

IS PREACHING PROPHECY?

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THE question raised in the title of this paper is an important one both for Biblical theology and for the modern preacher's understanding of his calling. "Preaching" and "Prophecy" are often in common usage loosely identified, whether the reference be to the ancient Hebrew prophets or to the pulpit ministry of today. The similarities and indeed the real connection between these terms and the phenomena they represent are obvious. Yet the two are not by any means identical. It may contribute to the clearer understanding of both if we seek to define them historically and essentially, to establish the connection and to mark the distinction between them.

Dean Sperry has remarked that Jeremy Taylor's title, *The Liberty of Prophesying*, has stirred the imagination of preachers for three hundred years, so that the custom of speaking of preaching as "prophecy" owes much to "this single happy phrase".¹ Sperry takes as the title of his own Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching the Pauline phrase *We Prophesy in Part*. David A. MacLennan, in his wise and helpful *Preacher's Primer*, speaks of following "in the great tradition of the prophets of Israel", and of seeking "to emulate them as spokesmen for God and his righteousness".² This last remark aptly suggests that the identification of preaching with prophecy has been prompted by the rediscovery of the Hebrew prophets as spokesmen of the divine will rather than advance witnesses of the Messiah. When it came to be recognized that the prophets spoke in the first instance to their own times, reproving iniquity, proclaiming the will of God, and calling men to obedience, it seemed that they were in fact preachers. The Christian preacher, conversely, was "prophesying".

The first objection to this is, as Sperry comments, that the pregnant Biblical term may too easily be "reduced to the level of a commonplace professional tag".³ However real on a deeper level may be the connection between essential preaching and essential prophecy, there is little in common between either the formal modern sermon or the enthusiastic harangue on the one hand, and, on the other, the Hebrew prophet's solemn and costly utterance of the Word of Yahweh. Amos found his whole way of life violently disrupted by Yahweh's imperious summons. Jeremiah was driven almost beyond endurance; wearied in a foot-race with men, he must then, as it were, race with horses. The Word of Yahweh had become within him something like a burning fire which he could not contain.⁴ A nameless prophet of the sixth century describes in unforgettable terms the psycho-

logical turmoil and spiritual anguish which he suffered when a divine oracle was struggling to birth within him.⁵ We have no right to speak of preaching as "prophesying" unless it is at least comparable with this in its personal involvement of the preacher as well as in the spiritual seriousness of the message.

It can be objected at this point—and quite properly—that like must be compared with like; there was in ancient Israel commonplace professional prophesying as well as what we may call "high prophecy". Yahweh says to Jeremiah that the prophets of peace and prosperity were prophesying lies in his name. He had not sent them nor spoken to them. They were self-deceived, and were proclaiming the fulfilment of their own desires and the desires of those who listened to them. "Attack Ramoth-Gilead and triumph!" cried Ahab's court prophets, seeking to strengthen by a divine sanction the monarch's aggressive plans.⁶ In our own day, indeed, it is not altogether unknown for preachers to clothe with sanctity particular policies or a "way of life" grounded more on human desires than on the will of God.

But this again does not get to the root of the question, since the "false preacher" no more than the "false prophet" can be taken as in any way representative. Preaching and prophecy are primary phenomena of the Christian tradition, and can be defined essentially only as they are viewed historically. There is a clear distinction to be made in each case between the function or activity on the one hand, and the resulting message on the other. The proclaiming of the Word is the subjective aspect, and the Word proclaimed the objective aspect. In both there are similarities and differences between preaching and prophecy. The basic similarity is that each is a form of proclamation of the Word of God. In their historical contexts it quickly becomes evident that each term has both a wider and a narrower connotation than the other. In the New Testament preaching has the more significant place, and, in the Old Testament, prophecy.

There can be no question but that the standard or canon of prophecy in the Hebrew-Christian tradition was established by the pre-exilic prophets of Israel. This was the golden age of prophecy. At the same time we know that the term "prophet" or "man of God" in the Old Testament may mean anything from the dervish ecstatic of Saul's day to the stern passionate Amos, the serene Isaiah, the lonely and courageous Jeremiah—or their anonymous disciples who added so much to the prophetic scriptures. Balaam was one, fallen in his trance. Samuel was a "seer" whose "second sight" might be an aid in the recovery of lost property. There were court prophets and temple prophets with whom men like Micaiah ben Imlah and Jeremiah found themselves in conflict. Elisha was a "master" presiding over a college or monastic community, and credited in popular lore with miracles.⁷

It is against this background that the "prophets of the Word" are to be seen, men who refused to prophesy what men wanted to hear since it was

Yahweh who had put the word in their mouth.⁸ Micaiah ben Imlah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah the Morasthite—these men were different. Their words were not the incoherent babblings of spirit-crazed dervishes,⁹ but conveyed a meaningful message worthy to be received as a Word of God. Their claim to be speaking as Yahweh's mouthpieces, and by his compelling command, is justified, on the whole, by the quality and substance of their utterances.

Before considering prophecy as message we must observe it as an activity. Was prophesying the same thing as preaching? The common notion of the prophets, as itinerant haranguers of the people holding forth to casual crowds in the market place or the city gate, is hardly accurate. The forms of address of many of the oracles make it clear that these were spoken in *representative* public assemblies where secular and religious authorities were present, as well as the people. The nation or community as a collective body was the recipient of the message. "Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Harken, O royal house!"¹⁰

It seems indeed that the principal forum where the prophet's voice was heard was the temple court, where the community was assembled for a stated feast or on a special occasion of fasting or rejoicing. Our only glimpse of Amos in person is on the day when he was ejected from a royal temple for making what was considered a seditious utterance to the people. Isaiah had his vision and his call amid the sights and sounds of worship, apparently when he was standing among the officiants so close to the shrine that he could hear the door-pivots rattle in their sockets. Most probably it was from the same vantage point that he demanded of the congregation, "Who requires of you this trampling of my courts?" Micah's prediction that Zion would be ploughed as a field was recalled when Jeremiah said much the same thing presumably in the same place, the temple court. Many of the oracles of most of the prophets are particularly apt when viewed against the background of an occasion of cultic worship.¹¹

It is quite possible, indeed, that some of the prophets whose words have been preserved in the Old Testament were, or had been, officially connected with the shrines. Isaiah, unlike Amos, did not repudiate the title "prophet"; rather, by referring to his wife as "the prophetess" he accepted it.¹² Jeremiah belonged to the priestly family of the shrine at Anathoth; he was called to prophesy while still a youth, and may well have been a cult prophet at Anathoth before coming to Jerusalem. In any case, as we learn from Jer. 36, he had been accustomed to proclaim his oracles in the temple court until, like Amos, he was debarred from the sacred precincts for something he had said. The fact that Jeremiah, Hosea and Micah, found themselves in conflict with the main body of the cult prophets, means simply that individuals of outstanding moral integrity and spiritual perception stood out from the rest.¹³

The prophetic oracles as we have them preserved in writing are in most instances cast in the forms of public address—indeed, in the noble rhetoric

of masters of assemblies. Evidently there is here a close analogy between the activities of prophesying and of preaching, especially if the suggestion be correct that the prophets were discharging the duties of a recognized function in public assemblies for worship. If the activities appear analogous, what is to be said of the forms and the substance? Is a prophetic oracle in its essence the same thing as a sermon?

The prophetic oracle as we find it in the prophetic books may be defined as a divine utterance through the lips of a man who speaks it under a divine compulsion, and not by his own choice. Its content is not what men wish to hear or what the prophet wants to say, but what God wants to say through him. "The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing", said Isaiah, "[that] many houses shall surely be desolate".¹⁴ "Thus saith the Lord" means quite simply "This is the message which the Lord has commanded me to deliver". The inference is that the message is being repeated word for word.

At the same time it is quite evident that most prophetic oracles as we have them preserved in the Old Testament bear the marks of deliberate composition for public delivery. They conform to certain established literary structures and are related to other literary forms. At their best they exhibit a powerful and brilliant poetry of speech which clearly was not the product of impromptu composition. It is the substance, not the form, of the message which is attributed to divine inspiration. In Jer. 22:10 and 22:12, for example, we have the same oracle in two forms.

The "word" from Yahweh seems to have become articulate in the prophet's mind as a germinal idea expressed in a single word or phrase. This germinal idea was then clothed in the rich dress of oratory for the occasion when it was to be proclaimed. Amos sees a basket of fruit, (*qayic*), and exclaims the word aloud; in his ear there is an echo, (*qec*), "the end". This is Yahweh's Word, and it becomes the spoken oracle: "The end has come upon my people Israel."¹⁵ The famous Isaianic oracle "a remnant shall return" (7:3) is expanded in two different ways in 10:20-23; with the stress on the subject it is a threat, but with the stress moved to the predicate it becomes a promise. Many examples can be given of these succinct "embryonic" oracles and of their subsequent development into poetic and rhetorical forms suited to public presentation.¹⁶

Almost all of these developed literary oracles belong to one of four classes: denunciation, exhortation, threat and promise. These occur sometimes singly, but more often in combination. They are distinguishable to a degree by their literary structures as well as by their contents. The *denunciation*, for example, often takes the form of a complaint lodged before witnesses ("Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth") or directed to the offenders ("Hear this, you who trample upon the needy"). It may begin "Woe to . . ." or "Shame on . . .". The *exhortation* lays emphasis on a series of imperatives, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean". The *threat* usually follows a *denunciation*, and begins "therefore", "truly", or "be-

hold", introducing a declaration of what is going to happen. The *promise* opens with some such phrase as "in that day", or "in the coming days". In each case there is usually a fairly regular structure and a characteristic conclusion. Thus the form of the prophetic oracle, as distinct from its substance, may follow one of several literary patterns. It also bears the marks of the individual style of the prophet by whom it is spoken.¹⁷

It may be claimed that each of these types of publicly declaimed oracle—especially perhaps the *denunciation* and the *exhortation*—was a form of preaching. The speaker was directing to a particular audience and situation a message of ethical imperatives consequent upon theological affirmations. The message was relevant and urgent because the assembled audience represented the people of Yahweh's covenant. The moral will of the living God was being presented as an urgent demand upon those who claimed his aid and protection.

At this point we become aware of the outreach of prophecy beyond preaching. The prophet did not expound and apply the message of a written scripture or an inherited tradition, even though he stood in a living succession of prophets who shared largely the same religious and ethical convictions. He was speaking on behalf of a God who had indeed, revealed himself to the fathers, but who now had something *new* to say. He spoke *as* (or, at least on some occasions, *as if*) Yahweh had at that moment laid hands on him and put words in his mouth.¹⁸ To utter an oracle is not the same thing as to preach a sermon!

The substance of prophecy is therefore only in part like the substance of preaching. It is the voice of God in a present moment of crisis and decision, a moment in which past and future are somehow included as well. The present is not just a consequence of the past, nor is the future merely a projection of the present. The will and purpose of the living God are the pattern of meaning and the determining factor in all that happens. The prophet points out the pattern and announces what Yahweh is about to do. He articulates the divine purpose, thus constituting history on behalf of the Lord of history. "Surely the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets."¹⁹

When we come to the writings of Second Isaiah, we are in a different atmosphere from that of Amos or Jeremiah, and appear to be dealing with a different kind of prophecy. The difference is not simply in the fact that the prophet is addressing a generation which has now received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. The spoken word has given place to the written message. Prophecy is merging into poetry, and promise into gospel. "O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings. . . say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold, your God!'" The imagery of the Exodus from Egypt becomes symbolic of the new Exodus from captivity and despair. Here is salvation; the Lord has been, and is, and always will be "the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour". This is a summons to faith, to hope, to courage and to rejoicing. It is a proclamation of good news, a *kerygma*.

This written prophecy of Second Isaiah, then, is essentially the preaching of glad tidings. It does not come under any of the four prophetic categories of reproach and threat, exhortation and promise. It is an announcement which declares what God has done and is about to do. Surely it is significant that Jesus and the evangelists refer so often to the writings of Second Isaiah, the Old Testament herald of a salvation and a kingdom at hand.

The distinctive quality of the activity which is designated "preaching" in the New Testament is *proclamation*. This is the idea common to the verbs used, viz., *kērussō*, "to announce like a herald", *euangelizomai*, "to bring good news", *diangelo*, "to publish abroad", and *katangelo*, "to proclaim publicly". Matthew and Mark speak of John the Baptist's heralding a baptism of repentance in view of the nearness of God's kingdom, and the imminent appearance of One mightier than he. Our Lord began here, proclaiming and also exhibiting the powers of the new age to which the prophets of the Old Testament had pointed forward. The apostolic preaching, moreover, declared what God *had done*: "Know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." It was also a summons to act in the light of the *new situation* created by the announcement, and a promise of what would follow: "Repent, and be baptized, . . . and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."²⁰

When the New Testament writers speak of "prophesying", they seem to have in view an activity quite distinct from proclamation of the gospel and the call to respond to it. Essentially the meaning is the same as in the Old Testament, viz., "to speak ecstatically (and, except with the primitive prophets, intelligibly) under the immediate inspiration of God's word". In I Cor. 12:8-10 this is one of the gifts of the Spirit distinct from the utterance of wisdom or knowledge, from "speaking with tongues" and from the interpretation of tongues. Romans 12:6-8 discriminates between teaching, exhortation and prophecy, while in I Cor. 14:3 we read that "he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation, . . . [and] edifies the church". Here "prophesying" resembles pastoral preaching in effect, though evidently what is referred to was impromptu mutual exhortation.

It seems evident from this brief consideration of prophecy and preaching in the Bible that as activities they overlap, but that they differ essentially in the message which it was their function to proclaim. Prophecy was the declaration that the will and purpose of the living God were urgent and relevant in the present moment in which the people stood. God was speaking directly to his people through the mouth of the prophet, revealing the crisis which faced them, and calling for a decision to believe and obey. The emphasis was upon what God was even then doing and was about to do. The note is declaratory and imperative. Let Israel hear and turn again in loyal love to the God whom she professes to serve. Her salvation is not an accomplished fact; it is a promise, conditional upon faith and obedience.

"If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land". "In returning and rest you shall be saved."²¹

Preaching, on the other hand, as first exemplified in Second Isaiah and carried forward in the New Testament, was the announcement of good news of what God *had done* and was prepared to do for those who would hear and believe. The announcement is accompanied by an invitation: "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price!" Whereas prophecy in the name of the Lord of the covenant was addressed to the people of the covenant, preaching was for all who had ears to hear and would hear. Yet it was "to the Jew first", if "also to the Greek". To the former it was the astounding news that God had visited and redeemed his people; that the crucified Jesus was indeed both Lord and Christ. To the latter it was the hardly less astonishing news that what God had done for his ancient people he had done also for all men who would enter into his covenant.

The Christian preacher today is the heir both of the Old Testament prophets and of the apostolic preachers of the Gospel. He is the heir, too, of the priest and the "wise man" who, as Jeremiah tells us,²² shared with the prophet the task of speaking for Yahweh in ancient Israel. And he has laid upon him the apostle's pastoral "care of all the churches"; he must "reprove, rebuke, exhort" and "make full proof of his ministry".

Preaching, as we understand it in the church of today, is a more inclusive term than prophecy. The terms, as we have seen, are not synonymous in scripture. We should not speak loosely of the preacher as a prophet any more than we should describe him as an apostle. Yet the prophetic office and the apostolic commission both belong to the *ministry* of the church, and to the individual preacher as he represents that ministry and shares its authority and responsibility. Only occasionally—perhaps rarely—does the preacher assume the prophet's mantle. Then he is overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility to utter in a particular situation a "solving word" which he is sure that God has given him to speak. Only twice in a preaching ministry of thirty years, Dean Sperry tells us, did he feel that he was "on the fringes of the experience" of prophesying.²³

It may well be asked if Christian preaching might not more often have the authentic quality and authority of prophecy if we understood better the nature of the prophetic experience. These men belonged within a theologically articulate religious tradition which had "come alive" in them, so that when they spoke they were not merely threshing old straw. They were personally responsive to the Word of the Living God who had spoken to the fathers and now spoke to them. The Word was not theirs; it was God's. The prophet was God's mouthpiece and his messenger. The Word was a Word of illumination, of rebuke and of summons. The prophet must speak; he could not help himself, for the hand of God was upon him.

In the context of this Biblical tradition we shall not lightly compare—

let alone equate—our preaching with prophecy. We are too familiar with the feeble homily, the dull disquisition, the elegant essay, and sometimes, alas, with the impertinences of the pulpit entertainer. But our preaching may have something at least of prophetic quality if we perceive God's presence and his purpose as the decisive factors in the situation in which we and our hearers stand. Our times call urgently for a prophetic word—a word of clarity, of power and decision, of judgment and salvation. There is an essential connection between preaching and prophecy, and at times one merges with the other. Each proclaims a decisive word from God. In the one case the Word is given to the prophet for publication in a particular moment and set of circumstances. In the other it is a Word which has been given once for all to the People of God, of whom the preacher is a minister. This is the Word of the Kingdom and of the Cross, of the Resurrection and of the Parousia.

To proclaim that "Jesus is Lord" is Christian prophecy which, in the nature of the case, passes beyond the farthest outreach of the ancient Hebrew seers. When, within the total context of Law, Prophecy and Gospel, some truth peculiarly fitted to the moment seizes the mind and soul of the preacher and cries for utterance, he is prophet and preacher too. The urgent declaration of the truth of God is prophecy. The proclamation of the Gospel is prophecy's counterpart and completion.

NOTES

1. Willard L. Sperry, *We Prophecy in Part*, Harper Brothers, New York, 1938; p. 2.
2. David A. MacLennan, *A Preacher's Primer*, Clarke, Irwin & Co., Toronto, 1950; p. 42.
3. Sperry, op. cit., p. 7.
4. Amos 7:14-15; Jer. 12:5, 20:9.
5. Isa. 21:1-10.
6. Jer. 14:14; I Kings 22:12.
7. Cf. I Sam. 10:5-10; Num. 24:4; I Sam. 9:1-10; Jer. 26:7-11; II Kings 4:38; 6:1.
8. I Kings 22:13-14.
9. I Sam. 10:6-10; I Kings 18:28-29.
10. Hos. 5:1: cf. Isa. 1:10; Jer. 2:4.
11. Amos 7:10-13; Isa. 6:1-8; 1:12; Jer. 26:17-19.
12. Isa. 8:3.
13. Cf. Jer. 1:1-10; 28:1-11; Hos. 4:5; 9:7; Mic. 3:5-7.
14. Isa. 5:9.
15. Amos 8:1-3.
16. Cf. Jer. 1:11-12; Isa. 7:3; 8:1-4; Jer. 20:3-6.
17. Cf. Isa. 1:2; Amos 8:4; 6:1; Isa. 1:16; Jer. 22:18-19; 23:2-7.
18. Cf. Amos 7:15; Isa. 6:8-10; Jer. 1:9.
19. Amos 3:7.
20. Acts 2:36, 38.
21. Isa. 1:19; 30:15.
22. Jer. 18:18.
23. Sperry, op. cit., p. 28.