

MEN WHO SPEAK FOR GOD

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, John the Baptist

by

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About the Author

Dr. Henry Bast graduated from Hope College with an A.B. degree in 1930, and from Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, in 1933. Both are educational institutions of the Reformed Church in America. His first pastorate was at the Richmond Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, which he served from 1933 to 1939. He was then called to be college pastor and professor of Bible at Hope College, a position he filled for five years. He left Hope College to serve the Bethany Reformed Church of Grand Rapids as pastor from 1944 to 1956. In 1956 Hope College

conferred upon him the Doctor of Divinity degree. From 1956 to 1963 he taught preaching at Western Theological Seminary as Professor of Practical Theology. In the spring of 1963 Dr. Bast resigned his seminary position to become pastor of Bethany Reformed Church in Grand Rapids for a second time. Dr. Bast also served on numerous Boards and Committees of the Reformed Church, and was President of the General Synod in 1960-61.

During the last 20 years of his active ministry (from 1952 - 1972) Dr. Bast also served as the speaker on the Temple Time (now Words of Hope) broadcast until he was forced to retire due to ill health. Dr. Bast died in 1983. In 1986 Western Seminary established a preaching program in his honor which includes an endowed chair, the Henry Bast Professor of Preaching.

1**ISAIAH: THE VISION OF GOD**

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. — Isaiah 6:1 RSV

THE MEN WHO SPEAK for God whom we are to study in this series of messages are the Old Testament prophets. One of the most important passages in the Bible for the church today is found in the opening statement of the Letter to the Hebrews,

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.

Hebrews 1:1-2

The whole message of the Bible can be summed up in three basic words which convey the substance of this passage: *God has spoken*. This is the foundation of the Christian faith. When the apostolic writer says that God has spoken, he means something more than the fact that God speaks in nature. The Bible teaches us that there is a general revelation of God in nature, in history, and in the conscience of man. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). God has not left Himself without witness. There is a revelation of God in nature and man.

But when the writer of Hebrews says, “God hath spoken through the prophets,” he is thinking of a more direct revelation of God. It is apparent that the Bible means that this is to be taken quite literally. When the Bible says that God speaks or that God has spoken or that God says, it means that He speaks in words.

This basic Christian concept of the origin of the knowledge of God has been widely repudiated in the church today. It was lost in the nineteenth century when men rejected revelation altogether and relied on reason alone. It was partially recovered in the early part of the twentieth century in what was known as the Crisis Theology. New theologians came into the church who saw that reason alone was not enough. Therefore they began to speak once more about revelation, but they gave their own sophisticated definition of it. They made a distinction between revelation as

the communication of truth, which they called propositional revelation and rejected, and revelation as the self-disclosure of God. This has proved to be an utterly inadequate representation of the Biblical doctrine of revelation. It must be said, therefore, that when the Bible says “God has spoken,” it means something more than the revelation of God in nature and something more than a nonverbal, ambiguous disclosure of God. The statement that God has spoken means that revelation is the communication of truth.

I have carefully chosen the tense of the verb in the main title of this series, *Men Who Speak for God*. This is to emphasize the fact that the word God spoke to the prophets is the living Word. It is alive today. We have the infallible record of the word which God spoke through the prophets and in Jesus Christ His Son, and this is why we call the Bible the infallible Word of God. This is a point made by Peter in his second letter:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:16-21

Our first study in this series of messages on the prophets takes us to chapter 6 of the prophecy of Isaiah, which contains one of the most exalted passages in the whole Bible. The chapter can be divided into two parts: first, the account of Isaiah’s vision of God, and second, the response he made to the vision.

The sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah opens with a magnificent vision:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.

Isaiah 6:1

The reference to the death of Uzziah is more than a date in history. Uzziah was a great king who reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. This was a time of prosperity and military power exceeded only by the reign of Solomon, but Uzziah died and now his young son Jotham sat on the throne. These were days of great anxiety, and what Isaiah means when he says that he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the year that King Uzziah died is that he saw something more in this than a succession of kings. He saw in the vision that neither Uzziah nor Jotham was the true king of Israel; the true King of Israel was the Lord God of hosts who sat on the throne.

In these troubled days when men's hearts fail them for fear, when nation rises against nation, when violence and conflict increases within our own nation, we need to remember that the living God is on the throne. He has not abdicated. I learned this lesson well when I was a seminary student in the days of the great depression. The year that I graduated the banks were closed. I had hoped to do graduate work, but all scholarships were wiped out. It was doubtful whether many of us would even get a church to preach in. About that time a man moved into town who started a new restaurant with simple food, simple furnishings, and low prices. The students flocked there. It was about the only place we could afford to eat, but what impresses me most now about those days is the cash register. Just above the line that registered the cash sales, there was a cardboard sign, "God is still on the throne." That simple statement of faith helped bring me through a very difficult time in my life, and in the lives of many others.

Isaiah's vision of the living God on the throne teaches us some very important things about God. The first is the reality of God. Isaiah said, "My eyes have seen the king, the Lord of Hosts." God is not merely a word or a concept or a symbol. When the Bible speaks about God it speaks about the living God. In this vision Isaiah saw the reality of the whole invisible, spiritual world. In this materialistic age, we must remember that reality is greater than that which we can see or touch or handle. There is more to reality than can be measured by sense perception. Heaven is real, God is real, and the angels are real.

The Bible teaches us that God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. This vision of God discloses what we usually call the invisible world — invisible only to our natural senses. Do you remember the story of Elisha, the great prophet who was trapped in Dothan by the Syrian army? Early in the morning his servant rose up and looked at all the hills surrounding Dothan. They were filled with Syrian chariots. The city was completely encircled by the enemy; and in consternation and panic the young man ran to his master and said, "What shall we do?" Elisha was not even disturbed. He said quietly, "Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." Then the prophet prayed and said, "Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he

may see.” The Bible says that “the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17).

Before we can really see God, grasp the reality of God, something must happen to us. Our ears, our eyes, our sight, all our perceptions must be attuned to God. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

The second thing we learn from Isaiah’s vision of God is the majesty of God. He saw the Lord high and lifted up and His train filled the temple. Here we have the revelation of the transcendent greatness of God. He is altogether other than man. God says,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and
my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

God created the world without our aid or our counsel, and He is the ruler of heaven and earth.

The third point to which our attention is directed in the vision is the holiness of God. Above the throne “stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew” (Isa. 1:2). They sang antiphonally, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (v. 3). This is the only place in the Bible where seraphim are mentioned. They are apparently God’s highest created beings. The Hebrew word *seraph* refers to something that is burning and dazzling. This emphasizes the holiness of God. If the highest of the created beings, who have never sinned, had to cover their faces when they stood around the throne of God, what must be said of sinful men? The Bible teaches us that holiness is the fundamental attribute of God. It refers both to moral purity and separation from all that is evil. God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity.

The fourth point of emphasis in the vision is the glory of God. Not only the temple but the whole earth is full of His glory. The vision of the holiness and glory of God is intended to teach us that we can approach Him only with reverence. We are to give unto the Lord the glory due to His name. The great sin of our age is that we have given to man the glory due only to God, and now our confidence in man is being shaken. We talk about the credibility gap. We do not trust each other. This is because we have put man in the place of God. We must go back to the right order. To give unto the Lord the glory due to His name is to recognize God as God — sovereign, holy,

righteous, the one with whom we have to do. The first commandment is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.”

Having examined the vision of God that came to Isaiah in the temple, let us now observe the response he made to the vision. There are three parts to the response. There is first an overwhelming sense of unworthiness. This vision of the holiness and majesty of God stunned the prophet. He said,

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!

Isaiah 6:5

Here we learn one of the important lessons of the Bible. It is only the true knowledge of God that brings men to a sense of sin and unworthiness. When Peter saw that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, he fell down at His feet and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Until we see God in His holiness, we will never see ourselves as guilty, sinful men and women. It is the knowledge of God that produces in man the consciousness of sin, a consciousness which is generally lacking in our day.

This is the reason it is so difficult to preach the gospel. When we preach the wonderful message of salvation, that God freely forgives our sins, that He accepts us in Jesus Christ as His children so that we can call God Father, it makes no impression on the modern man. This is because, being ignorant of God, he is ignorant of himself; and in this ignorance he goes on his way to destruction and death. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “They that are whole have no need of a physician.” The church must once more pattern its preaching and teaching of the gospel after the prophets and apostles. Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Only those who are conscious of their sin and guilt have an ear for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Observe next that after Isaiah’s confession of sin comes the purging or cleaning from sin. This is how it is described:

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.”

Isaiah 6:6-7

This is the good news of the gospel. The confession of sin is followed immediately by the forgiveness of sin:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

The third part of the response to the vision is the call to consecration. After confession and cleansing comes consecration. Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me!’” Cleansed and forgiven, he was ready to serve. We must remember that cleansing always comes before consecration. We cannot enter into the service of the Lord until we have been cleansed from our sins. The great Puritan pastor Richard Baxter said, “A holy calling never saved an unholy man.” Salvation is by grace alone. It can never be merited or earned. Many people who have been in the church all their lives still have a feeling that if they do good for God, He will do good for them. This is the wrong order. We must first confess our sins and be cleansed from them. The guilt must be pardoned. We must become the children of God by faith, and then in that position and from that position we can serve Him.

So cleansed and consecrated, this young prophet of God went out to preach the message of salvation. The substance of his message is found in chapter 55 of his book. I can think of no better way to close this message than by repeating to you the great gospel invitation of this evangelical prophet:

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness.

Isaiah 55:1-2

So I ask you out there in the world living it up while you can, finding no satisfaction or peace or contentment: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Come to Jesus Christ who is the Bread of life. In Him you will find life and peace and joy.

2

JEREMIAH: THE WORD OF THE LORD

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?

Jeremiah 23:28-29 RSV

JEREMIAH HAD FAR AND away the most difficult task God ever assigned to a man. He was called to proclaim the word of God to a people who had rebelled against God. They were so deeply hardened in their sin, so stubbornly set in their resistance to God, that there was no remedy. It was Jeremiah's responsibility to tell these people that judgment was certain and sure. The city of Jerusalem with the temple would be completely destroyed. God had said,

And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

2 Kings 21:13

In carrying out this assignment he faced such hatred and opposition that at one point he cursed the day in which he was born. One of the priceless values of the Book of Jeremiah is that it offers us a keen analysis of the human heart, including the mind and heart of the prophet himself. He so frankly and freely describes his own emotional involvement in his mission that at one point he exclaims,

O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! O that I had in the desert a wayfarers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men.

Jeremiah 9:1-2

But not only was he called to the difficult task of preaching a message of judgment, he was continually plagued in his work by false prophets. This was true of the other prophets also, but none of them were so consistently opposed by the false prophets, and no one so completely exposes them for the frauds that they were as Jeremiah. The false prophets opposing Jeremiah were not like the prophets of Baal, the prophets of a false god. The false prophets of Jeremiah and Isaiah are false prophets of the true God. They claim to speak the word of the Lord, but instead they give their own opinions. They talked about the word of God, the burden of the Lord, they came saying, "Thus says the Lord," but they were faking it. Speaking to these false prophets God said,

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them down their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.

Jeremiah 23:21-22

The Lord God also warns the people:

"Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you': and to every one who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"

Jeremiah 23:16-17

When I read this passage to a friend recently he said, "That sounds as if it came out of the morning newspaper." There are thousands of men today occupying the pulpits of this country who speak their own opinions. If the church is to survive in this country today, it is imperative that we learn once more to distinguish between true and false prophets. "What is the chaff to the wheat?" says the Lord. Just as chaff can be distinguished from the wheat, so the true prophet can be distinguished from the false prophet. In our study of this passage from Jeremiah we will find five characteristics of a true prophet of the living God.

First, a true prophet is called to preach. Jeremiah begins his account of his prophetic work with a description of the call he had from the Lord.

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew

you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah 1:4-5

So the prophet is called to his office by none other than the Lord Himself. Isaiah in the temple, Moses at the burning bush, Amos the herdsman whom the Lord took from following the flocks and said, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel” — all were called to proclaim the word of the Lord.

We must understand that the office of the minister of the Word of God in the Christian church is rooted in the office of the prophet in the Old Testament. Hence the true church has always taught that God calls men to preach. This does not mean that they have to see a visible sign in the sky or hear an audible voice, but there must be a deep inner compulsion that one is called of the Lord to deliver His Word to the people. Calvin and the other Reformers spoke sternly against those who would intrude themselves upon this office. The historic liturgy of the Reformed churches, at the installation of a minister, asks this question, “Do you feel in your heart that you are called of God’s church and therefore, of God Himself, to this holy ministry?”

Only this sense of a call from God will enable a man to preach when he runs into difficulty or faces opposition. Jeremiah was so relentlessly persecuted by false prophets as well as by the rulers, that at one point he thought of giving up his ministry. However, instead of tossing in the towel as so many ministers are doing today, he said,

If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

Jeremiah 20:9

He was compelled to preach. I have always liked the distinction made by a great English preacher in the nineteenth century named Chadwick, who said that he would rather pay to preach than be paid not to preach.

One reason for the sickness of the church today is that we no longer stress the necessity of a call to preach the gospel. Today we recruit men for the ministry. We have made it a profession instead of a calling. Young ministers are trained to do everything but preach. While training is necessary for the ministry, it must be understood that the men to be trained must know that they are called of God to preach the gospel.

The second characteristic of a true prophet and a true minister of the Word of God is that he speaks with authority. He comes saying, "Thus says the Lord." He hears God speak and then he faithfully speaks the Word God gave him. There is a dramatic passage in chapter 37 of the Book of Jeremiah which describes Zedekiah, the young king, in a private interview with the prophet in the palace just before the fall of Jerusalem. The frightened young king asks, "Is there any word from the LORD?" The prophet answers, "There is" (v. 17).

So there are millions in our day who are anxiously asking, "Is there any word from the Lord?" and it is our obligation as true ministers of the Word of God to say, "There is." But someone says, "Even if those ancient men did actually hear the word of God so that they could speak with authority, how can we hear it today?" The answer is that we find that word in the Bible. The revelation that God made of Himself to the prophets of the Old Testament is not limited to them. The Word of God endures forever. It is always true. The word spoken audibly to the prophets was committed to writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we have the authentic Word of God in the Bible. This is why we must preach from the Bible if we would preach the truth.

But someone says, "This will not work in our day. People will not listen if you come saying, 'Thus says the Lord.' An authoritative approach to religion turns them off." I would like to answer these objections with one contemporary example to show that the objectors are wrong. It is the preaching of Billy Graham. Recently I watched a telecast of one of Billy Graham's meetings from last summer's Chicago Crusade. That night Billy preached on the Ten Commandments, all ten of them in one sermon. He quoted the commandments, explained them, and applied them, right down the line from one to ten. When he got to the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," there was no mincing of words. There were no concessions to permissiveness. Billy's formula, the Bible says, is the formula of the prophets, "Thus says the Lord." This dedicated, talented preacher speaks to more people than any preacher in our time and he does it with the authority of the Word of God.

The third characteristic of true prophetic preaching is found in the declaration of the judgment of God on unrepentant sinners. This is the missing note in today's preaching. When Paul expounds the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Letter to the Romans, he begins with judgment. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness." In the Bible Judgment Day is real, and the gathering clouds around us should indicate how near it may be for all of us today. False prophets can be detected in that they do not speak of judgment. They say, "It is well, it is well," when it is not well. "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14).

In Paul's second Letter to Timothy there is a prediction of the kind of preaching there will be in the last days.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4

So God's word to His preachers, in both the Old and New Testament is:

Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.

2 Timothy 4:2

The fourth distinguishing mark of the true prophet is that the message of salvation is always directed to the individual. The message of the gospel, in the Old Testament as well as the New, is primarily concerned with the individual's relation to God. This is profoundly set forth in Jeremiah's doctrine of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). This also is largely missing in today's preaching. Paul sums up the substance of the Bible when he says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). Paul immediately adds a note declaring that this is the message Christ's true ambassadors are called to preach (2 Cor. 5:20).

The fifth distinguishing mark of the true prophet is that the Word of God has power. The Word of God, under the preaching of Jeremiah and every true prophet, is directed at the human heart, which is hardened by sin and rebellion against God. But the Word of God has power to break that heart and to humble it. The words of men falling on the hardened hearts of sinners are like Ping-Pong balls bouncing off the surface of the table, but God's Word is like a hammer. The Lord Himself says, "Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29).

This power of the Word of God to break the human heart has been demonstrated in history again and again. It was demonstrated in a wonderful way, first of all, at Pentecost. As Peter preached the gospel to the men who had crucified Jesus, calling them to repentance, they exclaimed, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

When George Whitefield preached the gospel in the days of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, the hearts of sinners were broken as thousands came to Christ in tears of repentance and faith. In his Journal, Whitefield tells the story of a man who came to hear him preach in order to attack him. It was an outdoor meeting. The man had his pocket filled with stones. He pressed through the crowd to get within range of Whitefield's head. But as he made his way forward slowly, he began to listen. Then one by one the stones came out of his pocket and fell to the ground. After the meeting was over, this man went to Whitefield and said, "I came here to break your head; but God, through your preaching, has broken my heart." In the same period John Nelson says of Wesley's preaching, "My breast beat like the pendulum of a clock, and when he spoke I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me."

I close today with a powerful passage from the fifth chapter of the Book of Jeremiah in which the prophet denounces the sin and rebellion of God's people. They will not repent; they ignore the word of the Lord. They are secure in their sins. They do not think of judgment. This is Jeremiah's final appeal to these people.

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?

Jeremiah 5:30-31

The matter of the authenticity of the Word of God is not an academic question. It is not a question that is to be discussed only in the classrooms and lecture halls of seminaries, colleges, and universities where scholars sit in judgment on the Word of God. The Word of God is alive. God says, "Behold, I have set before you life and death, choose life." Have you chosen life? Have you confessed Christ as your Savior? If not, what will you do when the end comes?

3

EZEKIEL: A PROPHET'S RESPONSIBILITY

So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

Ezekiel 33:7 RSV

THE OFFICE AND FUNCTION of a prophet is described in the Bible in several graphic figures. Perhaps the most familiar is the figure of the shepherd watching over the flock and leading the sheep out to pasture. It is from this figure of the office that we derive the word *pastor*. A minister serving a congregation is a shepherd or pastor to the people. The shepherd figure is also found in chapter 34 of Ezekiel, where the Lord denounces the corrupt religious leaders as false shepherds.

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

Ezekiel 34:1-2

The prophet is also described as a herald, one who proclaims good news. In chapter 40 of Isaiah, God says:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

Isaiah 40:9

It is from this aspect of the work of a prophet that we speak of a minister as a preacher of the Word of God. If he is a true preacher, he proclaims the Word of God and he does not express his own opinions.

But a prophet is not only a shepherd who feeds the flock or a herald who announces the good news. We learn from Ezekiel that a prophet is also a watchman. This introduces us to another aspect of the office of the minister of the Word of God. In this message we will discuss the question: What does the figure of the watchman teach us about the function of a prophet and consequently of a minister of the Word of God?

Let us begin by observing that the figure of the watchman confronts us with the responsibility of a prophet. God says to His servant Ezekiel, “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.”

We will observe how this teaches us the solemn responsibility of a prophet when we recall what the duty of the watchman was in ancient Israel. Ancient cities were defended primarily by heavy walls which completely encircled the city, and somewhere on top of the wall was the tower in which the watchman stood. It was his duty to announce the approach of the enemy and warn the men in the city. You may recall how David, in the rebellion of Absalom, sat in the gate at Mahanaim while the watchman stood in the tower waiting for news of the outcome of the battle.

Perhaps the most dramatic account of a watchman in action is found in the Book of 2 Kings. Joram, king of Israel, had been wounded in the war with the Syrians and he went to the city of Jezreel to recover from his wounds. One day when the watchman was standing in the tower in Jezreel he saw the company of Jehu coming toward the city and he called down, “I see a cloud of dust.” The king ordered that a horseman be sent to meet the company and ask, “Is it peace?” They waited for some time and the watchman reported, “The messenger reached them but he is not coming back.”

The king ordered a second messenger to go out to meet the company and once more the watchman reported, “He has reached the company but he is not coming back. And the driving is like the driving of Jehu, the son of Nimshi; for he drives furiously.” This report stirred Joram to action but he was too late; his forces were routed and he was killed in the battle. This is a dramatic example of a watchman who did his duty. He reported the approach of the enemy step by step, but the king was slow to respond and he did not take action until it was too late.

So we learn from the Book of Ezekiel that a prophet is a spiritual watchman. It is his responsibility to watch over the people and to warn them if they go in the wrong way. This solemn responsibility is described for us in a very important passage in the Book of Ezekiel. God says:

If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Ezekiel 33:8-9

In the same vein God said to Isaiah, “Say unto the righteous it shall be well with them, and unto the wicked it shall be ill with them.” This aspect of the warning element in the ministry of the word of God is not limited to the Old Testament. When Paul spoke to the elders of the church of Ephesus, he said,

Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.

Acts 20:28

The warning note in the ministry of the word of God distinguishes the true prophet from the false prophet. The false prophet always says, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. Jesus, the great prophet, who was moved with compassion when He saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, called the people graciously and lovingly to come to Him for rest and peace; but as a true watchman He also declared: “Except you repent you shall all likewise perish.”

Having considered the prophet’s responsibility, let us now observe what is the prophet’s message. We have seen that it is the solemn responsibility and duty of the watchman to warn the wicked of their destiny. But this does not mean that the prophet’s message is a message of judgment only, for the Old Testament prophets proclaimed the love of God in all its fullness and power. God says to His people, through the prophet Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3). There is a moving passage in Hosea where God says:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender.

Hosea 11:8

The prophet’s message of the love and grace of God is fully expounded by Ezekiel in chapter 36 of his prophecy, which contains all the promises of the gospel.

There is a promise of cleansing from sin:

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you” (v. 25).

There is the gospel promise of a new heart:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (v. 26).

There is the promise of the Holy Spirit:

“And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (v. 27).

There is the ultimate promise of God which underlines the whole message of the Bible:

“You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (v. 28).

From this study of Ezekiel we have learned that it is the prophet’s responsibility to declare the whole counsel of God to the people. Let us now observe how the prophet teaches us that the hearer is also responsible for what he does with the Word of God that is preached to him. God said to Ezekiel, “If you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.” Then He added, “But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.”

If the Old Testament people were held responsible for rejecting the word of God as it came to them through the prophets, how much more are we accountable since we have the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We know that Christ was crucified for our sins and that He rose again for our justification. We know that the great transaction is done. God has reconciled us to Himself in Jesus Christ by His death on the cross. How then do we dare continue in our sin without repentance and faith when we have the full light of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. This is the way one of the apostolic preachers put it to the people in the first century:

Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Hebrews 2:1-3

From this analysis of the message of the prophet Ezekiel, let us now observe how the message was received. In spite of the fact that the people heard God's wonderful promise of a new heart and cleansing from sin and His gracious offer to make them His people, they would not listen. They rejected the message. This was generally true of Israel's attitude toward the word of God as it came to them through all the prophets. Stephen in his brilliant defense before the Sanhedrin said:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.

Acts 7:51-52

Although there was general opposition to the message of all the prophets, they were not all treated in the same way. Jeremiah, who was a contemporary of Ezekiel, preached the word of God in the period immediately preceding the fall of Jerusalem and faced persecution, hatred, and violence all his life. On the other hand, Ezekiel lived a peaceful life when he preached in the same period to the exiles in Babylon. He never faced persecution or violence, but the people still rejected the message.

There is a full description of the preaching ministry of Ezekiel in Babylon which is the nearest thing in the Bible to a minister preaching to a congregation today. I will read this account of the preaching of Ezekiel from chapter 33 of his book.

As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, "Come, and hear what the word is that comes forth from the LORD." And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain. And, lo, you are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes — and come it will! — then they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Ezekiel 33:30-33

We see how close this comes to our condition when we observe the reason for the rejection. "Their heart is set on their gain." In the materialism of Babylon they had lost all their interest in the word of God. They looked upon worship as entertainment. They praised the performer. They

talked about his talents, but they went away without any commitment to the word of the Lord. “For they hear what you say but they will not do it.” Isaiah describes the spiritual condition of Israel in Babylon graphically in chapter 55 of his book.

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness.

Isaiah 55:1-2

This teaches us once more that the only right response to the Word of God is repentance. John the Baptist came preaching the gospel of God, saying, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This theme of repentance rings through all the Book of Ezekiel. God pleads with His people through the word of the prophet.

As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Ezekiel 33:11

Here is the alternative we always face when we hear the Word of God preached. It is turn or die. Or in Spurgeon’s blunt phrase, “Turn or burn.” It is repent and believe the gospel and be saved, or it is reject the gospel and be lost.

4

DANIEL: THE PREDICTIONS OF A PROPHET

The king said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery."

Daniel 2:47 RSV

THE BOOK OF Daniel is a fascinating book. It has been a favorite with children for generations because it contains some of the most exciting stories in the Bible. Daniel refusing to defile himself at the king's table; Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, thrown into the fiery furnace; Daniel in the lions' den; and Daniel at the feast of Belshazzar — stories such as these have made the Book of Daniel a favorite for generations of children brought up in Christian homes.

But the Book of Daniel is also one of the most profound books in the Bible. It contains elaborate and detailed prophecies of the future. It gives us a sweeping survey of history. Harold Lindsell, in Harper's Study Bible, says: "No comprehensive Christian world view can be developed without its use. Daniel's panoramic vision includes the period of Gentile ascendancy after Calvary and sweeps on to the end of the age."

Daniel exercised his office of prophet in a unique manner. Most of the prophets were preachers; that is, they proclaimed the word of the Lord to the people. We have observed this in our studies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and it is equally true of the other prophets. Daniel, however, was not a preacher but a statesman. In the sixth century B.C., he counseled the great and mighty monarchs of the Babylonian and Persian empires. He held high positions in government under the rulers of these kingdoms and at one time was the governor of a third part of the Babylonian kingdom. A prophet is a man who speaks for God, and Daniel fulfilled that function for over sixty years when he brought the word of God to the rulers of the great kingdoms of the ancient world.

In our study of the Book of Daniel, we will begin by observing the account it gives of the making of a prophet. Many of the prophets tell us about their call to the office, but in the Book of Daniel we have more than that. We have a full account of a man's preparation for the office. Daniel was one of several young men of royal blood who were carried away into captivity into Babylon in one of the early deportations from Jerusalem to Babylon.

It was the practice of the Babylonian rulers to take from the captives of the nations which they conquered the most promising young men, usually of noble family, to train them to serve in the new kingdom. The young men set aside for such training were very young, usually in their early teens. So we find Daniel and his friends in Babylon, very young, separated from their parents and friends, receiving special training for service to the king of Babylon. In order to completely obliterate — even in their minds — all remembrance of their God, their names were changed. Daniel's name, which means "God will judge," was changed to Belteshazzar, which means "May Bel, the god of Babylon, protect your life."

Part of the training of these young men for service in the kingdom of Babylon consisted in eating at the king's table. All the young men from all the conquered kingdoms were required to eat at the same table with the food provided by the king. But Daniel purposed in his heart not to eat at the king's table. For a young man in his early teens this was a step of enormous courage, but he used tact and judgment in carrying out his purpose. He went to the prince of the eunuchs and asked for the privilege of being freed from the requirement, suggesting a test in which Daniel and his friends would give up eating the rich food of Babylon for ten days. Daniel and his friends passed the test, were blessed by God, and stood head and shoulders above all the other trainees.

A number of reasons have been suggested why Daniel would not eat at the king's table. For one thing, meat that was forbidden by the Jewish law would be served; and he was determined to be obedient to the law of God. It also involved the problem of eating food sacrificed to idols, which from Daniel's point of view would be to recognize the idolatry of Babylon. But there was another reason for refusing to eat at the king's table. Calvin says it was not merely the food but the company to which Daniel objected. Commenting on Calvin, Alexander Whyte says: "It was the company at the king's table; it was the idolatry, and the self-indulgence, and the indecency, and the riot among the young men at the palace that made Daniel determined that it would be both far easier and far safer to abstain altogether from the beginning."

This introduces us to the teaching in the Bible about the separation of the believer from the world. The New Testament teaches us that there is a sense in which every Christian must be

separated from the world. This is found in the admonitions of Paul to the early churches, and in a classic statement in the Letter of James.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

James 1:27

The Christian religion is a religion of action. We are to visit the fatherless and the widows and to care for the poor, but it is also a religion of separation. We of course cannot completely separate ourselves from the world. We must work in the world, we must live in the world; and if we are to win men and women to Christ we must have contact with the world. But there is still a sense in which we are separated from the world. The old formula "In the world but not of the world" is perhaps the best. Daniel's strength of character and his powerful witness to God in an idolatrous country, came from the fact that early in his life he determined to disassociate himself from all the idolatry and immorality of Babylon.

Here, then, we have the account of the making of a prophet. A captive of war carried away to a distant idolatrous country in his early teens, his name changed, often all alone, remained faithful and true to the God after whom he was named and in whom he believed. Daniel is an excellent example for the Christian youth of our day. In the universities, in a permissive society, in a culture which has rejected the living God, they face the same immorality, pollution, and decay Daniel did in his world. Let me urge you now as you listen to this broadcast to follow the example of Daniel.

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone.
Dare to have a purpose firm,
Dare to make it known.

Let us now direct our attention to the description we find in the Book of Daniel of the character of a prophet. After the opening chapter of the book, which gives us the story of his youth and his faithfulness to God, we are introduced to Daniel as a mature man and leader in the nation. We know more about Daniel than we do any other prophet in the Bible, and we have substantial material to make a brief analysis of the character of this great man of God.

First, he was a man of integrity, a man of principle. He did not make his decisions on the basis of expediency but on the principles of his faith. He knew the difference between right and wrong.

The greatest testimony to his character comes from his enemies who became jealous of Daniel. This Hebrew captive was now far above many native Babylonians in the government, and this prompted his jealous enemies to plot his destruction. As they schemed together what charge they would bring against him, they came to the conclusion that they would never find a complaint against his character except in the practice of his religion. Daniel showed no partiality in judgment. He was not open to bribes. He was honest, truthful, upright, and loyal.

Men of such integrity in high office are a rarity even in Christian nations, but we can thank God that they are not extinct. A few weeks ago this nation laid aside a great American and a great statesman, J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI. He was a man of character. He was not ashamed of his faith and openly witnessed for Jesus Christ. At his death he was accorded the highest honors any civilian can receive in this nation. The president of the United States delivered the eulogy and spoke of his character and integrity. At his death our attention was directed to the fact that the Federal Bureau of Investigation which he headed is one of the few governmental agencies in which there is no corruption.

Not only was Daniel a man of integrity, honest, and upright, he was also winsome. Three times in the book he is called Daniel, the greatly beloved. He was gracious and considerate, but at the same time refused to compromise principles. Daniel was also a man of great courage. He not only showed physical courage when his life was in danger many times; he showed great moral courage. He stood before Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and faithfully delivered the word of judgment that came from the Lord to these kings, even though it could have cost him his life.

We do not have time to mention all the outstanding qualities in the character of Daniel, but I will mention one more even if I do it only briefly. Daniel was a man of prayer. He prayed in the crises of his life, and he asked others to join him in prayer that they might seek God's will and protection and blessing. He interceded for his people. I can only mention his practice of private prayer as described in the sixth chapter, or the great prayer of intercession he offered for the people in the ninth chapter. If you haven't read it lately, let me urge you to turn to the ninth chapter of Daniel and read the great intercessory prayer which he offers for his people, confessing their sin and asking God not to forsake them. We could stand a lot of praying like that in America today.

Let us now turn to the main section of the Book of Daniel, which contains the predictions of a prophet. I have already called your attention in this series of messages on the prophets, to the fact that the predictive element in prophecy is completely rejected by the liberal critics of the Bible. They have coined their own definition of prophecy. It is not foretelling but forth telling.

This is a half-truth. Prophecy is certainly forth telling — that is, proclaiming the word of God. The main function of the prophet is to preach the word of God to the people. Daniel was a true prophet in this sense because he spoke the word of God to the rulers of nations. But prophecy is also foretelling. The Bible teaches us that the essence of all prophecy is foretelling the future. It began in the Garden of Eden after man had sinned and rebelled against the Lord. In the Garden, God spoke to the serpent and said,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Genesis 3:15

In fact, in the Bible the test of true prophecy is whether or not the predictions of the prophet come true. This is the way a true prophet is distinguished from a false prophet.

And if you say in your heart, “How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?” — when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22

Predictive prophecy is the very warp and woof of the Bible. The central theme of the Old Testament is the coming of Christ predicted to the smallest details by the prophets. The main section of the Book of Daniel deals with dreams and visions through which the prophet foretells the coming of Christ. I will take one such representative dream from the book in order to illustrate the teachings of Daniel on the predictions of the future.

The second chapter of the Book of Daniel gives a full account of one such prophetic dream, in which Nebuchadnezzar saw a great image. The image was mighty and of exceeding brightness, frightening in appearance. The head was of fine gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron and the feet partly iron and partly clay. As the king stared at the image, a stone suddenly appeared which was cut out by no human hands. This stone rolled toward the image, hit it at the base, and smashed it to pieces. The image broke into pieces so small that the wind came and blew them away so that not a trace of the image could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. This was the dream.

God made the dream known to Daniel and gave him this interpretation of it. The four parts of the image are four empires. The first is the Babylonian kingdom under Nebuchadnezzar, which in Daniel's day was at the height of its power. This is the head of gold. By the direct inspiration of God Daniel then went on to interpret the rest of the dream, which dealt with the future. The breast and arms of silver represent the kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians under the rule of Darius and Cyrus. The belly and thighs of bronze represent the Greek kingdoms which followed the Persian empire in history. The legs of iron represent the Roman kingdoms which ruled the world at the time of the coming of Christ. Here, then, is one of the most detailed and specific prophecies in the whole Bible. It speaks not only of one isolated event, but it gives us the revelation of the whole movement of history from the sixth century B.C. to the coming of Christ.

This prediction is so definite, so specific, so sweeping in its view of future events that the radical critics, rejecting predictive prophecy, have dated the book in the second century before Christ and therefore after the events occurred. One contemporary liberal critic is frank enough to admit that one reason he really holds to the late date is because he does not believe in predictive prophecy.

It may be well to pause here for a moment to observe what has happened to such speculative studies of the Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls have furnished evidence that make the late date of Daniel highly improbable. A few weeks ago *TIME* magazine reported an important discovery from the Dead Sea Scrolls which affect the New Testament. A Roman Catholic Biblical scholar studying the Dead Sea Scrolls found a fragment of the Gospel of Mark that was dated about A.D. 50 and could be as early as A.D. 35. When we remember that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are usually dated about A.D.30, we can see how close this manuscript brings us to the actual publication of the Gospel of Mark. *TIME* magazine sees this also and comments that for scholars the findings could mean the end of some cherished theories in Biblical interpretation. One Biblical researcher states, "This means that seven tons of German scholarship may now be consigned to the flames." So we see that God who protected Daniel in the lions' den is also able to preserve and defend His Book in the critics' den.

It must not be supposed however that our faith rests on such archaeological discoveries. Evangelical Christians have always accepted the Book of Daniel on internal evidence. It claims to be written by Daniel, who prophesied from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian to Cyrus the Persian. But it is encouraging to see to what extent archaeological discoveries support the view of those who take the book at face value.

In the interpretation of the dream we must understand that the stone cut out without human hands is Jesus Christ. The great mountain into which the stone grew is the kingdom of God established by Christ. This is the interpretation.

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever.

Daniel 2:44

All evangelicals are agreed on this. Not all are agreed on the ten toes and what they mean. It is certain that the Book of Daniel speaks not only of the first coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God, but the visions of Daniel also speak of the second coming of Christ. In this message we limit ourselves to the certainty of the fact that Daniel foretells the coming of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom.

In these troubled days we need to feed our souls on the sure prophecies of the Bible. To reject prophecy is not only to reject miracles, but also the foreknowledge and providence of God, and ultimately the sovereignty of God. The God we know in Jesus Christ who has revealed Himself in Scripture sees the end from the beginning. After the interpretation of the dream, the king said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery" (Dan. 2:47).

In these days, when the kingdoms of our world are being shaken to their foundations, let those of us who know Jesus Christ lift up our heads; for His coming is drawing near. We need not fear. In Jesus Christ we have received the kingdom which cannot be shaken but will remain forever. Let those of us who know Christ thank God that we belong to Him, that we are members of a kingdom that can never be moved. But let us also recognize our obligation to proclaim the gospel of Christ to all men so that they too may enter the kingdom.

I close with a word to those of you who do not know Christ. He is God's answer not only to the problems of the nations, but to your problems. He Himself invites you to come to Him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:28-29

5

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:
THE GREATNESS OF A PROPHET**

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee." I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Luke 7:26-28 RSV

THIS MAGNIFICENT TRIBUTE JESUS gave to John the Baptist not only singles him out as the greatest of the prophets, but it is also a tribute to all true prophets. The prophet was the most important man in the old dispensation in Israel. He was the man who brought the word of the Lord not only to the people, but also to the rulers of the nation. He stood above the king, and the true kings of Israel recognized this. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered to cover up the adultery, Nathan, the prophet, was sent of the Lord to David to rebuke him for his sin and pronounce God's judgment upon it. When Eli, the high priest, failed to discipline his sons for their scandalous conduct in the priesthood, God sent a prophet to pronounce judgment upon him with this message,

Therefore the Lord the God of Israel declares: "I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me for ever"; but now the Lord declares: "Far be it from me; for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming, when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house."

1 Samuel 2:30-31

When Jesus spoke of John saying, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John," He was speaking of John as a prophet. Since all of the prophets were great men of God

holding the highest office in the land, let us consider today in what sense John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets.

The first measure of the greatness of John the Baptist is in his position. He stood in the succession of the Old Testament prophets. The key to the understanding of Jesus' statement comes in the second part of the sentence. "He that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John." It is obvious from this that Jesus is using a specific measure of greatness when He speaks about John the Baptist. This is the nearness of John to the coming of Jesus Christ.

In the long succession of prophets God sent to His people, John was the last because he actually introduced the Messiah to the nation. There is a progressive revelation of the coming of Christ in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Prophecy began in the garden of Eden. After the first man had fallen in sin and disobedience, God said to the serpent who had beguiled him,

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15

From that first glimmer of the light of the gospel in the Bible, we see that it ever grows brighter through the succession of prophets who speak of the coming of Christ. The last word of the Old Testament is the word of the Lord to Malachi, the prophet, who said:

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

All the prophets said, "He is coming"; John said, "He is here." He introduced Jesus to the nation as the Messiah: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

We must remember that although John saw Christ, spoke to Him, baptized Him, and introduced Him to the people, he did not see Christ crucified and risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. This explains Jesus' statement in His tribute to John the Baptist. "But he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." John the Baptist belongs properly to the Old Testament prophets. He was the forerunner, but he did not see Christ in the fullness of His resurrection and glorification. The difference between the greatness of John and the greatness of the least in the

kingdom of God is the difference between anticipation and realization. John was still on the other side of Calvary and the empty tomb. We are on this side of the cross and the resurrection. We have the full and final revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.

Hebrews 1:1-2

The newest believer in the church today knows more about Jesus Christ than John did.

The second measure of the greatness of John the Baptist as a prophet is in his preaching. He had a special mission to perform, and he accomplished it by preaching. The preaching of John the Baptist shook the nation. He drew such enormous crowds to the wilderness where he preached, that the Jewish leaders were disturbed and sent priests to John asking, "Who are you?" He said, "I am not the Christ." As they continued to press the question, "Who are you? What do you say about yourself?" John answered: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

From this we can see the importance of preaching. Preaching is downgraded in our day, and in some areas of the church it has been completely abandoned. Even in some evangelical circles the primacy of preaching is questioned. When I talk to college and seminary students who are preparing for the ministry and the subject gets around to preaching, they ask me, "But why is preaching so important? Are there not other things we can do?"

This is the issue today and those of us who hold responsible positions in the church must be able to face it. Why is preaching so important? For one thing, the whole New Testament sets forth the primacy of preaching. I have already indicated that John the Baptist carried out his mission by preaching. The Gospels tell us the same thing about Jesus. When Mark describes the beginning of the public ministry of Christ, he says,

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel!"

Mark 1:14-15

When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles at Pentecost, Peter preached the gospel to the throngs gathered in Jerusalem. When they cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter answered,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:38

When Paul and the other apostles carried out the great commission of Christ, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,” they were obeying Him. The summary of the ministry of Paul found at the end of the Book of Acts indicates that preaching was the foremost apostolic activity. “And he lived there in Rome two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered” (Acts 28:30- 31).

It must be understood that the preaching spoken of in the New Testament is the proclamation of the Word of God and not the opinions of men. This was the great recovery that was made in the Reformation. Hugh Latimer was speaking for all the Reformers when he said, “Take away preaching and you take away salvation.” If you need a text to support that, let me give you Romans 10:17, “So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (KJV).

The Gospels not only teach us that John carried out his mission primarily by preaching, but they also give us a specimen of his preaching. The theme of his preaching was repentance. The nation had fallen away from God. The religious leaders were corrupt and, except for a tiny minority, the people had forgotten God. John exposed the sin of his age. He did not mince his words. When he saw the corrupt religious leaders coming to hear him preach, he said:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Luke 3:7-9

Sin is the missing note in much of today’s preaching, but one hears echoes of it in very strange places. I talked recently with a veteran missionary to China who had been spending four months in the Far East visiting his old friends, Christians who had been driven from China by the Communist invasion. In the course of the conversation, he quoted a saying of Mao Tse-tung. The Chinese leader said, “The greatest hindrance to the full establishment of the People’s Republic in China is original sin. Most people are motivated by self-interest.” He, of course, had a different

solution to the problem. He said the only solution is for the people to completely commit themselves to the state.

At any rate, here is a shrewd old atheist who understands the problem of man better than many contemporary theologians. There is no doctrine of the historic Christian faith so widely denied in the church today as the doctrine of original sin. Until we recognize the fact of the depravity of human nature as it is taught in the Bible, we will never see our desperate need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us that the heart of man is utterly corrupt, and it is only the Word of God moving through the power of the Holy Spirit that can change it.

The third measure of the greatness of John the Baptist is his unwavering loyalty to the Word of God. After John was put in prison he sent two messengers to Jesus with a question, “Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?” Jesus answered the messengers in such a way that John would understand that Jesus was really the Messiah. Then He turned to the multitude and delivered a great eulogy on John the Baptist. He said,

What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

Luke 7:24-26

John was not a reed shaken by the wind. He was not weak and vacillating. He was not a man who yielded to popular opinion. He was not one who always went with the wind and the tide. He came with a word from God and he delivered it, even at the cost of his life. It was because he dared to stand up before the king Antipas and his wife Herodias and rebuked the adultery in which they lived, that he was imprisoned. He was a prophet, a great prophet, because he came with the word from the Lord and he delivered it exactly as God gave it to him. He not only spoke the word of the Lord to the rulers in their corruption and wickedness; but he also delivered it to the people, saying, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

The fourth measure of greatness in the character of John the Baptist is his humility. We have already observed that it was his mission to introduce Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. He did this preaching to enormous crowds, but when Jesus began to preach He drew the crowds instead of John. This disturbed the disciples of John and they came and complained to their master. They said, “Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him” (John 3:26). John’s answer is magnificent.

You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:28-30

His humility is set forth, first of all, in the figure of the friend of the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom was roughly equivalent to the best man in a wedding today, only in Biblical days the friend of the bridegroom had more responsibility. He had to make preparation for the entire wedding. We know that the bridegroom is Christ and that John is the friend of the bridegroom, and as such he truly rejoiced with the bridegroom in His marriage. The point is that he was not merely willing that he should decrease and Christ increase, and that he would bear this as his lot in life. The point is that he actually rejoiced in the growth and greatness of Jesus Christ. The popular acceptance of Jesus was John's great joy; and now that he sees Christ accepted, his joy is full. "He must increase and I must decrease."

Here we see how far John the Baptist rises above his disciples. They were jealous for their master, but there wasn't a trace of jealousy in John. He rejoiced to see Christ increase. We find this same jealousy and envy in the disciples of Jesus. Just before the institution of the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room, they were quarreling as to who would be greatest in the kingdom of God. As we look at the church in our day, we will have to admit that things have changed very little since the days of the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus. Envy and jealousy mar our witness for Christ.

Someone has said,

It takes more grace than I can tell,
To play the second fiddle well.

It is time for all of us to ask ourselves: Where do we put the work of Jesus Christ? Is it self first or Christ first? Are we glad to see the kingdom of God advance even where we have no hand in it? Do we rejoice in the success of other denominations or other groups? Do we thank God for the lay groups that are rising in our day, winning people to Christ by the thousands? These are the questions that we must answer. When John Wesley first began to preach, he was such a prim little churchman exalting the church of England above everything else, that he said he would rather see a sinner lost in the church than saved outside of it. But when Wesley was converted, when his heart was warmed by the gospel of Christ, he made a covenant with God as follows:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth let it be ratified in heaven.

Wesley used his covenant among his Methodist societies for many years, and it explains as much as anything else the tremendous power of that movement. It is the power of the humble. The Bible tells us that God resists the proud and gives His grace to the humble. He does not work with the proud; He works against them. When we learn that the cause is bigger than anyone person involved in it, we will again become channels of the power of God. ■