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The Prophetic Function of the Christian Ministry.

III.—THE WORK OF THE PROPHET.

IN my two previous papers I have considered "The Call" of the prophet and "The Knowledge" of the prophet. In this third and last paper I would deal with "The Work" of the prophet. In regard to work of all kinds at least three things demand careful consideration: First, the object or purpose of the work; secondly, the means or instruments employed in the work; and thirdly, the method, which will include the spirit, of the worker. In regard to any kind of work it is difficult to think of these three separately; it is especially so in the particular work with which we are dealing. Here certainly the object will govern the means chosen to effect the object; also the efficacy of the means will, to a large extent, depend upon the method (which will include the spirit) in which the means are employed.

The "object" of the prophet is the revelation of God's will (and consequently of God's nature) with a view to the furtherance of God's purpose, which is the salvation of man. By far the most complete and perfect example of One revealing God's will is the Lord Jesus Christ. We must indeed regard His life and teaching as the most perfect of all the instruments of revelation. A careful study of His life will also show us the true method of revelation, the spirit in which the work of revelation must be done. Hence a study of "The Work" of the prophet may for the Christian minister be almost confined to a study of the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ approached from this particular point of view.

One of the most striking features, or perhaps qualities, of the life of Christ is its *unity*. Every fragment of His life, or His teaching, or His work, ministers directly to the purpose of the whole. There is about Him a wonderful consistency. We see this most clearly where we compare His life with any other life. How frequently in other lives—even in those to which as

a whole we may apply the terms lofty or holy—we detect some flaw, some weakness, which mars the power or influence of the life as a whole! Now, we know that the world is all too apt to form its judgment of Christianity from the conduct of professing Christians, and especially professing Christian teachers or ministers. On the night before He died Christ could say, “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.”¹ In other words, “My conduct has been a revelation of the Divine.” He could also say, “Which of you convinceth Me of sin?”² He never fell beneath the perfect standard of the Divine. Every action of His conduct, every word of His speech, being divinely inspired and directed towards a Divine purpose, was a fragment of a Divine revelation made up of many parts. Thus the whole life and every part of the life was, in the true sense of the word, “prophetic”; it was a revelation of the Divine will. And nothing reveals like conduct. The chief part of the prophet’s work is to live the prophet’s life. Yet how rarely can this be said to be successfully accomplished! We have only to examine our own conduct to see this. We shall be able to remember numberless actions done, and numberless words spoken, which have rather militated against our spiritual influence than aided this. I am not thinking of actual wrongdoing; I am rather thinking of the failure to set, and live up to, a standard far above the world standard which surrounds us, and I am thinking especially of the failure to live a life of self-sacrifice and self-denial, which comes from a life of stern self-discipline, and which is essential to the really Christian life.

And when we pass from our own life to the lives of others who have been called to do the prophet’s work—though we do not wish to be uncharitable or to judge harshly—how frequently we find that the daily conduct, far from being “a consistent revelation of the Divine,” is only a revelation of a spirit which cannot be termed other than worldly. Apart from certain professional duties, too often very imperfectly performed, there is little to distinguish their lives from the lives of others who

¹ St. John xiv. 9.

² St. John viii. 46.

surround them. To live a consistent life on a high level of spirituality is probably the hardest task that any man can undertake. It can, of course, be only successfully carried out when we cease to undertake it of ourselves, and when we throw ourselves entirely upon the guidance and strength of God. Here more than anywhere else is Christ's saying true, that only those who lose their lives shall find them.

But it is not only the life as a whole but every faculty of the life that must be a prophetic instrument. We rightly speak of the prophet's life as a dedicated or consecrated life. After the example of Christ we must "sanctify" ourselves. The word is one of wide import. In St. John xvii. 19, the object seems to be designedly omitted; evidently because in Christ's case there was no need to describe it. With Him it was perfectly clear: it was *to God* and *for the sake of men*. And Christ sanctified every faculty of body, mind, heart, soul, and spirit to His purpose. It is most instructive to notice how, indirectly or implicitly, the sanctification and consecration of each of these is revealed in the Gospels. Even Christ's physical activities must have been enormous. He knew what it was to be weary;¹ but like the men of Gideon, while faint He yet pursued His task.² Even the physical strain upon the prophet in these days in some spheres of labour is often excessive. In other spheres the temptation to put forth far less physical energy than we ought is strong. I have frequently heard the clergy condemned for want of mental alertness, and quite justly; but I have also seen many a case where far more physical energy might have been put into their work. The ability and the readiness for severe physical strain is often a matter of training—in other words, of self-discipline. A careful attention to physical health is a duty. The conscientious workman keeps all his tools in good order. Regarded even as a help to physical efficiency the practice of fasting—if this is regarded not as an end but as a means to an end—is extremely useful. The number of those who pursue this to a degree when it becomes detrimental to health is very

¹ St. John iv. 6.

² Judges viii. 4.

small. A doctor in a large practice once said to me, "I have never come across the man who could afford to eat enough and did not do so." There are a very great many men with whom simpler and harder living would issue in far greater efficiency.

Christ's dedication of the thinking and reasoning powers to the work of revelation is evident upon every page of the gospels. His life is the outstanding example of the love of God "with all the mind."¹ A great preacher once said of his sermons, "I am content if I have made my hearers think." As it stands this sentence is open to misconstruction. What he probably meant to say is, "I am thankful if I have accomplished the first essential step in producing a change for the better." Repentance comes before even faith, and in repentance thought is primary. Every utterance of Christ's is designed to suggest thought. And only thought provokes thought. Every saying of Christ reveals the mind of one who not only has thought deeply but who is anxious to get others to think. It is not so only with Christ; it is so with the prophets. Their writings are eminently those of great thinkers. They are not only seers who see more widely, more deeply, and more clearly, than other men, but they are thinkers who have reasoned long and patiently upon what they have seen. Also, like Christ, they demand thought from their hearers or their readers. One of Isaiah's complaints is, "My people doth not consider."² Again, the conditions of repentance are not only that people should "see with their eyes and hear with their ears," but that they should "understand with their heart."³ If we turn to the New Testament teachers we find the same condition. The human instrument or faculty, according to St. Paul, by which the transition from the old life of sin to the new life of righteousness is effected is by "the renewing of the spirit of the mind."⁴ Unless the thinking and reasoning power is kept keen and sharp and constantly exercised the teaching cannot have its desired effect.

¹ St. Luke x. 27.

³ St. Matt. xiii. 15.

² Isa. i. 3.

⁴ Eph. iv. 23.

But besides the mind also the heart—the organ of feeling—is a very important instrument of revelation. God is love, and the revelation of God is the revelation of His love. The infinite love of Christ is at least one proof of His Divine nature and Divine mission. The prophet's message is a message of redeeming love. The life of Christ, consummated by His death, was one great act of love. His love was so intense that no sacrifice was too great ; and the love was manifested not merely in the sacrifice of life, but of position, of food, of rest, of all the comforts of life. Love is manifested in humility and service. Christ's whole life was an expression of both these virtues. We frequently find the life (and so the influence) of the Christian minister or worker—of the Christian prophet—marred by an apparent inability to make small sacrifices. In themselves these may seem small matters, but as factors of influence, as increasing or diminishing this influence, they are not small. When the majority of a clergyman's parishioners have to be at work at 6 a.m., it does not add to his influence with them when they find he does not rise until 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. When, again, many of these are struggling to make both ends meet, they do not think better of him, even if he can afford it, if he lives a somewhat luxurious life. When alcohol—no doubt when taken in excess—is slaying its thousands of victims every year, it should not be too great a sacrifice, for the sake of influence, to abstain from it altogether. To preach self-sacrifice (and those who would preach the Gospel must preach this) without practising it, is not the way to commend its claim to our hearers. St. Paul was the last man to be accused of want of personal humility, but he would employ all manner of means to effect the salvation of his hearers, and he knew the force of personal example. It was not out of any feeling of self-satisfaction, but in order to leave no form of influence unemployed, that he wrote, "The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do."¹ The Philippians must not only give heed to the Apostle's teaching, they must also be

¹ Phil. iv. 9.

careful to copy his example. Only a conviction of the enormous influence of this last could have caused St. Paul to write thus.

There is one form of self-sacrifice which in these crowded days, and especially in busy spheres of labour, becomes increasingly difficult to practise. That to which I refer is best described by the phrase, "waiting upon God." It will include prayer, meditation, study, and thought, and everything, in short, which enables us to hear and to see God, whether our condition be that of a mere listener or of an active seeker after truth. I lay stress upon this because of all the causes of want of ministerial influence or success the want of *power* is both the most common and the most fatal. I speak, of course, of spiritual power. Now much more than is generally supposed goes to the making of this. It is not, as some imagine, a simple, but a very complex, possession, one into which a great many factors enter. It is a combination of the intellectual, the moral, and the social, as well as what is more generally regarded as the distinctively spiritual. Would it not be true to say that, if we regard the spiritual as almost synonymous with the Divine, then this spiritual power must be regarded as consecrating, sanctifying, and rightly directing the other powers. Again, many an earnest preacher's power or influence is greatly diminished from want of fulness of study and strenuousness of thought or intellectual effort. In the words of Browning we admit that the preacher's "zeal was good" and so was "his aspiration," but we detected his want of knowledge and the unsoundness of his reasoning; consequently he did not convince us. He reminds us of an advocate who either has not got up his brief, or who is intellectually unequal to the task he has attempted. He has not studied the subject sufficiently; he has not thought it out. Then while one preacher lacks knowledge of his subject, is unlearned in booklore, another lacks knowledge of men, he does not know human nature either in the general or in the case of the particular audience he is addressing. Neither the prophets of the Old Testament nor of the New fail here. One reason why we seem to know both the peoples and the individual

characters of the Bible so much more intimately than any other peoples or any other characters of history is that those who speak to these, or describe them, reveal to us their nature so much more clearly. We are too apt to regard "the discerning of spirits" as simply a miraculous gift which has been withdrawn, like the power to heal the lame or give sight to the blind. But what pains do we take to cultivate it? Can we imagine Amos or Jeremiah or St. Paul, much less Christ Himself, delivering the same discourse, after a considerable interval of time to the same audience? The true prophet (the seer) speaks directly and immediately to the people when he wishes to influence, and the object of his speech is always a change in conduct. He is not content to propound a theory, without commending it strongly to his hearers; he wishes them to do and not simply to listen. He is not satisfied by their saying "This is true," he would have them say "We must act as he desires." The effect of Christ's teaching is summed up in the saying, "His word was with power," where the term used for power (*ἐξουσία*) shows that Christ was felt to be speaking with a Divine authority. It was this conviction that influenced His hearers.

Do we sufficiently realize what speaking in God's Name implies, what should be involved in saying, "Thus saith the Lord"? When the responsibility which the words imply is carefully considered, is it not overwhelming? In the great prologue to St. John's Gospel we read that "In the beginning was the Word;" then the Word is everlasting. The Word of God spoke from the first moment of Creation, the Word of God has never ceased to speak. The true prophets of the Old Testament were inspired by that same Word which found expression in their lives and teaching. We are called to be the mouthpieces of that same Word. In the Name of Jesus—the Word Incarnate—the Apostles were wont to speak.¹ If we are to claim a Divine authority for our message it can only be by speaking in that Name. But if Christ is to issue *from* us, He

¹ Acts iv. 18.

must first be *in* us. The "glory" of the prophet is according to the measure with which He is filled with Christ. He must, too, be filled with the Spirit, the great Interpreter of Christ. The power of the prophet depends upon the personality of the preacher, and this personality depends upon whether it is or is not filled with the nature of Christ. To me there is nothing more heartrending than to hear a preacher, after mounting the pulpit and uttering the words "In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," proceed to read monotonously from a MS. a cold, ill-prepared, and shallow sermon. The gulf between profession and practice, between the ideal and the actual, between the tremendous claim, and the wretched attempt to substantiate it, is too appalling.

But the work of the prophet is not confined to dealing with men in the mass. Both the prophets of the Old Testament and of the New dealt with individuals. They were frequently charged with a message to some definite person. Christ is, again, the most striking example of this particular kind of work. The woman of Samaria, to whom Christ had spoken alone, saw by the way in which He spoke to her, that He possessed both the prophet's insight and the prophet's power.¹ We cannot suppose that she grasped His true nature, but of one thing she was sure, that He was no ordinary natural genius. She felt that He possessed some supernatural, some Divine power. In the words of another, "Never man spake as He spoke."²

The pastor as well as the preacher, the Christian minister in the discharge of his pastoral as well as in his preaching function, must cultivate the prophetic power. He must unfold God's will to the individual as well as to the crowd. It is constantly remarked that pastoral visitation is to-day neglected by the clergy. I fear the reproach is widely true. But the multiplicity of organizations and the elaboration of machinery is no adequate substitute for spiritual influence brought to bear upon the character (the soul) of the individual. It is no excuse to say

¹ St. John iv. 19.

² St. John vii. 46.

that we have not the "gift" for this personal dealing with souls. What is required is not a "gift", but spiritual power which has to be sought, assimilated, and stored up, so that it can be brought to bear. The last thing I would initiate or recommend is the confessional system of the Roman Church, but there is no doubt that one reason for the undoubted influence of the Roman priest is his practice of dealing with the individual as well as of speaking to the people in the congregation. Let anyone measure the difference in the effect upon himself between the influence of a really powerful sermon and even a short conversation with a deeply spiritual man upon the highest subjects, and he will be convinced of the far greater permanence of the latter. Samuel deals personally with Saul, Nathan with David, Ahijah with Jeroboam, Isaiah with Hezekiah, so Christ deals personally with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman, and with Mary Magdalene.

I have left to the last one absolutely essential qualification for the right discharge of the prophetic function of the ministry, because, whatever else of what I have said they may forget, I wish my readers to remember this. The work of the prophet is, we know, to reveal God's will towards man. But God is love, and therefore God's will is expressed in love for man. How can we assure men of this? I cannot reveal God unless I know Him, and I cannot know Him, in the deepest and fullest sense of the word, unless I love Him. But if I love Him I shall try to find out more and more of His will, both as revealed in the past and as being still revealed in the present. The revelation of the will of God will, therefore, be my daily study. On the other hand, unless I love men and women and children I shall not use my utmost endeavour, I shall not be prepared to make a complete sacrifice of time and ease and energy, to making this will known. Thus love—love to God and love to man—is the first essential quality of the prophetic character and of the prophetic ministry. Where love is wanting the work must fail; where it exists, even if obstacles in our path be many

and great, they can and will be overcome. We must cultivate this spirit of love, the agent not only of creation, but of re-creation. If the "glory" of a work is the manifestation of its highest excellence, then here, as ever, Christ in us is the hope of glory. Apart from Christ our work is doomed to failure; "in Christ" it must succeed.

W. EDWARD CHADWICK.

