<sup>31</sup> The imagination is shaped by the things perceived through the senses. Amos Yong claims that Pentecostals have a "pneumatological imagination," "a way of seeing God, self, and world that is inspired by the Pentecostal-charismatic experience of the Spirit."<sup>32</sup> According to Yong, for Pentecostals, the imagination is funded by the experience of the Holy Spirit and conversely, the pneumatological imagination informs the experience.<sup>33</sup> With these as the theoretical bases, Félix-Jäger writes:

Since divine inspiration cannot only be seen as God bypassing the artist's imagination, but also as God endowing the imagination through religious experience from which the artist draws, one begins to see that a Pentecostal artist's experiential spirituality greatly structures his or her inspiration. If one considers a Pentecostal artist as an artist who holds a Pentecostal worldview, then the artist's inspirations are thoroughly Pentecostal whether the resulting artwork is explicitly religious or not in content. The artwork would, in one way or another, be the outer expression of the artist's own experiential spirituality. In this way, the Pentecostal's artwork is an expression of his or her confessional appeal to a divine experience.<sup>34</sup>

Félix-Jäger summarises how the Pentecostal experience can be drawn upon and shaped in the process of inspiration. As discussed earlier, the prophetic painting is dynamically inspired, and the human factor is always present in the process. A Pentecostal artist with a Pentecostal worldview will often find it being expressed in the artworks. Therefore, the Pentecostal experience can be one way in which the Holy Spirit shapes the artist's imagination.

In conclusion, this section discussed how the Holy Spirit inspires prophetic artists in the process of prophetic painting. Due to differences in Scripture writing and prophetic painting, the extent of inspiration

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<sup>31</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 57. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 91.

<sup>32</sup>Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 102.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>34</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 93.

varies. While the authoritative nature of the Scripture requires the exactness of verbal inspiration, the non-authoritative nature of prophetic arts only requires dynamic inspiration. As the dynamic theory holds that the process of painting is a collaboration of God and humans, the human experience influences the artworks. For a Pentecostal, it means that the Pentecostal experience, which is shaped by the Holy Spirit may be expressed in one's artworks.

### **The Prophetic Ministries**

After considering how the Holy Spirit inspires the prophetic artists, this paper shall discuss the differences between Old Testament and New Testament prophecies to define the prophetic nature of the prophetic arts.

#### **The Old Testament Prophets**

In the Old Testament, a prophet functions as God's spokesperson, commissioned to deliver his word.<sup>35</sup> Wayne Grudem points out the divine authority that was attached to the Old Testament prophecies. First, the Old Testament frequently highlights that the prophets were speaking the exact words which God has commanded them to deliver (Exod 4:12; Deut 18:18; Jer1:9; Num 22:38; Ezek 2:7).<sup>36</sup> Second, the Old Testament prophets frequently speak for God in the first person (2 Sam 7:4-16; 1 Kings 20:13, 42; 2 Kings 17:13; 19:25-28, 34; 21:12-15; 22:16-20; 2 Chr 12:5), which is an indication that they were speaking the words of God, not their own; the hearers would have recognised that the prophet is relaying God's words and not speaking his own words.<sup>37</sup> Last, the Old Testament prophets often prefaced their prophecies with words that indicated the divine origin of the prophetic words.<sup>38</sup> For example, "Thus says the Lord"<sup>39</sup> (1 Kings 21:19) and "the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant... the prophet" (1 Kings 14:18; 16:12; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; 17:23; 24:2; 2 Chr 29:25; Ezra 9:10-11; Neh 9:30; Jer 37:2; Zech 7:7, 12).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Aaron C. Fenlason, "Prophets," in *Lexham Theological Workbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), Logos Bible Software.

<sup>36</sup>Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 18-19.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

On the other hand, the penalty for false prophets for false prophecies was fatal (Deut 13:5; 18:20). The prophets were evaluated as either true or false prophets and not by the various parts of their prophecies.<sup>41</sup> The presence of one bit of falsehood would disqualify the whole prophecy and the prophet would be regarded as a false prophet.<sup>42</sup>

In essence, divine authority was attached to the Old Testament prophecies as the prophets were to deliver the exact words of God. The prophets were evaluated by their prophecies, no allowance was given for the presence of falsehood.

### New Testament Prophecy

In the New Testament, a prophet is one of the fivefold ministries that God equipped to lead the church through edification and encouragement of believers.<sup>43</sup> J. Rodman Williams discusses the ministry of the New Testament prophets. First, they could foretell events to come.<sup>44</sup> For example, the book of Acts recorded Agabus's prediction of the great famine (11:27-28) and Paul's arrest (21:10-11).<sup>45</sup> In the second prediction, Agabus prefaced his prophecy with "Thus says the Holy Spirit," which is similar to the fashion in which the Old Testament prophets introduced their prophecies. However, Grudem notes that though Agabus's second prophecy is generally correct, there are two minor mistakes. Agabus predicted that Paul would be bound by the Jews at Jerusalem, but Luke reported that Paul was bound by the Romans instead of the Jews.<sup>46</sup> Agabus predicted that the Jews would deliver Paul to the Romans by choice but Luke reported that Paul was forcibly rescued from the Jews by the tribune and his soldiers (Acts 21:32-33).<sup>47</sup> Grudem further argues that Agabus's prophecy is an example of the New Testament prophecy where "the prophet receives some kind of revelation and then reports it in his own words."<sup>48</sup> In this case, Agabus was generally correct but the details were somewhat wrong.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Fenlason, "Prophets."

<sup>44</sup>J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 171.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 96.

<sup>47</sup>Grudem argues that "will . . . deliver" (παραδώσουσιν) implies the idea of "actively, consciously, willingly 'delivering, giving over, handing over.'" Ibid., 97.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

By the Old Testament's standard, Agabus would have been put to death. However, in the New Testament, divine authority was not attached to the prophecies like in the Old Testament. Therefore, the evaluation is different; the believers are commanded to test the prophecies and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess 5:20-21).<sup>50</sup> New Testament prophecies were evaluated by various parts and there was allowance for mistakes.

Second, Williams also notes that the selection of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work was the result of a prophetic utterance that came forth from a gathering of teachers and prophets (Acts 13:1-2).<sup>51</sup> It seems that the prophet in the New Testament continues the role of providing spiritual direction.

Third, Judas and Silas who were identified as prophets fulfilled an important spiritual role of encouraging and strengthening (Acts 15:32).<sup>52</sup> Apart from that, Paul also teaches that the gift of prophecy is available to all believers, all can exercise the gift, and all are encouraged to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:24, 31).<sup>53</sup> Grudem points out that the New Testament prophecy is "simply a human being reporting in merely human words something which God has brought to mind."<sup>54</sup>

To sum up the discussion above, it seems that the New Testament prophets have similar roles as the Old Testament prophets to foretell, instruct, and encourage. However, these prophets report the revelations in their own words, so mistakes may be present. Therefore, the believers are commanded to test the prophecies and hold fast to what is good.

## Defining the Prophetic Arts

### Defining "Prophetic"

Based on the discussions above, it seems appropriate to use the term "prophetic" to describe the activity where the believers report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds. When applied to prophetic arts, the artists simply draw or paint (report) the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds through artistic inspiration.

Erickson argues that the reception of a message is a work of the Holy Spirit. Two people hearing the same message may have different

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>51</sup>Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 3:171.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 380–81.

<sup>54</sup>Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 262.

responses. He cites his own experience where he thought he had preached poorly but a person who hears the message was blessed though he did not consciously intend it.<sup>55</sup> He then points out that the “prophetic” aspect may sometimes be in the reception more than in the declaration.<sup>56</sup> The Holy Spirit can also speak to a person “prophetically” through different means on various occasions. Considering the reception aspect may result in overgeneralising the term “prophetic.” However, this paper argues that the reception aspect should be considered as the Holy Spirit may influence the process of preparation and declaration though the one who declares may not be aware of it.

### Prophetic Arts

As mentioned above, “prophetic” describes the activity where the believers report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds. Prophetic arts can be defined as artworks that the artists simply draw or paint to report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds through artistic inspiration.

It is helpful here to differentiate the term from other types of art that are closely associated. “Christian arts” as defined by Félix-Jäger is “art that comes from a Christian worldview or backdrop.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Félix-Jäger defined “Pentecostal art” as “art that comes from a Pentecostal worldview or backdrop.”<sup>58</sup> “Prophetic art” is both “Christian art” and “Pentecostal art,” but not all “Christian art” and “Pentecostal art” are “Prophetic art.” In terms of function, there are arts with didactic functions, which explicitly depict biblical or moral scenes to teach the viewer about Christian narrative.<sup>59</sup> “Prophetic art” must be differentiated from “didactic art” as they have different purposes. Though, “prophetic art” may sometimes use “didactic” elements to convey God’s message, its purpose is not to teach Christian narrative. Some “prophetic arts” may convey God’s message without using Christian elements. Therefore, it is paramount to highlight the importance of purpose when defining “prophetic arts.”

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<sup>55</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 811.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 9.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 199–200.

## Discerning Prophetic Arts

Discerning whether artworks are prophetic arts is a complex issue. How do we know if the artworks are inspired by the Holy Spirit, other spirits, or human imagination? Discernment is crucial in identifying the source of inspiration.

In assessing the source of inspiration for ritual, Yong characterises Spirit-inspired rituals as those that promote social cohesion, enable practitioners to bring social change, transform practitioners emotionally and aesthetically, bring healing and liberation, and intensify human creativity.<sup>60</sup> While demonic rituals are those that destroy human integrity, disrupt social relations, produce alienation and estrangement, obstruct personal healing and communal reconciliation, and inhibit human creativity.<sup>61</sup> Félix-Jäger acknowledges the helpfulness of these categorisations when it comes to considering the source of inspiration for artwork.<sup>62</sup> However, he also notes that a piece of artwork may display both characteristics, which makes identification of the source of inspiration problematic.<sup>63</sup>

Félix-Jäger proposes a three-step process of discernment to identify the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within a piece of artwork.<sup>64</sup> First, one must consider the artist's purpose and tradition while assessing the ideologies in their context.<sup>65</sup> Second, one must compare the artist's purpose and tradition to God's larger purpose.<sup>66</sup> Last, one must evaluate the artwork by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup>

Fee points out that while Paul instructs the believers to test prophecies, he did not give specific criteria but some general principles can be observed from Paul's writings.<sup>68</sup> First, Fee suggests the test of purpose can be applied since Paul says that the one who prophesies speaks edification, encouragement, and comfort (1 Cor 14:3).<sup>69</sup> Second, the test of content can be applied as Paul exhorts believers to "stand firm

<sup>60</sup>Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 135.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>62</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 101.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1994), 60.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

and hold to the traditions” taught by the apostles (2 Thess 2:15).<sup>70</sup> Félix-Jäger’s first two steps aligns with the two criteria that Fee outlines.

The third step is somewhat subjective. In 1 Cor 14:29, Paul teaches that prophecies should be weighed by the others. Grudem convincingly argues that “the others” is not an exclusive group of prophets or gifted people but the entire congregation.<sup>71</sup> This can offer some objectivity to discerning as the responsibility of discerning is not rested only on one or few.

Jesus also teaches the disciples to recognise the false prophets by their fruits (Matt 7:15-16). Likewise, Jesus did not specifically identify the “fruits.” France comments that the “fruits” is an ethical metaphor, assuming that true allegiance to God will cause one to exhibit appropriate behaviour.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, by the lifestyles of the speakers of prophecies, one can recognise if they are true prophets.

Clifton points out that considering inspiration from the perspective of the purpose of the artist may not offer a complete picture.<sup>73</sup> Clifton suggests that it is better to consider it from the perspective of the viewer as interpretation is subjective and the Holy Spirit might speak to two viewers of the same artwork differently.<sup>74</sup> This is the case where the “prophetic” is in the reception. Even so, discernment is still necessary. The recipients can test the content and allow others to weigh the interpretation.

Suffice it to say, that though a definite conclusion of the source of inspiration is beyond reach, some helpful guidelines can be put in place. The subjectivity involved certainly adds to the complexity of the discernment. Nevertheless, one needs to critically evaluate artwork while being open to the prophetic.

## Evaluation of Various Definitions

### Visual Expression of Prophecy

One of the definitions that is popular among prophetic artists is based on 1 Cor 14:3, where prophetic arts are considered visual expressions of

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 73.

<sup>72</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 291.

<sup>73</sup>Clifton, “Steven Félix-Jäger, Pentecostal Aesthetics.”

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

prophecy to strengthen, encourage, and comfort.<sup>75</sup> In the New Testament, prophecy is one of the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. Schreiner defines “prophecy” as “communicating revelations from God in a spontaneous utterance.”<sup>76</sup> One might question, is the artwork a valid expression of prophecy? In the New Testament, many of the instances mentioned in the Pauline epistles discuss prophecy as expressed through spoken words. However, it does not mean prophecy can only be communicated through words. For example, in Acts 21:10-11, Agabus bound himself with Paul’s belt as a prophetic symbol to express the message of the prophecy.<sup>77</sup> Old Testament prophets proclaimed their messages through many verbal and nonverbal elements of communication.<sup>78</sup> However, the very few records of these communications may be due to the inherent theological and ideological nature of the preserved text, which places importance on the messages rather than the way the messages were communicated.<sup>79</sup> Art may be a nonverbal way that prophecy can be communicated. Moreover, God spoke through the Old Testament prophet using vision as an occasion for his message.<sup>80</sup> In this case, artwork as a visual expression is a more direct way to present the vision. However, it should be noted that just as with visions, the artwork is just an occasion for the prophecy to be communicated, it is not the message itself. In practice, some churches also request prophetic artists to write the message in words and attach it to the artwork to guide the viewers in interpreting the artwork.

Manzo defines spontaneous prophetic arts as “divinely inspired unpremeditated and unrehearsed artmaking” and states that prophetic arts may be created “intuitively in public religious arenas or cultural spaces within liturgical and ecclesial functions.”<sup>81</sup> This definition limits the nature of prophetic arts and settings of prophetic artmaking.

Citing Fee, Manzo argues that the charismata is meant for the church and is to be operated in the setting of Christian worship.<sup>82</sup> Does the painting need to be done in the church services to be considered

<sup>75</sup>Manzo, “Towards an Understanding of the Spontaneous Prophetic Artist in the Pentecostal Church,” 36.

<sup>76</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 360, Logos Bible Software.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>78</sup>K. G. Friebel, “Sign Acts,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 707.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 508, Kindle.

<sup>81</sup>Manzo, “Towards an Understanding of the Spontaneous Prophetic Artist in the Pentecostal Church,” 36-37.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

as prophetic art? To answer this question, one must inquire whether prophecy can be uttered outside of the church services. When Paul discusses the charismatic giftings, it was often discussed in the context of the church gathering to strengthen, encourage, and comfort the body of Christ. This might lead one to conclude that the charismatic gifts can only be operated within the church services. This paper argues that charismatic gifts can be operated outside of church services. The lack of didactic teachings on the use of charismatic gifts outside of the church is probably because the epistles were written to the church to address issues within the congregation. The Book of Acts records instances where charismatic gifts are exercised outside of the context of church gatherings. For example, Peter healed the lame outside the temple gate and healing took place where his shadow fell on the sick he passed by (Acts 3:1-9; 5:12-16). In modern days, encouragements and prophecies can be sent over text messages or through recorded videos or audio outside of church gatherings. Since the charismatic gifts are operational outside of the church services, the prophetic artists can paint prophetically even in their studios. Due to the limited time, in practice, some of the prophetic artists painted most of the artworks beforehand and did their final touches during the worship session.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, this paper calls for an expansion of the definition to include artworks painted prophetically outside of the church services to be prophetic arts.

The last thing to address here is the “spontaneity” in the gift of prophecy. It is true that spontaneity is suggested in 1 Corinthians 14 since “revelation” comes to another while one is still “prophesying” (14:29-32).<sup>84</sup> However, it may not necessarily mean “no previously prepared message is contemplated here.”<sup>85</sup> The objection is not to the notion of “spontaneity,” but to the exclusion of preparation. As discussed in the earlier section, the dynamic process of inspiration usually draws on the human experience to give expression to God’s message. While the message may be spontaneously given in the church gathering, the content of the message may be prepared. Blomberg argues that believers should consider thoughtfully what God wants to convey to a particular congregation at a particular time and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit to lucidly speak what is most appropriate.<sup>86</sup> He added that preparation aids spontaneity, as one can draw from the wealth of previously considered

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<sup>83</sup>Bay and Tan, “Prophetic Painting.”

<sup>84</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 171.

<sup>85</sup>Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 361.

<sup>86</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 272.

thoughts at the moment.<sup>87</sup> Lack of preparation, conversely, may hinder the successful articulation of God’s message as one may be at a loss for words or a logical flow of thought and “lapses into a disconnected ‘stream of consciousness.’”<sup>88</sup>

This paper argues that spontaneity refers to the point where one is spontaneously prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak, rather than the spontaneous generation of content. However, it should be noted that the Holy Spirit is free to bypass the speaker’s experience and inspire the speaker directly to speak of unpremeditated content spontaneously, though the expression is still limited by the speaker’s capabilities. Manzo argues that “in the spontaneous moment, the artist may create solely from their memory of existing skills and experiences with their art materials, or they may create from an unknown place beyond their current ability fully inspired by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>89</sup> This paper agrees with Manzo in that the artists may be prompted by the Holy Spirit spontaneously. However, this paper considers “memory of existing skills and experiences” as preparations and that prophetic artmaking may not necessarily be unpremeditated and unrehearsed. Therefore, just as spontaneous prophetic painting is valid, premeditated and rehearsed prophetic artmaking is also a valid form of prophetic art.

### Prophetic Painting as Worship to God

Some artists also define prophetic painting as a physical demonstration of one’s worship.<sup>90</sup> This definition focuses on the act of painting rather than the product as one is painting unto God. Jim Watkins suggests that the congregation participates in this act of worship by witnessing the skill and gift that God works through (or with) the artist.<sup>91</sup> Félix-Jäger asserts that this type of spontaneous painting is an example of liturgical (visual) arts.<sup>92</sup> If taken out of the church, it loses its liturgical functions and would fail to fulfil its intended purpose.<sup>93</sup> Initial inquiry may exclude this from the definition of “prophetic arts” proposed in this

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Manzo, “Towards an Understanding of the Spontaneous Prophetic Artist in the Pentecostal Church,” 37.

<sup>90</sup>Ocampo, “Prophetic Art.”

<sup>91</sup>Jim Watkins, “Spontaneous Performance Jesus Painting . . . huh?,” *Transpositions* (blog), August 16, 2010, <https://www.transpositions.co.uk/spontaneous-performance-jesus-painting-huh/>.

<sup>92</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 205.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

paper as its purpose is to express worship instead of conveying God's message.

As discussed earlier, sometimes the "prophetic" is in the reception more than it is in the declaration. Sometimes, an artist may unconsciously paint something "prophetic." This does not mean that the Holy Spirit dictates the painting and the artist is painting in an unconscious state. Rather, the impression that the artist conceives may be the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which the artist may not be aware of. Though it is differentiable in theory, it is difficult to differentiate in practice. One might advocate accepting all such works so as not to quench the Spirit. On the other hand, some might be concerned that some works are false claimants to inspiration or worse, diabolical inspirations.<sup>94</sup> It is prudent to exercise discernment rather than to uncritically accept works as Spirit-inspired.

#### Prophetic arts as critical cultural engagement

Some Pentecostal scholars consider charismatic gifts as a foretaste of things to come.<sup>95</sup> Félix-Jäger proposes that if art is a foretaste of things to come, it gives art "a prophetic function that ultimately underscores the eschatological hope of the coming kingdom of God."<sup>96</sup> Smith argues that the ability to imagine the world otherwise is an important aspect of Pentecostalism.<sup>97</sup> The prophetic imagination seeks an alternate social consciousness from the dominant one.<sup>98</sup> Walter Brueggeman points out that one of our prophetic imagination's tasks is criticism and dismantlement.<sup>99</sup>

As mentioned in the earlier discussions, the Pentecostal worldview as part of the human experience is a source of inspiration. When painting under the charismatic influence of the Holy Spirit, the artworks can portray the eschatological hope that runs contrary to the dominant culture of the world that sometimes may involve criticism and deconstruction. This would be considered prophetic art as well, as it conveys the eschatological hope in God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In this

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<sup>94</sup>Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 112. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 82.

<sup>95</sup>Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 151.

<sup>96</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 138.

<sup>97</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 84. As cited in Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 140.

<sup>98</sup>Félix-Jäger, *Pentecostal Aesthetics*, 140.

<sup>99</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 81.

sense, the message is like that of the Old Testament prophets. However, this form of prophetic arts may not be seen in the church as frequently as preparation, meditation, and refinement may be involved. The time given to paint in the church may be insufficient unless the artist completes most of the artwork and delivers the final touch in the church setting.

Some are concerned that through preparation, meditation, and refinement, the artwork may become more of human imagination than the Holy Spirit's inspiration. This is a valid concern and could be a similar case to Agabus's prophecy where parts are correct and parts are presumptuous. On the other hand, the images that God has impressed upon the hearts of artists may require them to take time to prepare, meditate, and refine. Some artworks simply require more time to complete. Limiting the time for artists may restrict prophetic arts to only those that can be completed in a short frame of time, or in the context of some churches, the duration of the service. Moreover, even within a short time, the artwork may be the artist's imagination rather than the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Therefore, it is more advisable for prophetic artists to be careful, faithful, and prayerful in depicting the images that God has impressed in their hearts than to limit the time, preparation, meditation, and refinement. During preparation, meditation, and refinement, the artists can also discern the source of inspiration.

In summary, most of the understanding of prophetic arts can be subsumed under the definition proposed by this paper, where "prophetic arts" is defined as artworks that the artists paint to report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds through artistic inspiration. Consequently, this paper calls for an expansion of understanding of prophetic arts in the Church to explore the other aspects of prophetic arts. For example, many churches would confine prophetic art to the artworks painted during church services and further limit it to spontaneous painting. Prophetic artists may explore prophetic painting in studios or even public spaces, where the reach can be extended beyond the four walls of the Church. On the other hand, artists should not limit inspiration to that which is spontaneous, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit may be a prolonged process as well.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that the Holy Spirit inspires prophetic artists dynamically in the process of prophetic painting, where the artists give human expression to the divine message. This paper also proposes that "prophetic arts" should be defined by the prophetic function in that the artists simply paint to report the revelation that God has laid on their hearts

or brought to their minds through artistic inspiration. Consequently, this paper calls for an expansion of understanding of “prophetic arts” and encourages churches and prophetic artists to explore other aspects of “prophetic arts” to discover the fullness of God’s gift to the Church, while they continue to trust the Spirit’s guidance and remain discerning.

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