

Prophecy and the Gospel

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LAST week we discussed the question "What is a prophet?" and we came to the conclusion that a prophet, in the Biblical sense of the word, is a person who speaks for God, who speaks what God by supernatural revelation and by definite command has commissioned him to speak.

Incidentally we observed that the popular sense of the word "prophet," in accordance with which it designates a man who predicts the future, does not do justice to the Biblical sense. A "prophet," in the Biblical sense of the word, may predict the future, but he may also speak of the present and of the past, and he may be just as truly a prophet when he speaks of the present and of the past as he is when he speaks of the future. Moreover, he may be just as truly a prophet when he issues commands as he is when he gives information. He is a prophet if he speaks as one who has been made, in supernatural fashion, the mouthpiece of God, so that he can say, when he comes forward, "Thus saith the Lord; my voice, now, must be received as the voice of God."

It is certainly true that prophecy, according to the Bible, need not necessarily be prediction of the future. Yet in recognizing that fact, in learning not to give an entirely exclusive place to the predictive element in prophecy, men have sometimes fallen into the extreme of utterly failing to give the predictive element in prophecy that place which it does most certainly deserve. What a great discovery it was, they say, when modern Biblical scholars learned that the prophets of the Old Testament were not foretellers but forthtellers, when they learned that the business of the prophet was not to predict the future but to set forth great religious truth!

Well, with regard to that allegedly great discovery, I can only say that most of those who boast about it have really made no great discovery at all, but have lost sight of an exceedingly precious truth. They have lost sight

of the fact that the great prophets of the Old Testament, though they did do more than predict the future, yet did predict the future, and did make the prediction of the future a very large part of their work.

Why is it that these modern men, of whom we are speaking now, have come to deny or minimize the predictive element in prophecy? I will tell you why. It is because the predictive element in prophecy, supposing the predictions that make up that predictive element are true, exhibits with particular clearness the supernaturalism of prophecy. The future is hidden from man; and if the prophets really did predict the future accurately they could have done that only by supernatural revelation from God. But the whole idea of such supernatural revelation, as the whole idea of miracles, is abhorrent to these modern men. Therefore they have directed their attack especially against the predictive element in prophecy because that is the element in which the supernaturalness of the prophet's work would, if only they recognized it, most clearly be seen.

Thus one of the first and one of the most important steps in the downward march of certain modern scholars as preachers was their determination to lay the emphasis upon other things in the message of the Old Testament prophets than the prediction of the future. Sometimes these scholars or preachers did not at first actually deny the predictive element in prophecy. "No doubt the Old Testament prophets," they said, "did predict the future; at least we are not at all concerned to say that they did not. Do not be alarmed, Christian readers, we are really very innocent people indeed. We are not at all concerned to deny things that you have been accustomed, in your reading of the Old Testament, to regard as precious. We are not at all concerned to deny that the Old Testament prophets may have predicted the events in the life of Christ that occurred long after their

day. But we ask you just for a change to leave that element in the prophet's work out of account for the moment and consider with us another aspect of their work, an aspect which up to modern times has been sadly neglected in the church—namely, the message that the prophets had for the men of their own day. We ask you to consider those prophets primarily as great statesmen who brought to bear upon the affairs of nations certain underlying religious principles. We ask you to put yourselves back in the ancient days in which those men lived, in order that you may understand them as men who had a living message for their times. If you consider them thus, you may no longer look upon them primarily as recipients of some strange supernatural revelation, and that will perhaps at first sight seem to you to be a loss; but the loss will be compensated for by a greater gain. The prophets will become living, breathing, human figures; and since the religious principles upon which they based their lives are still valid, we shall be able to profit by their teaching more than we ever did when we looked upon them as soothsayers who predicted details about the life of Christ and the early history of the Christian Church."

What shall we say about that very common way of dealing with the Old Testament prophets? I think we can say something very simple about it. I think we can just say that it is merely one expression, among the many modern expressions, of unbelief.

You see, it is all based upon the underlying assumption upon which modern unbelief is based—namely, the assumption that what man needs is simply moral guidance and the contagion of great religious experience. If that assumption is correct, then all we need from the prophets is an enunciation of great moral and religious principles and the example of men who centuries ago made those principles effective in their lives. But as a matter of fact that assumption is

radically false. What man really needs is not just the enunciation of great principles and the power of good examples, but a salvation wrought by the living God. Being utterly dead in trespasses and sins he can do nothing whatever to save himself, no matter what fine moral instruction he receives and no matter what excellent examples of virtue are held before his eyes. If sinful man is to be saved, God must save him. The salvation of man as he actually is must be a work of the living God.

The Bible contains the blessed record of that divine work of salvation. The Bible is not just a storehouse of moral and religious instruction or an account of men's religious experiences. It is a record of events—it is a record of what God has done for the salvation of sinful men. It tells us how, when the fullness of time was come, God saved sinners by the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

But how is that redeeming work applied to those whom God has chosen for salvation? The answer is really not obscure. The redemption purchased by Christ is applied to the individual soul by the Holy Spirit, and the means which the Holy Spirit uses to apply it is faith.

A man listens to the gospel story. He hears how Jesus died upon the cross to save sinners. At first he does not believe. But then the Holy Spirit works faith in him. He believes and is saved.

That is true not only of those who have been saved after Jesus came; but it is also true of those who were saved before Jesus came. The Old Testament saints, like the New Testament saints, were justified through faith. They too listened to the gospel, believed the gospel because the Holy Spirit opened their hearts, and thus were saved.

But how did the gospel come to them? How could it possibly come to them, since the events which the gospel story sets forth had in their day not yet taken place? The answer is really very plain. The gospel came to the Old Testament saints by way of promise. The redeeming work of Christ had not yet been accomplished, but God promised it, and those who received the promise in faith were saved.

Certainly the promise was at first not at all explicit. It was not very explicit, for example, when it came to Abraham. Yet the Old Testament

says that Abraham "believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness"; and the New Testament presents this faith of Abraham as an example of that same saving faith which also appears after our Lord had come. All through the Old Testament that element of promise is found. The Old Testament saints did not know how the coming salvation was to be wrought, they did not know in any great fullness—at least in the earlier stages of the promise—in what it was to consist; but God had told them to look forward to it and to trust God to accomplish it in His own way. They did trust Him, and that was saving faith.

But if that be so, it will readily be seen that the predictive element in Old Testament prophecy is at the very heart of it. It is because Old Testament prophecy was prediction that it constituted a gospel. It was the gospel story told beforehand, and those who believed the gospel story, thus told beforehand, were saved.

In the great prophets such as Isaiah the promise comes to wonderfully rich unfolding. There we find the promise of a King of David's line who should also be mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There also we find the meaning of the cross of Christ set forth in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah in such explicit terms that, despite the great wealth of New Testament revelation, we love now to turn back ever again to that chapter when we think of the One who died on Calvary for our sins.

How utterly shallow, then, is the view of those who push the predictive aspect of Old Testament prophecy into the background! How utterly shallow is the view of those who regard the great prophets as being primarily statesmen and moral leaders, and lose sight of the fact that they were really men who had had revealed to them by way of promise that blessed gospel through the hearing and believing of which salvation comes! If a man loses sight of that fact, that the prophets preached the gospel afore, he has not the slightest real inkling of what the prophets were raised up to do.

The prophets did indeed do more than predict the future. That is true. But they did predict the future; and the prediction of the future, far from being a merely subordinate part of their work, was quite the most important part of it—indeed, was really

the part that gave meaning to all the rest. It is quite necessary, if we are to have any real understanding of the Bible, that we should get out of our minds this allegedly important discovery that the prophets were forth-tellers and not foretellers, and we should get into our minds the great fact that the prophets had at the heart of their message the unfolding of that divine promise which was fulfilled in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The truth is that the men who deny the predictive aspect of Old Testament prophecy have really denied all prophecy. Why is it that they deny the predictive aspect? As we observed at the beginning of this talk it is because the predictive aspect is that aspect which most obviously involves the claim on the part of the prophets to have received supernatural revelation. It is also, as we now observe, because the predictive aspect of prophecy is that aspect which most obviously shows the prophets to have been proclaimers of a piece of good news setting forth not just general principles of religion and ethics but things that God actually did at a definite point in the world's history, for the salvation of sinful men. The truth is that the denial or minimizing of predictive prophecy, so common today, is only one manifestation of that general denial of supernatural redemption which is such a marked characteristic of the life of our times.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that those who deny to the prophets the supernatural work of predicting the future really deny to them every other supernatural work. It is not surprising to find that they regard the prophets essentially as men of extraordinary religious insight, and have not the slightest notion of the central fact that the prophets had received in supernatural fashion a message from God.

We, on the other hand, must hold on with all our souls to that great truth which these men deny. We must hold clearly to the fact that the prophets were not just men of extraordinary religious and moral insight, but were men who were in the strictest sense spokesmen for God—men who could truly say, as they came forward, "Thus saith the Lord."

They could say that not only when they predicted the future, but also when they spoke of the present or of the past. They could say that not only

when they imparted information but also when they issued commands. They could say that whenever the Spirit of God was upon them to make their word truly the word of God.

It is with that high supernaturalistic conception of the prophet's function that we come now to speak of the prophetic office of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Christ, as our Redeemer," says the Shorter Catechism, "executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king." I want to talk to you now about the first of these three offices which the Shorter Catechism names—Christ's office of a prophet.

The first point to notice is that we really do have a right to attribute this office to our Lord. In the passage from the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, which I discussed with you, from a slightly different point of view, last Sunday, it is said:

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 lest we should have any doubt about our right to apply this passage to Christ, we have direct Scriptural warrant for so doing in the third chapter and in the seventh chapter of the Book of Acts.

Moreover, even where the word "prophet" is not actually applied to Jesus, we find Jesus represented as fulfilling functions which are very clearly those of a prophet. That is particularly prominent in the Gospel according to John. Take, for example, passages such as these:

My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.

For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak.

... for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

These passages, of course, present a relation between Christ and God the Father which is quite unlike the relation in which any mere man can stand

toward God. But all the same they do present Christ in the clearest possible way as a prophet. "All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you," "Even as the Father said unto me, so I speak"—how could the essential nature of the prophet's work, as the work of a spokesman for God, be set forth in clearer fashion than it is set forth here?

Moreover, the New Testament tells us that people, during Jesus' earthly ministry, recognized Him as a prophet; and while it no doubt leads us to understand, at least in some cases, that these persons did not have a full conception of the true nature of His person, yet it does clearly at the same time lead us to understand that these persons did have a view of Jesus which was true as far as it went. Of course Jesus was far more than a prophet, but He certainly was a prophet, as these persons saw.

There can be, then, no doubt whatever about the matter. The Bible does clearly teach us that Christ exercises the office of prophet. The question then arises at what times and in what ways Christ has exercised that office.

Well, in one sense, perhaps, He may be said to have exercised that office even before He became man. The Bible does seem to teach us that the Second Person of the Trinity is the Revealer of God; it does seem to teach that wherever men have any knowledge of God at all they have received it from the Son.

This, however, is not that general revealing activity of the Second Person of the Trinity of which the Shorter Catechism is speaking when it says that Christ executeth the office of a prophet. It is speaking of that particular execution of the office of a prophet which Christ carries out as our Redeemer.

Even when so limited, however, Christ's execution of the office of a prophet seems to have begun even before the incarnation. In a passage in the first chapter of the First Epistle

of Peter, for example, we are told that the Spirit of Christ testified in and through the Old Testament prophets concerning Christ's sufferings and the glory that should follow. The Old Testament prophets are represented in that passage as

searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.

The passage does seem clearly to mean that Christ sent the Holy Spirit to give them their prophetic message regarding the salvation that was to come. If so, His prophetic office, and His prophetic office as Redeemer, began already in Old Testament times. Even in Old Testament times He was not only the substance of the gospel but also the author of it. As the author of it, as the one who sent forth the Holy Spirit to proclaim His death and resurrection beforehand, He was certainly executing the office of a prophet.

It is, however, the work of Christ after the incarnation that we think of more particularly when we speak of Christ (as our Redeemer) as executing the office of a prophet.

It is that post-incarnation work of Christ of which the Epistle to the Hebrews is speaking when, in the grand opening of the majestic epistle, it treats the coming of the Son of God as the climax of that long progress of revelation which had been carried on through the Old Testament prophets:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son. . .

I want to speak to you next Sunday afternoon about that revelation of God which was carried on and is carried on through the incarnate Son of God, that is, through Him who is truly God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever. I want to show you wherein it is like the revelation of God that was carried on through the Old Testament prophets. But also I want to show you the stupendous difference that separates it from the work of the Old Testament prophets and from the work of any prophet who was merely man.

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