

EDITORIAL

Prophetic Succession

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It must come as a real shock to ministers of non-episcopal churches that they cannot participate in the “apostolic succession”—and apostolic succession seems to be so important in some circles. In the recent merger talks between the Church of England and British Methodism, this was a matter of real concern to the Anglicans: that Methodist ministers should have Episcopal hands laid upon them, thus assuring “apostolic succession.”

But there is another “succession” which is vitally more significant; that of prophetic succession. No more noble trust is committed to Christian ministers than that of being God’s prophet. One fears that our modern concern for a beautiful worship center in the sanctuary to displace the central pulpit is only one expression of the diminishing emphasis on preaching. In tones of humility we are told that the preacher is not to be in the “limelight”; he must be out of the center that the focus might be on God. Yet the prophets of both the Old and New Testaments were in the center of activity without destroying a theocentric or Christocentric emphasis. The centrality of God and His Son was the heart of the preaching and needed no stained glass windows to “create an impression.” Perhaps our practice suffers from our misconception of the prophet.

The Greek term *προφήτης* (from *προ* - *φημι*) is not difficult to analyze. It means “one who speaks forth,” with the special religious meaning, “one who speaks for a god and interprets his will to man” (Liddell & Scott). The etymology of the Hebrew term *navi*’ is not so apparent. Some scholars think it is from the Hebrew word meaning “to boil, to pour”, indicating the ecstatic practices of the prophet. Some feel that the word derives from Akkadian, indicating that the prophet is “one who is called” (passive) or “one who calls or proclaims” (active). Whatever its etymology, the first usage of the term *navi*’ in the Bible demonstrates the function of the prophet:

And the Lord said to Moses, “See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land (Ex. 7:1-2, R.S.V.).

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As Aaron was a prophet for Moses to speak Moses' word to Pharaoh, the prophet of God is one who speaks for God. As in Greek usage, he interprets the will of God to man.

Anyone who would be a part of the *prophetic succession* ought to be aware of his predecessors and the principles which obtained in their ministries. There are at least three primary principles, and none more vital than the first: a *conscious identification* as a prophet. He must be aware of his calling.

One is impressed by the testimonies of the biblical prophets. Amos declares: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the Lord took me. . . and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" (7:14-15). Isaiah's words were later to be read by the Son of God to the synagogue in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach. . ." (61:1). Jeremiah's compulsion to preach is reflected in his forthright confession: "I said, 'I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name.' But his word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones and I could not refrain" (20:19). Paralleling these Old Testament prophets is Paul's understanding of Jesus' instruction to him: ". . . rise, and stand upon your feet: for I have appeared unto you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of these things which you have seen, and of those in which I will appear unto you" (Acts 26:16).

This conscious identification as a prophet is not to be confused with egotism and its offensive concomitants. Rather, its positive contribution shares largely in producing God's man for any hour. While we may not express ourselves as Jeremiah or have such an astounding experience as Paul, yet the prophet must identify, for this identification gives authenticity to his role. To speak for God becomes the ambition of his life; all else is secondary. To speak for God is his assignment; any other appointment is subordinate. But most importantly, it is precisely this conscious identification which gives authority to his speaking. He speaks not for himself; not in his name nor in the name of any other, man or institution; he speaks for God. One readily understands Moses' hesitancy: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" (Ex. 3:11). Who indeed is any man? But he to whom God says "now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" has authority to preach!

There must also be *complete identification with the preaching*. Though the modern prophet might find Isaiah's naming of his children important to the interpretation of his message, he is hardly likely to "go and do likewise" (though Maher-shalal-hash-baz might appeal to a

generation seeking to be different!). Neither is he likely to imitate Ezekiel's methods, lying on his side or shaving his head to demonstrate his point. Such would be mere histrionics to his hearers. However, he must not overlook the prophetic principle of complete identification with the preaching. His life must also reflect the impact of the message he is to share.

How the message is reflected is seen in part in the demonstration of the conviction of his preaching. Pulpit antics have no place for the prophet. Superficial sermonizing and lifeless lectures convey no sense of conviction. Unless a sermon is a part of the preacher, it lacks the breath that makes it live. No sermon is a part of the preacher unless it bears the corroboration of his practice. And no sermon is a part of the preacher that is not marked with the sweat-stains of real preparation for preaching. Superficial sermons are avoided only through diligent and dedicated effort to discern the mind of the Lord, just as lifeless lectures are fired by passing through the burning heart of one who is committed to the proclamation of that mind. Who can separate a prophet from his preaching?

One last prophetic principle is the *compassionate identification of the prophet with the people*. The classic statement of this is found in Ezekiel: "I sat where they sat. . ." (3:15); but one should not forget its illustration in Isaiah and Jeremiah. The latter is frequently identified as the "Weeping Prophet" for his compassion flows over as he weeps: "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 (9:1). But Isaiah too, the austere man of God, is deeply moved by the plight of his people: ". . . look away from me: I will weep bitterly; labor not to comfort me, because of the spoiling of the daughter of my people (22:4). The prophet must be genuinely moved by those to whom he speaks as well as touched by Him for whom he speaks, else there is no bridge from God to man. The chasm is spanned only when the bridge is related to both sides.

However, compassion is not to be misunderstood as a sentimentalism which reneges on its responsibility for fear of discomforting some hearer. Christian compassion is a concern for men's souls which precludes compromise of the eternal truth by which all men are judged; it is a care for men's souls which prevents the coldness of professionalism. When he who speaks for God compassionately identifies with his people, he will be given the opportunity to speak to them, which opportunity is not a part of one's call!

No man has the right to be a prophet; to some men is given the privilege. To be a part of the *prophetic succession* demands a prophetic ministry, achieved through an incorporation of those prophetic principles

which identified those of whom the Father spoke: “My servants, the prophets!” But no example for our calling is nobler than that of which the poet sang:

“O young and fearless prophet of ancient Galilee:
Thy life is still a summons to serve humanity,
To make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the crowd,
To stand with humble courage for truth with hearts uncowed.”