

What Is a Prophet?

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By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

AT THE close of last week's talk I was pointing out to you that the work of Christ as Mediator between God and fallen man may be summarized under three heads. In the words of the Shorter Catechism, "Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king."

This afternoon we shall begin to consider the first of these—we shall consider Christ's office of a prophet.

Before we can do so—before we can consider Christ as a prophet—we must ask what the word "prophet" means. In answer to that question, our first impulse might be to say, on the basis of popular modern usage, that a prophet is a man who predicts future events. In that sense we speak of all kinds of prophets. We speak, for instance, of weather-prophets. A weather-prophet is a man who tells, or tries to tell, what the weather is going to be. So also we have prophets in a great many other spheres. When I lived at Princeton I used to hear a good deal about a man who was called a prophet because he predicted, or tried to predict, every year the score of the Yale-Princeton game. He was the world's worst prophet. His predictions were always wrong. But that does not affect the sense in which the word "prophet" was applied to him. He was called a prophet because he *tried*, at least, to predict the future.

This use of the word "prophet", however, is not the use that appears in the Bible. In the Bible the word "prophet" does not in itself designate a man who predicts future events. No doubt most prophets did, as a matter of fact, predict future events, but their power to predict future events was not the thing that caused them to be called prophets. Prediction of the future was usually part of the prophet's function, but it was not by any means all of his function. The word "prophet" in the Bible has a very much broader sense. It designates a man who speaks as a mouthpiece of God, a man who speaks what

by definite command, has commissioned him to speak. The things that the prophet says may, indeed, concern the future, and often they do concern the future; but they may also concern the present and even the past. They may consist in the imparting of information, but they may also consist in the issuance of commands. Whatever they consist in, they come with divine authority—not with the authority of the prophet, but with the authority of God who has commissioned the prophet and of whom he is the spokesman. A prophet, in other words, according to the Bible, is a man who can say, as he comes forward, "Thus saith the Lord."

If that be so, the question arises how the prophet, in the Biblical sense of the word, differs from the modern minister of the gospel. Does not the minister of the gospel today, like the prophet of Biblical times, proclaim a message which God has given him to proclaim? Does he not preach the word of God rather than his own word? Does he not, if he be a true minister, say, as he stands in his pulpit, "Thus saith the Lord"? If that be so, how does he differ from the prophets of old?

The answer is not difficult. The minister of the gospel is like the prophet in that he proclaims the word of the Lord, but he differs from the prophet in the way in which the word of the Lord comes to him. The word of the Lord comes to the minister of the gospel through the Bible, whereas it came to the prophets of old through no intermediary—through no book—but in direct, supernatural fashion. The minister of the gospel must always appeal to an authority which is outside of him and to which others have access equally with him, whereas the prophet appeals to no authority to which others can have access but claims that God has spoken directly to him, so that his voice must be received as the voice of God.

I think great evil sometimes results today when this distinction is ignored—when modern persons claim to be prophets in the high Biblical sense

of the word. Some modern persons make that claim very definitely and clearly. They are the fanatics who occasionally arise and draw poor deluded people away after them. Sometimes the adherents of these fanatics or impostors may be numbered by the thousands or hundreds of thousands. But it is perfectly plain to well-instructed Christian people that they are false prophets one and all.

The error sometimes shows itself, however, in subtler ways. There are Christian people who have a sort of notion that God speaks in some supernatural fashion by way of direct guidance to them. I am not talking about adherents of groups or sects that obviously make light of Biblical doctrine, but I am talking about people who really believe in the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet when you talk to them about questions of conduct or policy will be quite impervious to all argument, but will simply tell you that they have been on their knees and that God has made His will known to them. In practice, though not in theory, these persons are assuming a position something like that of the prophets in the Biblical sense of the word.

These persons, it seems to me, are rather seriously wrong. God might, of course, have chosen to guide His servants today in the manner in which these persons think He guides them, but as a matter of fact He has not done so. Instead, He guides His servants today by the Bible. He has written in the pages of that Book what His will is for His people. He has written it very plainly. It is there for all to read and for all to understand. No one man and no one group of men has a monopoly in the understanding of it. The Bible's commands are to be interpreted, not in some way open only to people of special piety, but in accordance with plain, out-of-door common sense.

I do not mean, of course, that the Holy Spirit is not present with Christian people, and I certainly do not mean that His presence is not neces-

sary if we are to understand and apply the Bible aright. But what I do mean is that, when the Holy Spirit is really present with us in our reading of the Bible, He enables us to apply the Bible to our own conduct and to the conduct of other people in a way that we can defend before all the world. It is a very dangerous thing indeed when men decline to reason about the application of the Bible to their own lives and the lives of other people, and when they say, in lieu of argument, "I have been on my knees and the Holy Spirit has made plain to me that this is God's will and that everyone who objects to it is opposing God's will."

That is the reason why it is always rather ominous when the report of an ecclesiastical committee of any kind begins by saying that the committee has been much in prayer about the matter referred to it. Do I mean by that that committees ought not to be much in prayer before they come to their decisions? I certainly mean nothing of the kind. I think they ought to be much *more* in prayer than they usually are. Do I mean, then, that it is not a good thing to ask God for His Holy Spirit that the committee may come to the right decision? I certainly do not mean that. I think it is a very necessary thing to pray for the Holy Spirit before we deliberate about any important matters.

What then do I mean? I mean that prayer is not to be made a substitute for common sense but a help to the real exercise of common sense. I mean that prayer is not to be made an excuse for evading unpalatable arguments of one's opponents in debate but is to be used rather that sound arguments may be given free scope. What we ought to pray for as individuals and as members of ecclesiastical committees is not some special supernatural guidance, but clearness of mind and receptivity of heart and consecration of will, in order that all mists may be taken from our eyes and we may come to a decision that is in accordance with God's Word and that we can defend by perfectly plain and sound arguments.

In other words, it is a splendid thing to pray, but it is an evil thing to boast about our prayers. It is a dangerous thing to make the length and fervency of our prayers an excuse for running rough-shod over things plainly taught in God's Word.

The Holy Spirit does guide the servants of Jesus today; He does often give them a blessed assurance of His presence with them, and of the rightness of the decisions that He has enabled them to take. But He does that, not by fresh, supernatural revelation, but by opening their minds and hearts to receive the supernatural revelation contained in the Book which He, the Holy Spirit, Himself has inspired.

Thus prophecy today has ceased. Like all the other supernatural gifts, and like the power of working miracles, it ceased at the close of the apostolic age. If you ask why it ceased, I cannot do better than refer you to an excellent and very learned book by Dr. B. B. Warfield, entitled *Counterfeit Miracles*.

I do not think that we ought to feel gloomy because miracles and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit do not appear in our age. That they do not appear is from one point of view the glory of the age in which we are living. Why were there miracles in Old Testament times and in New Testament times? It was because the supernatural revelation which the miracles were intended to accredit was not yet complete. Now, however, it is complete. There is a wonderful symmetry in the revelation of God which is contained in the Old and New Testaments. Nothing needs to be added to that revelation until the next great supernatural act in the drama of redemption, which will occur when our Lord returns. We can rejoice that miracles are not needed today, since the reason why they are not needed is that God has already fully made known to us His will for our salvation in the pages of the holy Book.

At any rate, whatever be the reason for the cessation of miracles, it is clear that as a matter of fact they have ceased. There are no miracles today. There are today no events in the external world which are wrought by the immediate power of God. The things that occur in the course of nature are indeed wrought by God; they are just as much wrought by Him as would be the case if they were miracles. But to accomplish those events God uses means, while to accomplish the miracles of which we have accounts in the Bible He put forth directly His creative power.

There are today supernatural works of God. There is a supernatural work

of God every time a sinner is born again. That is not accomplished through the course of nature. It is just as supernatural, it is just as much "above nature," as was the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. But it is not done in the external world and therefore it is not properly called a "miracle."

With the cessation of the miracles has gone, as we have seen, the cessation of those special supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, like the gift of tongues, of which Paul speaks, for example, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. One of those gifts, and the most important of them, was the gift of prophecy. That gift, like the other strictly supernatural gifts, has ceased.

We all ought to recognize that fact with the utmost clearness, and particularly we preachers ought to do so. We ought to recognize very clearly what our business is and what it is not. Our business is not to proclaim any word that God has given us in the night watches by dream or vision; it is not to proclaim any message which He has placed upon our lips by a supernatural impulsion of which we can give no account. There were times when His Word came to men in such glorious and wonderful ways, but those times are past, and we ought very clearly to recognize the fact that they are past. We ought to honor the prophets, but in honoring the prophets we ought to be perfectly clear about the fact that we are not prophets ourselves.

Our function is a humbler function. It is the function of studying the Bible and then of setting forth what the Bible contains.

Do you think that is an unworthy function? I do not think so at all. I think it is a glorious function, and the sad thing is that men who call themselves preachers have turned aside from it to something that is far less worthy. They have turned aside to proclaim their own opinions on the subject of religion, or their own experiences, or their own views on political or social questions. In view of what much modern preaching is, I can well understand that one modern preacher has suggested that a halt be called for a number of years on the whole business. It is indeed hardly worthwhile. But very different from that sorry hubbub of voices is the voice of the real preacher. He is a

man who comes forth into his pulpit from a secret place of meditation and prayer, opens the Bible upon the pulpit desk and, with his heart all aglow from the radiance of the sacred page, stands there, with dying men before him, and proclaims to them the blessed message of salvation which God in His Word has given him to proclaim. Does that view of preaching make of the preacher a mere scribe or a mere phonograph? Ah, just think of the great preachers, my friends—the great preachers who have been the first to disclaim any thought of originality in the content of their message, the great preachers who have appealed most humbly to God's written Word. Was preaching as they practised it a cold, mechanical thing? No, my friends, it was almost the greatest privilege that could conceivably be given to mortal man. To receive God's message of salvation in the depths of one's own soul, to have it written by the Holy Spirit upon the tablets of one's own heart, and then to proclaim it to others as the Holy Spirit gives one utterance—what higher privilege can there be than that? That is the privilege of the true preacher of the gospel.

But the prophet's work was different. When he said to his hearers, "Thus saith the Lord," he pointed not to the Bible open before him but to special supernatural revelation which God had given him to proclaim. He was, in the strictest possible sense, a spokesman for God.

Many passages in the Bible set forth the nature of the prophet's office, but here we shall have time to refer to only one of them. It is found in the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, where we find the following verses:

And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken.

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him (Deut. 18: 17-19).

Here the fundamental nature of prophecy is clearly set forth. A prophet is a man on whose lips God has put His word. He is a man who speaks what God has commanded him

to speak. Being thus the mouthpiece of God, his words come with divine authority. Whosoever will not hearken unto the words the prophet speaks in God's name, God will require it of Him.

Just because the prophet's function is such a lofty one, the greater is the sin of any man who presumes to lay claim to it when God has not given it to him:

But the prophet [so the passage in Deuteronomy continues] which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die (Deut. 18: 20).

Take also that great passage in the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah, where the false prophets are described:

I have not sent prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied (Jer. 23: 21).

Yes, very solemn is the work of the true prophet; and woe to the man who undertakes that work without command of God.

At that point a question may arise. If there are true prophets and also false prophets, how are we to tell the true from the false? Are we just to accept as true prophecy everything that claims to be such, or are we to apply certain tests by which true prophets may be known?

The Bible tells us that the latter is the case. John tells us in his First Epistle to "try the spirits whether they are of God":

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (I John 4: 1).

If then we are to "try the spirits," if we are to apply tests to distinguish false prophets from true, just what are the tests that we are to apply?

No doubt there are various tests; but the apostle John, immediately after the verse that we have quoted, gives us one of the most important of them. No prophet, he tells us, is to be regarded as a real prophet, no spirit is to be regarded as the Spirit of God, if the prophet or the spirit tells us something that is contrary to what God has already told us regarding Himself or regarding the Lord Jesus Christ:

Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth

that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world (I John 4: 2f.).

So also Paul, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, says that no man can be regarded as speaking by the impulsion of the Spirit of God if he says Jesus is anathema:

Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost (I Cor. 12: 3).

In these passages we find a principle which is sadly neglected in our day. It is the principle of the primacy of truth. One who comes forward as a prophet or a preacher cannot, according to the Bible, be recognized as a genuine prophet or a genuine preacher of the gospel unless the things that he says are true. It makes not the slightest difference, according to the Bible, how fervent he is; it makes not the slightest difference how magnetic is his personality; it makes not the slightest difference what power he attains over the souls of men: he is, according to the Bible, a false prophet or a false preacher, if the things that he says about God or about Christ or about salvation are not true. Once establish what the truth is, and every man thereafter coming forward as a prophet or as a preacher must be tested by his conformity to that.

Now today the truth is established. It is established in the Bible. Every preacher as well as every prophet must be tested by his conformity to God's written Word. If what he says is contrary to the Bible, then it makes no difference, so far as our decision to accept him or reject him is concerned, how eloquent he is, how fervent he is, how religious he is, how spiritual (in the modern and non-Biblical sense of that misused word) he is, how sincere he is. We are bound to reject him if what he says is not in accordance with God's Word. The true Holy Spirit does not contradict what He Himself has caused to be written in the Bible; and any spirit that does contradict what the Holy Spirit has caused to be written is one of the false spirits against which we are warned in such solemn language by Paul and by John.