

## The Function of Prophet and Priest in the Church of God.

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EVERY human institution if it is to fulfil the object which called it into being must be organized. It must take shape and form in law and rite. By this means alone can it give expression to those truths and principles to preserve and extend which is the reason of its existence. As Carlyle says in his forcible way, "It is meritorious to insist on forms. Religion and all else naturally clothes itself in forms. Everywhere the formed world is the only habitable one." And so the Church as an organized institution is a necessary means, in a world where every system must be governed by law and order if it is to survive and keep pace with human needs, towards that end which is the spiritual regeneration of mankind.

So much is this a law of human institutions that, if in course of time the organization of some society is found to be defective or inadequate, it will seek to obey the law of its being by organizing itself in a direction which may not be in conformity with its original character. A suggestive example of this may be found in the present behaviour of certain Nonconformist bodies, where, as in the case of the Independents or Congregationalists, the original intention was that each separate congregation should be autonomous and complete in itself. But as these separate Churches multiplied, it was inevitable that some central organization, something which linked them together, should be found for them. The narrowness of their original conception hardly admitted of this, and so an actual basis of unification is found, not in the spiritual sphere, but in the political; and to-day the great bond of union between a large number of separate and independent religious bodies is a political one; and in consequence political aspirations, or the

expectation that religious and social reforms can be carried out by means of politics, have largely taken the place of that particular religious teaching they were established to promote.

It will be seen, therefore, that want of organization may lead to the perversion of principles which it was the object of the institution to preserve. But it is also true that excess of organization may have the same effect. For when a living want of man becomes so urgent that to maintain its existence a system has to be devised for its protection, then the system itself may come to stand in the way of fulfilling the very want it was originally intended to supply. Religion, as we have seen, must be officially organized and protected if it is to supply the spiritual needs of men. It must have its churches, its sacraments, its clergy. But directly it is so protected and organized, there is always the danger lest the institution be held in greater reverence than the spiritual want it was created to supply. Ritual can never be anything else than an imperfect, though necessary, expression of the spiritual; but when the outward is made more important and impressive than the spiritual, then religion, viewed as an inward and transforming power—the new birth of the Spirit—is over-weighted by those means by which alone it is maintained it can be apprehended. The legalism, the ceremonialism, the rigid dogmatism of Judaism were devised to protect the purity of the religion of Israel. But the stricter Jews became so absorbed in mere outward observance that they came near to stifling all true religion, and certainly in our Lord's time were incapable of seeing the truth and purity of His teaching. And to-day even good Christians find it hard, and sometimes impossible, to believe in salvation apart from their own sacraments, or outside their own denominational forms.

With these preliminary observations we may pass on to the subject of this article.

Now, broadly speaking, the function of the Christian ministry is a twofold one—the priestly and the prophetic; and the ideal Christian minister is doubtless one in whom the priestly and prophetic functions are combined. For the priest stands in the

main for the organization ; the prophet for freedom to push out beyond the organization. The one stands for the outward, the other for the inward, in the Church of God. The priest represents the principles of authority, and law, and order. It is that side of religion which legislates, and prohibits, and punishes. The prophet is typical of that freedom of the spirit which is always pushing out to find fresh indications of the Divine providence, and to reveal new aspects of the Divine character. The one is eminently the preserver of order and rule, the other is eminently the renewer of spiritual energy.

Yet the whole history of religion, instead of showing a gradual approximation of these two ideals, reveals rather the eternal conflict between them. The classic example is to be found in the religion of Israel. Its whole history is the history of the war between prophet and priest ; yet they have always to come to terms, for neither can do without the other. When Amos, the inspired herdsman of Tekoa, appeared at the sanctuary of Bethel, and protested against the hollowness and insincerity of the religion practised there, the official voice of religion, in the person of the priest Amaziah, rebuked him and sent him about his business, as it has silenced many a true prophet since. But the voice of the prophet is a solitary, ineffectual thing, when it has no means of making itself heard ; so Amos returned to his flocks in the wilderness and wrote a book—the first of the prophets to do so—and perhaps that was his reason for doing so, because it was the only way open to him of perpetuating his teaching.

But mark : it was the priests who collected and edited the Sacred Books, and formed the Canon of Holy Scripture. And the prophet cannot do without the priest. If our Lord said, " I will have mercy, and not sacrifice," He also recognized the place of ritual in worship, and said, " Thus it behoveth us to fulfil all righteousness " ; and by righteousness He did not mean moral law, but man's duty of rite, and sacrifice, and tithe, and alms. Religion must have its duties and its obligations. There is also an invaluable loyalty to traditional habits, as there are

holy and special uses in symbol and sacrament. There are truths about religion which all feel are too great for formal utterance. They must be felt rather than expressed. They belong rather to the heart than to the head. But often by the concrete symbolism of ceremony the truth is seen through a glass darkly. And that may be the best means of keeping it alive. Its mystery, too high for mental grasp, would be lost unless it were preserved in some outward, tangible form. In the outward symbol we are reminded of the spiritual reality. We are able to see and feel what no words of ours can ever adequately express.

All this belongs to the function of the priest, and religion cannot afford to be without him. But, on the other hand, there is always the danger of clinging to the shadow and so losing the reality. What is wanted is that religion shall constantly be invigorated by the free breath of the Spirit. Just as we complain of red-tapism in a Government Office, which hinders that being done which it was created to do, so we must beware of the petrifying influences of an all-absorbing ceremonialism, which is in danger of becoming an end in itself, or of a rigid dogmatism which leaves no room for fresh streams of interpretation and inspiration to vitalize the consecrated forms of belief. And that is the function of the prophet, who breaks through the outward that he may grasp the inward. He sees the dulling effect on the spirit of a merely mechanical worship. He recalls men to the reality that underlies the outward symbols of religion. He startles them from that easy-going pietism which imagines that the duties of religion are fulfilled when their outward requirements have been observed. He warns them against the folly of believing that the Church can save them; and in this he appears as the enemy of the priest, who regards his advent as interfering with the traditional forms of worship, and subverting the historical symbols of the faith.

Let us turn again to the religion of Israel as the classic instance of the antagonism between the two ideals of the prophet and the priest. The nation possessed an outward

worship, at once costly and elaborate ; but this was just to teach the worshipper that God could only be approached in reverence and awe, and to lift him above the very means he was using, because they were inadequate. "Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee : how much less this house that I have builded," is Solomon's humble admission when he dedicated the Temple for the worship of God. And the temple, the altar, and the sacrifice were maintained, in order that they might teach by contrast that the true temple of God is the soul of man, and that the true priest is he who offers the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart to God. In the last phase of the nation's life—the period after the Exile—we see these two aspects of the inward and the outward in religion reach their highest development. "On the one hand," there is "the Levitical law which hedged round the life of the Jewish devotee with the minutest prescriptions of outward service and ritual ; and, on the other hand, the Book of Psalms, which expresses, in language that the highest Christian devotion is glad to accept as its own, the inward yearning of the soul that turns away from all outward forms as empty and worthless, and is content with nothing short of the deepest union with God."<sup>1</sup>

We pass on to consider briefly the position of the prophet in the early history of the Church. "The ultimate triumph in the primitive Church of the ministry of office," writes Dr. Armitage Robinson, "over what we may call the ministry of enthusiasm, has made it difficult for us to realize that there was a time when bishops, presbyters, and deacons were not the prominent figures of the ecclesiastical community."<sup>2</sup> The New Testament clearly shows that in the early Church the prophets ranked next in importance to the apostles. This is what we should expect—that so important a function in the old dispensation would survive and retain its dignity in the new. When John the Baptist appeared, he was at once recognized as a prophet, and our Lord confirmed the popular belief when He said that "a

<sup>1</sup> Edw. Caird, "Evolution of Religion," vol. i., p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> "Encyclopædia Biblica," vol. iii., col. 3883.

prophet, and more than a prophet" had appeared. And Jesus Himself was commonly spoken of as the prophet of Nazareth. The gift of prophecy, from the very earliest times, was ranked amongst the special gifts of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the words of Joel were recalled as fitly describing that memorable scene: "I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." And in St. Paul's earliest letter to a Greek Church he defends the position of prophecy: "Quench not the Spirit; despise not prophesyings."<sup>1</sup> To the Corinthians he writes that "God appointed in the Church first apostles, secondly prophets";<sup>2</sup> and later to the Ephesians that the Church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."<sup>3</sup>

Now what was the function of the prophet in the primitive Church? As we might expect, his position was very like the conception of a prophet which had gradually been worked out in the history of Israel. He is the interpreter of the Divine will; a man who speaks for God, in words sometimes of warning, sometimes of consolation. Prediction, it is true, as in the case of Agabus, held an important place in the prophetic message; and it was this part which most impressed, as it does still, the vulgar mind.<sup>4</sup>

Prophecy, however, was not an office, but a special gift. It was inevitable, therefore, that those who exercised this gift should in course of time come into conflict with the responsible leaders of the Church. In the first instance a Church might owe its foundation to an itinerant preacher or prophet, but for its preservation it required a regular ministry. Not every Church possessed its prophet, but it depended upon its appointed officers for its effective administration. The prophets were

<sup>1</sup> I Thess. v. 20.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. xii. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Eph. ii. 20.

<sup>4</sup> For a general definition of the prophetic function it would be difficult to improve upon the concise and balanced words of Professor Gwatkin: "The prophet's power is not in predictions of the future, though he may adventure some, nor in visions of another world if he have any, but in vivid understanding of his own age. Insight is his mark, not foresight, though marvellous foresight may come of true insight" ("The Knowledge of God," vol. i., p. 173).

never a numerous body; and however much they might be esteemed for their gifts of imparting instruction and arousing enthusiasm, it is clear that their function was not governmental. It was inevitable that their peculiar, and in some sense irresponsible, position would create difficulties. The passing visit of a prophet was not always welcome, because he would throw the local ministry at once into the shade. Again, it was not always easy to distinguish between true and false prophets, because their spiritual endowments lifted them above the judgments of men. Once more, the frailty of human nature was not above the scandal of seeking material gain as the reward of the prophet's special gifts. And so the second century sees the gradual decline of the prophet, and the rise of a regular and permanent class of officials. By the third century no more is heard of inspired persons, prophets, and itinerant teachers, but everywhere we see the ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons. The struggle with Gnosticism and Montanism compelled the Church to put its teaching, its worship, and its discipline into fixed forms and ordinances; and that was the work of the regular officials of the Church. "It was through her bishops that the Church was united to the apostles; they represented tradition and authority; and they alone were qualified to interpret doctrine, and to guide the faithful."<sup>1</sup>

Henceforth prophecy, as an institution, ceased to exist in the Christian Church; but as a spiritual element vitalizing the consecrated forms of belief, and transforming the traditional forms of worship with a new energy, arousing the consciences of men, teaching, warning, consoling them, the gift of prophecy can never be extinct. "Age after age," to quote once more from Dr. Armitage Robinson, "has seen the rise of great teachers, alike within and without the ranks of the regular ministry: men who were dominated by a sense of immediate mission from God, and filled with a conviction which imparted itself by contagion to their hearers."<sup>2</sup> That is the place

<sup>1</sup> Duchesne, "The Early History of the Church," p. 389. E.T.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 3887.

that the spirit of prophecy holds in the Church of to-day—*i.e.*, if it is allowed to. The danger is when the voice of authority silences the least manifestation of an original and independent message to mankind which might be supposed to tell against its sacred privileges. This is what a branch of the Catholic Church has done in the past, and is notoriously doing now. The Church of Rome does not encourage prophets, and our own Church has generally been inclined to regard them with suspicion. It is natural that those who are impressed with the institutional character of the Church should desire uniformity of religious belief, but it is equally natural that those who are convinced that revelation is partial and progressive, and conditioned by man's capacity to receive it, should claim liberty of religious opinion. And if we believe that the Holy Spirit is a living and present Power, who shall, as our Lord promised, "testify of Me," and "guide you into all the truth," we cannot feel satisfied that any summary of religious belief is a complete and exhaustive statement of Divine revelation, however truly and adequately it may represent the needs and aspirations of the particular age which called it forth.

The priest, therefore, is typical to-day of one who venerates the Church as a Divine institution. For him its threefold ministry and its sacraments were specially ordained by Christ Himself, and are the Divinely appointed means whereby the Christian religion is presented to and maintained in the world. His power lies there—that he speaks with authority. It is not he that speaks; he is but the mouthpiece of the Church which is the repository of Divine revelation. That he recognizes is his great and unique power. And with this goes a passionate belief in the fixity of the definitions of the faith. He cannot tolerate the least deviation from a rigid dogmatism; that were to introduce the thin edge of the wedge of a dissolving scepticism. And so he stands out as the champion of orthodoxy, and the teacher of legalism.

The prophet cannot breathe in such an atmosphere. For him truth is relative, and his function is to embody it afresh, to



shake it free of its old forms, and reinterpret it in those which are in conformity with new streams of thought, and able to satisfy the changing spiritual and intellectual needs of men. He may complain of persecution, but it is the fact of the Church, as an organized institution, which gives power and advertisement to his utterance. That must content him for the present—slowly, and it may be in face of opposition, to let his message find his hearers out, and let time test the value of his word. When his word is tried, as silver is tried, then it will become a part of the body of common belief, and the priest will be glad to appropriate and hand on his message. As Mark Pattison slyly remarked of F. D. Maurice: “The ritualists stole the honey out of the Maurician hive.” But the prophet is likely to be just as arrogant and self-assertive in his own sphere as the priest, and no less opinionated; only his lack of reverence for the Church may lead him to that fatal decision that he may fancy he can do without it, which is the illusion of the schismatic.

