

The Ministry of the Prophet

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

W.H. Griffith Thomas explores the essential elements of the prophetic ministry, emphasizing the call, work, and power of the prophet as a servant of God.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 9:6

Topics: "Prophetic Ministry", "Faithful Preaching"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the profound role of prophets in both the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing the necessity of a divine call, conviction of sin, confession, cleansing, consecration, and communion with God in a minister's life. He highlights the power of the Word of God as the primary instrument in a prophet's work, urging ministers to possess, proclaim, and live out the Word faithfully, as it has the power to convict, commission, commune, and constrain. Thomas also warns about the peril of false prophets, who prophesy out of their own hearts, emphasizing the importance of manliness and godliness in a minister's life to avoid hypocrisy and maintain authenticity in their service.

Transcript

There is a close analogy between the Old Testament and the New Testament prophet. The Greek word προφήτης gives a very fair idea of the meaning of the Hebrew word Nabi. [W. J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise.*] The prophet is a "spokesman," one who represents another, and Exodus. 7:1 is the best definition or description of what a prophet is, whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament.

Modern scholarship has rendered great service to the cause of Biblical truth by making these prophets much more definite, clear, and intelligible to us. We can now see pretty clearly what they were and did.

Section 1. The Prophet's Call (Isa. 6).

The first thing that strikes us is that each had a call to the work. This came in different ways and was associated with a variety of circumstances, but the fact was the same in every case, and was essential and fundamental. Prophets and prophetic men like Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and many others were all "called of God." No man took this honour to himself. What this call meant may perhaps be best understood by giving attention to one of whom we know most and whom we may regard as essentially typical of all; the prophet Isaiah (Ch. 6). Taking the story as it stands, we observe the four stages of his call, and in it the analogous experiences which should be true of every minister of the Gospel who is really called of God.

I. A Consciousness of God followed by a Conviction of Sin (verses 1-5).

Isaiah had a vision of God in His Sovereignty, His Majesty, and His Holiness (verses 1-4). This sight of God was at the foundation of all that he became. God as "infinitely great," "infinitely high," and "infinitely holy" possessed and dominated the soul of the young Isaiah, and it is only by such a sight of God that any man can become a prophet.

This vision, this consciousness of God, at once led to the result intended by God in giving it: conviction of sin. "Then said I, Woe is me!" In God's light Isaiah saw light on himself, his life, his ways in the sight of the high and holy God. Conviction of sin based on a consciousness of God is fundamental to the life and work of a prophet of God, a minister of Christ.

II. Confession of Sin followed by Cleansing from Sin (verses 5-7).

To be conscious was to confess, and Isaiah at once ("Then said I") poured out his soul in confession. He confessed his own and his people's sins. Uncleanness pressed on him, and especially uncleanness of lips. He was conscious of failure in himself and in his nation in regard to uncleanness of utterance, and the vision of God as "the King, the Lord of Hosts" had brought this out as never before.

But to confess was to be cleansed ("Then flew"). Cleansing immediate, perfect, assured, was his experience. The Divine fire did its work at once and thoroughly, and with the Divine assurance of absolute cleansing the prophet entered into the second, and was ready for the third stage of his experience.

III. The Call of God followed by Consecration to God (verse 8).

The prophet thus convicted and cleansed was now spiritually fit for further revelations from God, and it was not long before the Divine voice inquired, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" There was work to be done. The national life was at a crisis (verse 1), and the sin of the people called for Divine action (verse 5). To the man conscious of God, cleansed from sin, and assured of blessing, comes, as it always does, this call to service. This, and this alone, is the type of man God can use. Only as we see God, see our sin, receive God's forgiveness and know it, can we realize and answer the call, and so with wholehearted consecration came the response: "Here am I; send me." To the man for whom God had done so much, consecration was the necessary, prompt and thorough rejoinder, and the man whom God had so prepared was ready for service ("Then said I"). Before, it was, "Then said I, Woe is me!" Now, it is, "Then said I; Here am I."

IV. The Commission of God followed by Communion with God (verses 9-11).

The human readiness to be sent is quickly followed by the Divine authorization. "Go, and tell." The work to be done would mean plain speaking, and would need courage, persistence, and even severity of dealing. The ills of the people were not superficial and would not be met without drastic remedies. But when a man is conscious of a definite Divine commission, "Go, and tell," he can go because he knows that "God's biddings are enablings."

Not only so, but the prophet is now able to enter into fellowship with God, to seek to know more of His will, and to endeavour to understand His purposes. Faced with a difficult task, Isaiah approached God; "Then said I, Lord, how long?" This is the privilege of the man who has seen God and received God's cleansing and commission. The Lord does not hide from such a man that which He will do. "The Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).

And thus the prophet, called, cleansed, and commissioned, is enabled to enter into the secret of his Divine Lord's will. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and He will show them His covenant" (Psa. 25:14). This call and consciousness of God is essential to a man at the outset of his ministry. Unless he has it, he had better not start out. The ministry is a vocation, not a profession. "How wilt thou run, seeing thou hast no tidings ready?" But it is also essential when the man is actually at his work.

The Church can only echo and authenticate the call; and unless the minister is ever conscious that he is where and what he is, because God has called, placed, and equipped him, his ministry must necessarily suffer in power and blessing. And, not least of all, this consciousness of a Divine vocation is essential all through a minister's life. We must keep in touch with God. Only thus shall we preserve our freshness and not grow stale. Only thus shall we keep our glow and never become dull.

Only thus shall we walk and not faint. People are quick to see both the presence and the absence of this Divine consciousness in their clergyman's life. Some two years ago a well-known poet suddenly disappeared, and there seems no doubt that he committed suicide. He was the son of a minister, and he not only threw over his father's faith, but set himself with intense violence and virulence to overthrow Christianity. This is how The Times closed its review of his last work: - "He had well nigh all that goes to make a great poet, except the upward-seeing vision that is fixed on the Eternal."

"Except the upward-seeing vision that is fixed on the Eternal." How true, how searching are these words when applied to the minister. We may have all else, education, capacity, opportunity, but the one thing needful is the "upward-seeing vision". As Dr. A. J. Gordon of Boston once said: "It is the look that saves, but it is the gaze that sanctifies." It is only as we see God, keep our gaze fixed on the Eternal, that our life and service will bring glory to God, blessing to others, and restful satisfaction to our own souls.

Section 2. The Prophet's Work (Isa. 61:1-3).

It has often been pointed out that there is a great and fundamental difference between the Old Testament prophet and the New Testament minister: the former addressed the community; the latter the individual. Dr. G. A. Smith argues with his own characteristic force that Isaiah had a message for the individual, based on his own individual experience and inspired by his personal ideal for Israel. [Dr. G. A. Smith, Isaiah, vol. i., p. 289.] But probably most students of Old Testament prophecy will be inclined to agree with Dr. Stalker in making individuality and preaching to individuals essentially Christian ideas. [Dr. Stalker, The Preacher and His Models, p. 62 f.] Yet this difference of opinion need not prevent us from endeavouring to discover what was the prophet's work, and to apply the truths to our own day and needs. We shall find that whenever we address individuals or communities, the work of the prophet of the Old Testament has much to teach us.

I. The Prophet was a Messenger.

He was sent from God, he declared the message of God, and he spoke for God. He has been well described as "a citizen with a message". This message was directed primarily against the evils of his own day, but it also included the announcement of that great Day to which the Jews and the Old Testament ever looked forward. Today the minister is preeminently a Messenger of Redemption, and undoubtedly his primary message is and must be individual and personal. Whatever results may accrue to the community through the preaching of the Gospel, the needs of the soul in relation to God must come first. "The soul of all improvement is the improvement of the soul." But this is no reason why we should not rigidly and fearlessly apply the principles of Redemption to the facts of our social life and endeavour to let people see

that all such questions as Drink, Housing, Land, Unemployment, Gambling, have their moral aspects which can only be dealt with by the truths and grace of Christianity.

II. The Prophet was a Witness.

He was a "Truth Teller" "Cry aloud, and spare not," was his Divinely-given motto. In ordinary appearance he differed nothing from other citizens, but in attitude, bearing, conviction, he had the accent of one who had seen and therefore could speak. Coming from the presence of God, and judging all things in the light of Eternity, he could deal with such sins as idolatry, hypocrisy, selfishness, and oppression fearlessly and fully. For was he not the Divine witness against unrighteousness, and in favour of truth, equity, and purity? Even if the message is not heeded, the very presence in our parishes of a witness for God must and will tell.

III. The Prophet was a Pleader.

We greatly err if we think of the Old Testament prophet simply as one who warned, denounced, and threatened. There was another side to his message. He also appealed, there was the "wooing note" in his tone, and no one can read a passage like Isaiah 61:1-3, or study the life of Jeremiah without seeing how strong and constant was this note of pleading. This is one of the chief characteristics of a New Testament minister. He must plead, he must appeal, he must "woo," he must deal tenderly, and must never forget the apostolic tone which said "We pray you in Christ's stead."

IV. The Prophet was a Comforter.

Not only a pleader; a comforter. There was constant need of comfort. The Jewish remnant, that faithful few among the faithless, needed all the cheer they could obtain as they endeavoured to live for God amid the idolatry and iniquity of the nation. "To comfort them that mourn" was therefore a prominent feature of the prophet's work, and the keynote of the entire section of Isaiah 40-66 seems to be found in "Comfort ye my people, saith your God," addressed not to the people but to the prophets, as they set about their work for God.

Today the need for comfort is equally great. There are few congregations and few lives which are not burdened with some sorrow or discouragement. If the preacher omits this "note" from his preaching, he will fail at a vital point; but if he takes care to "comfort" in the old sense of encourage, strengthen, hearten, cheer, he will find his ministry blessed to many needy, burdened, thirsty souls.

V. The Prophet was a Herald.

This note was never long absent from the prophetic message. It was a message of Good News. A good time was coming, a great Day, and a glorious King, and these constituted the heart of the prophet's word. On the strength of this he bade them lift up their hearts and find cheer, strength, inspiration in the promise and hope of redemption. Today the dominant note of all preaching must be the evangelical note. The Gospel is Good News, and this in no narrow sense, but in the fullest, widest acceptance of the term.

Above all applications to social problems, and beyond all intellectual questions, the substance of the Gospel, the Good News must be proclaimed. "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins." "What must I do to be saved?" is still the primary question, and the Good News of Redemption is still the primary answer. Messenger, Witness, Pleader, Comforter, Herald. Such was the prophet; such, still more, is the Minister. "Difficult," do we say?

Yes, of course it is, it has never been anything else and never will be. How can a man be all this to his fellows without realizing the difficulty? Everything of value in life is difficult. To be a painter is difficult, to be a musician is difficult, to be a scientist is difficult. And to depict Christ, to bring out the music of the Gospel, to reveal truth for life must also be difficult. We need and must have the fullness of life both as to intellect and to experience. The fuller our experience of life and manhood, the richer our life will ever be.

"As a preacher grows up intellectually he should grow down in simplicity and sympathy, like the weeping trees that rise with their stem but touch the ground with their branches, the strength never lessening the softness." But though difficult it is possible. We have the same source of power as the prophet. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; He hath anointed me." The Spirit is still ready, still available, still powerful, and in the presence of Christ, in fellowship with Him, we shall receive the anointing which teaches, which equips, which upholds, which uses, which blesses.

Like Moses in the Mount, we shall learn the pattern and receive the power and then do the work God has for us to do. A well-known Methodist minister not long ago put all this in the following forceful way:- "The preaching that our time needs, the preaching that will relieve doubt and lead men to Christ, must be more than positive, it must be authoritative, in a good sense, the authority rooted in personal conviction of the preacher, and appealing with unflinching courage and unerring aim to the moral consciousness of the hearer.

The school where this method is learned and the Master Who taught it we know; in homiletics as in theology the word of our time is "back to Christ". He did not argue - He shone; He uttered truths of the utmost daring and originality as though they had been the merest commonplaces and axioms of the world's thought ever since. It is given to the servant to be as his Master even here; we may learn His method and practice His art if we dwell as He dwelt in the unclouded light of the Father's love.

"Abide in Me and I in you." The preacher for our times needs to live so near his fellow men, to enter so deeply into their soul trouble, and to know so well the conditions that affect them, that they shall say of him, even when no word of doubt or debate has been whispered, 'That man knows all that I have gone through, he has read my heart and speaks home to me.' "He needs to live so near to God that when he speaks, he shall be felt to speak out of the light in which there is no darkness at all; not in presumption of human knowledge, but in simplicity of heart and clearness of vision.

To that height few of us have attained; yet the mount of vision and of power rises above us, not to create despair, but to kindle desire, and we are brethren and comrades of the upward way." "Six little words lay claim on me Each passing day - I ought, I must, I can, I will, I dare, I may."

Section 3. The Prophet's Power.

The great instrument of the prophet's work was the Word of God. A "Word"! Only a Word! How light, how slight, and yet how mighty! Words have always had great influence and power in history. "Where the word of a king is, there is power." But the Word of God is the greatest power in the universe. "He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." All through Scripture the Word of the Lord stands out prominently as the greatest force in the world, and at all times His word through His servants has been the one supreme power over men. "He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword" (Isa. 49:2). The power of the Word in the prophet's own personal life needs careful consideration.

I. The Word Commissioning (Jer. 1:4, 9).

One phrase marks the prophetic commission. "The Word of the Lord came" (Jer. 1:4, 9). From the first occurrence of this term in connection with Abraham (Gen. 15:1) to the last occurrence in connection with the greatest of all the prophets (John the Baptist, Luke 3:2), it stands out as the basis of all proper and authorized service for God.

1. It meant first of all a personal commission. It meant a definite call to work and constituted the man to whom it came a genuine, authoritative servant of his Lord and God. What a strength and inspiration it gave a man to know and feel that "the word of the Lord came" to him. So it is, so it must be still. If in a very real way the word does not "come" to a man for ministry, he had better not set out, for it will be embarking on a hopeless enterprise. But if he is assured of the "Word of the Lord" commissioning him, how strong, how safe, how satisfied he is.

2. For it meant, also, a personal communication. Not only a definite call but a definite message, and the latter indicated and proved the former. By the message the call was demonstrated, by the communication the commission. This too, has a direct application to the ministry today, for in a very real sense we must get our texts from God; our message must be from Him if we are to speak in demonstration of the Spirit and power.

II. The Word Communing (Jer.15:16).

The Word which calls and commissions must be that by which the soul of the prophet continues to keep in touch with his Divine Lord. So it was with Jeremiah. "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by Thy Name, O Lord God of Hosts."

1. The Word must be received. "I did eat." The Word as food is a suggestion often found in Scripture. Job says, "I have esteemed Thy Word more than my necessary food" (ch. 23:12). Ezekiel was commanded to "eat" the book God gave him (ch. 3:1). The Psalmist rejoices in God's Word as sweet to his taste, and sweeter than the honeycomb (Psa. 21:10, 119:103). The Apostle urges the young converts to desire the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2), and the truth of God is more than once mentioned as the strong meat for the spiritually mature (1 Cor. 3:2, Heb. 5:12). The Word is indeed food. What food is to the body God's truth is to the soul. It satisfies the cravings of hunger; it invigorates the soul; it builds up the life. Meditation is the spiritual analogue of that process of appropriation, digestion and assimilation by means of which food becomes the nourishment of our bodily life. We must "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." "He that eateth Me (τρ■γωω)."

2. The Word must be experienced. "A joy and the rejoicing." The joy of the Word in the prophet's life is a suggestive and striking fact. Jeremiah is not usually thought of as a man of joy, and yet here he expresses his joy in God's Word in no measured terms. There will always be joy in every true ministry in proportion as God's Word is "found" and "eaten". The knowledge of the truth brings joy; the experience of its power causes joy; and the consciousness of possessing a definite message from God is a never-ending source of rejoicing. This is much more than a mere intellectual understanding of the contents of the Word. It is the transfusion of it into our emotional life, the influence of it on our spiritual life, and the inspiration of it on our will for consecration and service.

III. The Word Constraining (Jer. 20:9).

The next step in the prophet's inner life in relation to the Word naturally follows from the two preceding. The Word that commissions and communicates begins to constrain.

1. There is the consciousness of a great temptation. "I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His Name." It is an encouragement to find that the prophets were men like ourselves. They were tempted to desist from speaking, to be silent and never again to testify for God. How often this temptation comes to a minister. The strain of work is great; physical, mental, and spiritual! The results of work are so slow, so few, so disappointing! So he is tempted to silence. "I will not make mention of Him."

2. But there is the consciousness of a great power. If I say "I will not ... then there is in my heart a burning fire." The Word in the prophet's heart as a fire kindles afresh the strong convictions of his relation to God and his duty. And so today the minister, when tempted to desist, to give up, to be silent, finds the pressure of the Word within like a fire stirring him to renewed consecration. Like St. Paul, he becomes conscious once again of his profound spiritual debt, of his ministerial commission, of his duty of service, of the world's need, and of the unique power of the Gospel, and there comes again into his heart "as it were a burning fire."

3. And then there is the consciousness of great results. "I cannot contain." The fire begins to work, and the prophet must speak. Like Peter, he says, I "cannot but speak" (Acts 4:20). The pressure of the Word overcomes all hostility, all danger, all difficulty, all distrust of self, all fear, all cowardice, all unwillingness.

"Thy Word have I hid in my heart." The "heart" in Scripture means the center of the moral being, and includes intellect, feeling, and will. So that the Word in the heart, means in the mind for thought, in the emotion for feeling, and in the will for action. This is the prime essential in the inner life of the prophet; the Word of God. The Word convicting; the Word commissioning; the Word communing; and the Word constraining. And if only the minister will take care to get alone with God and His Bible, and seek the light and grace of Him Who inspired that Word, the spiritual results in the soul will be great, blessed, and powerful. The Word will so transform, energize, and inspire him in his inner life that when he comes forth to his people it will be quite evident that he has seen a vision (Luke 1), that God has spoken to him, and that he is indeed the prophet of the Lord, the messenger of the Lord of Hosts.

Section 4. The Prophet's Message (Jer. 23:28 f.).

The Word thus received into the heart is intended to be reproduced in life and work. After Commission, Communion, and Constraint by the Word, comes the Communication of it to others.

I. The Word Possessed.

"He that hath My Word, let him speak that word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?" God's word is the expression of His mind and is therefore wheat, not chaff; and the prophet is here described as the man that "hath" it, that possesses it. This is essential to all service, the definite possession of the Word of God. As St. Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ," and more than once he speaks of "my gospel," rejoicing in the conscious possession of a message from God. No ministry can ever be of service to men which does not start here, in the definite, conscious, blessed possession of the Word of God.

II. The Word Proclaimed.

"Let him proclaim My word faithfully." The Word is possessed in order to be proclaimed, and the proclamation must be in exact proportion to the possession. Nothing that is not possessed can be proclaimed; everything that is possessed is to be proclaimed; and nothing can be proclaimed if it is not possessed. "Faithfully." We must beware lest we mix the chaff with the wheat. There are constant and

serious temptations to unfaithfulness. Some men are tempted to indulge in mere eloquence without much regard to the substance of the message. Others are tempted to prophesy "smooth" or "pleasant" things in order to attract their people. Others are tempted to be content and to keep their people content with a low standard of life and deprecate being righteous overmuch. Others are tempted to take up themes of passing interest of a popular and even sensational type in order to "draw". But all such preaching will be as "chaff" to the "wheat," and if yielded to will bring their own terrible Nemesis to minister and people.

The Rev. J. R. Wood, a well-known Baptist minister in London, once told of a Congregational minister who said he had been long enough at his church, because his people knew all that he could tell them. "How long have you been there?" asked Mr. Wood. "Eight years." "What kind of sermons do you preach? Topical sermons?" "Yes." "You mean you have come to the end of your topics?" "Yes," "Do you do much in your Greek Testament?" inquired Mr. Wood. "No, not I much." "Well," said Mr. Wood, "go into your study and spend an hour with your Greek Testament every morning, and then take to your people on Sunday what I you get out of your Greek Testament during the week, and you will never want for subjects."

III. The Word Powerful. "Is not My word like a fire ... and like a hammer?" When the Word possessed is faithfully proclaimed, it always has the effect suggested by the figures of "fire" and "hammer". The Word, as fire, does its threefold work of burning, warming, and cheering. It consumes the things to be consumed, and for this there is no power to compare with the Word in its destructive influence. It warms the coldness of hearts and lives and makes them glow with life and love.

It cheers the despondent, the sorrowful, the weary, and inspires with joy and courage. The Word, as a hammer, does its twofold work of breaking down and building up. The resistance of the sinful heart is met by the power of the Divine Word. The truth of God is concentrated on the life of man; and by the blessing of the Spirit hard hearts are broken, rebellious hearts are softened, resisting hearts are led to yield. "Is not My word like a hammer?" But the hammer is used to build up as well.

Its work is constructive as well as destructive. The carpenter's hammer is in constant use for building up the materials at hand. So is it with the divine Word; it builds up, it edifies, it produces character, strengthens and holds together the elements of human life as they are fastened together by Divine Grace. These are the results that should be seen in the ministry. The Word is to be mighty in hearts and lives, mighty to the pulling down of sinful strongholds, mighty to the erection of spiritual structures, mighty to the transformation of character and the inspiration of conduct.

To accomplish this we must make much of the Word. We must honour it, believe in it, and show in our proclamation of it that it is to us the very word of the living God. And to make much of it we must be much with it. We must live in it. The Apostles said, "We will give ourselves to the ministry of the Word" (προσκαρτεροῦμεν); i.e. adhere closely, keep ourselves firmly fixed, and never allow anything to divert us from putting this Word in the foremost place of our life. A well-known worker has truly said: - "There are three things, and only three, that are absolutely essential to spiritual health and strength and growth.

These three things are: constant Bible study, constant prayer, and constant effort for the salvation of others. Where these three things are there will be spiritual health, spiritual growth, spiritual strength. When any one of these three things is lacking, there will be spiritual deterioration, spiritual disease, spiritual weakness, spiritual death." Another great teacher of today tells the following: - "There was a great physician in America that had an interview with a patient who was subject to terrific nervous prostration.

He said, "Madam, I want you to go home and study your Bible an hour a day," and he bowed her out without further ceremony. She said, "After all, this prescription does not cost me anything. Suppose I try it." She went home, and she held communion with God for an hour a day, and at the end of a month she was entirely cured. Then she went back to her doctor and said, "I was angry with you, doctor." "Yes," he remarked, "I supposed you would be," and taking down his own Bible from the shelf he said, "Do you see this?"

I read it before every operation, and go to work in the light of God's Word. I read it before visiting my patients, and it is the only thing that keeps me in the strain of my profession and from darkness and disorder. I knew that you needed it, and that it was the only remedy that would meet your case." Nothing can make up for this devotion to the Bible in our ministerial life. It is the secret, the source, and the spring of everything that is vital, useful, blessed, and powerful in Christian character and service.

Section 5. The Prophet's Peril.

There is one fact in the account of the Old Testament prophet which startles and even shocks us. It is the presence and even prominence given to the false prophet almost all through the history. At nearly every stage the curious phenomena are in evidence. The false prophet was arrayed against the true, and it is probably correct to say that the greatest conflict the true prophet had to wage was against the false prophet, and not even against the irreligious element in Israel. The lessons are many, serious, and searching, because *corruptio optimi pessima*. Let us heed them as we contemplate our own ministry.

I. Who the False Prophets were.

There seem to have been two classes of them. One consisted of counterfeit prophets (1 Kings 22), men who for one reason or another found it useful to imitate a good thing. The other class evidently consisted of backsliders (1 Kings 13), men who had been genuine prophets and had fallen away from their high estate.

We may well hope and believe that not many (one would like to say with certainty not any) of the former class are to be found in the ministry today. It is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of men entering the ministry who are 'counterfeit,' who find it serviceable to imitate the real minister. But we pass from these by simply admitting the possibility of their existence. The other class is, we fear, much more likely to be found in the ranks of the clergy, men who started well, with high hopes, earnest spirit, and full determination, but whose fires have gone down, whose ideals have perished, and whose ministry is but a name. The awful, hideous possibility, and even probability, must assuredly be faced. "Ye did run well; what doth hinder you?"

II. What the False Prophets did.

Several charges are made against them. They prophesied "smooth things" rather than "right things" (Isa. 30:10). They yielded to the temptation of saying only what the people liked and desired to hear. They cried "Peace" when there was no peace, and their work was like that of building a wall with untempered mortar (Ezek. 13:10-16). Thus they pandered to the prejudices of their hearers instead of proclaiming the truth of God without fear or favour. They prophesied falsely because the people "loved to have it so" (Jer. 5:31). Further than this, they indulged in flattery and pleased their hearers with personal praise which tended only to self-deceit (Ezek. 12:24). Deepest degradation of all, they did not hesitate to speak falsehood. It is a short and easy step from the preaching of pleasant things to flattery, and from flattery to falsehood. The

flatterer is essentially a "liar," and the terrible charge is made against these false prophets that they spoke lies in the Name of the Lord (Zech. 13:3).

The temptation is a real one to the minister to speak "pleasant things," to pander to the prejudices of his people, whether rich or poor. It is as possible to do it to one class as to the other, for both poor and rich naturally like to have their own particular ideas emphasized and their partialities approved. But from the moment a minister allows himself to depart from the strict line of truth, he is in danger of ending where the false prophets ended. The awfulness of conscious, and still more of unconscious hypocrisy and unreality in the ministry is unspeakable.

III. What the False Prophets were.

Since work is but the expression of life, and conduct the outcome of character, it is a natural and necessary question as to what these prophets really were. Can anything be known of their character and disposition? Several significant hints are found. In some cases they were men given to drink (Isa. 28:7). In other cases they were impure (Jer. 23:11). In still others, covetous (Isa. 56:10, 12; Mic. 3:11). Yet again, some were light and trivial (Zeph. 3:4), while others were insincere and guilty of what we should call plagiarism; "that steal my words from his neighbour" (Jer. 23:30).

This catalogue is serious and solemn. Drunkenness, Impurity, Covetousness, Triviality, Insincerity. But are they impossible in the ministry today? Have we not known, or at any rate heard, of men of whom some of these things are true. Character inevitably expresses itself in conduct and service, and if our work is wrong our life must be wrong also.

IV. Why the False Prophets were what they were.

The explanation was as simple as it was searching. It was due to one cause only; "That prophesy out of their own hearts" (Ezek. 13:2). This, and this only, was the reason, their vision came from within, not from above; from themselves, not from God; from their own heart, not from the mind of God. And when once they began to "prophesy out of their own hearts," the time of the end was not far off. So is it always, and herein lies our greatest danger. Our messages must not be self-made, but God-made; must come from above, not from within; must be the result of listening to the Lord and not to the people. Vox populi is not always and necessarily vox Dei; and certainly if the Word of God is not preeminent in our ministerial life, there will always be the danger of proclaiming that which comes from below instead of above. The Word is at once the substance of our message and the standard of our own life, and the man who keeps in touch with it will never lack something to say, or want power and guidance in saying it. But we must go one step further and deeper, and ask -

V. How did the False Prophets become what they were?

Is it possible to trace the line, or lines, of aberration? Authorities generally tend to trace their declension to the condition and life of the schools of the prophets. They became formal, conventional, accustomed to sacred things and words, and thus became spiritually deteriorated, until at length disaster accrued. This may, or may not be the actual explanation, but it certainly indicates a possibility, if not a strong probability. It has been a proverb that "the shoemaker's wife is the worst shod," and everyone knows the danger of the deadening influence of constant association with religious and spiritual things. If the schools of the prophets were the main cause of the decay and deadness of the life of these men, it points with unerring and forceful meaning to the necessity of the greatest and most prayerful thought in connection with

theological colleges, and all similar places where types of ministry are decided. It should never be forgotten that the tone of a theological college is largely set by the men themselves. Discipline may be good and strong, and the influence of the authorities may help generally; but in the last resort the result depends on the men themselves. A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and a theological college will never be much higher than the tone of the men in it. If, therefore, a man is living an inconsistent life he ought to feel uncomfortable and even miserable in a theological college, and ought not to enter the ministry unless he changes his way and determines to live aright. Theological colleges are not for whitewashing, but for the strengthening of convictions, the deepening of impressions, the clarifying of visions, the purifying of desires, the raising of ideals, and the intensifying of determination to live and labour aright in the ministry.

But the same dangers face us all through our ministry. Constant use of Bible and Prayer Book words, constant association with religious people, constant service in Church affairs tend to spiritual formality, dryness, and even deadness which must assuredly affect the spiritual quality of our ministry if not at once and wholly altered. And herein lies the solemnity for students and clergymen of the Psalmist's words which call us to face these issues with ourselves, and never to rest until we can look up to God and feel perfectly sure that we are not among the false prophets, or even in danger of traveling on the way thither. "Search me, O God, and know my heart try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psa. 139:23-24).

Section 6. The Prophet's Life.

There is one title frequently used of the prophet and probably of no one else: "Man of God." Eight are mentioned by name to whom this is given. Moses, Samuel, David, Shemaiah, Elijah, Elisha (thirteen passages), Igdaliah (Jer. 35), Timothy. Once an angel is called by this name, and several men unnamed are described by it. "Man of God." What does it mean? Just two things. Manliness and Godliness.

I. Manliness.

The prophet was a man of ordinary appearance. He had no special garb to distinguish him from his fellows, no frenzy to mark his attitude and his work. He was just an ordinary man, one among his fellow citizens, not of a separate caste, but raised up of God for the special work (Deut. 18:18). The chief points which marked him were two. (a) He was a man with a message. When God gave him this, he delivered it faithfully (1 Sam. 9:6, 1 Kings 13:1) and fearlessly. Nothing was allowed to hinder the complete and courageous delivery of the Divine Word. With absolute boldness he witnessed to God and His truth. (b) He was a man with a blessing. Not merely a man of words, but deeds. Moses, the Man of God, was able to bless as well as teach (Deut. 33:1), and in like manner Elijah and Elisha carried blessing wherever they went. It is the greatest honour in a man's life that people come to him in their difficulties and trials because they feel that his character is stronger than theirs, his experience riper as a Man of God.

From all this it is clear that a manly man is the truest channel of communication between man and God. It was the uniqueness of Israel as a religion that it exalted manhood in the truest sense of that idea of exaltation. And so today true Christianity conserves and uses the truest, purest, and best in human nature. People will not respect the "cloth" unless there is a man in it, nor the office unless a man fills it. There is no incompatibility, but, quite the contrary, the most perfect congruity between manliness and the ministry. A layman once said that of three ministers he had known, the first was a man, not a minister; the second a minister, not a man; the third was neither man nor minister. [Stalker, p. 165.] A real minister will be

honoured and loved for his manliness and will therefore be surrounded by troops of friends in his congregation who will value, trust, love, and follow him.

II. Godliness.

This is the real foundation of all true manliness, the power of a godly life (1 Tim. 6:11). Such a life will convince of sin (1 Kings 17:18), and convince of the truth (1 Kings 17:24). People will soon find out whether we are in earnest. We cannot deceive them for long. If we are hypocrites, they will know it. They may not tell anybody; they may not even grumble or complain, but they will use us less, come to us less, and value us less in the things of God. As Emerson says, "I cannot hear what you say; what you are thunders so loud." Character is all-powerful.

What is its secret? Very simple, but very searching. (a) It means a true relation to God's Word (2 Tim. 3:16-17). "That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." No one will ever be a Man of God unless he "continues in those things he has learned." (b) It means a true relation to obedience. The Man of God must practice what he preaches. Disobedience is fatal (1 Kings 13:26). (c) It means a true relation to prayer. The Man of God will be a man of prayer (Psa. 90, title). Elijah was a Man of God, and prayer was the prevailing characteristic of his life (1 Kings 18:36-37). Prayer brings us into that fellowship with God (1 Kings 17:1) from which all character springs. Character is power, character is everything. Character makes the man, and as Christ makes the character, the minister as a Man of God is the prime fundamental secret of service. It is only as he is a Man of God that he can have power with men and become a blessing (Gen. 32:28).

And thus "Man of God" is the highest title, the noblest description, the finest testimony. Manly and Godly. Manly because godly, and Godliness expressing itself in Manliness. Given these two elements, the life and work of the ministry glorifies God and blesses Man.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/wh-griffith-thomas/the-ministry-of-the-prophet/>

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