

What Prophetic Ministry Is

by T. Austin-Sparks

Prophetic ministry is the ministry of spiritual interpretation, which involves the interpretation of everything from a spiritual standpoint and the bringing of the spiritual implications of things, past, present, and future, before the people of God.

Topics: "Prophetic Ministry", "Spiritual Interpretation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that prophetic ministry transcends mere prediction of future events, focusing instead on spiritual interpretation and the communication of God's mind to His people. He argues that the true essence of prophetic ministry is to reveal the full, original, and ultimate purpose of God, which is often obscured by the chaos of the present world. Sparks highlights the necessity of anointing and revelation in prophetic ministry, asserting that only through the Holy Spirit can one truly understand and convey God's intentions. He calls for a revival of prophetic voices that can interpret God's will and guide the Church towards its divine purpose, ultimately centered on the fullness of Christ. The sermon stresses that prophetic ministry is vital for the spiritual health of the Church and the world today.

Transcript

Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15,18; Acts 3:22; 7:37; Luke 24:19; Revelation 19:10; Ephesians 4: 8, 11-13.

"He gave some... prophets... for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11,12).

We are going to consider the matter of prophetic ministry. "He gave some... prophets." But we must at once make some discrimination, for when we speak of prophetic ministry, we find that people are very largely governed by a certain mentality associated with what is called 'prophecy'. They immediately relate the very term 'prophetic' to incidents, happenings, dates, and so on, lying mainly in the future. That is, they think instantly of the predictive element in prophetic ministry and limit the whole function to that conception.

Now, for the real value of what is before us we must remove from our minds that restricted idea of the pre-eminence of the predictive aspect in prophetic ministry. It is an aspect, but it is only an aspect. Prophetic ministry is a much larger thing than the predictive.

Perhaps it would be better if we said that the prophetic function, going far beyond mere events, happenings and dates, is the ministry of spiritual interpretation. That phrase will cover the whole ground of that with which we are now concerned. Prophecy is spiritual interpretation. If you think about it for a moment, in the light of prophetic ministry in the Word of God, I am quite sure you will see how true this is. It is the interpretation of everything from a spiritual standpoint; the bringing of the spiritual implications of things, past, present and future, before the people of God, and giving them to understand the significance of things in their spiritual value and meaning. That was and is the essence of prophetic ministry.

Of course, what we know about prophets in the Scriptures is that they were a special function or faculty amongst the Lord's people, but we must also remember that they often combined their prophetic function with other functions. Samuel was a prophet; he was also a judge, and a priest. Moses was a prophet, but he was other things besides. I believe Paul was a prophet; he was an apostle, an evangelist; he was everything, it seems to me! So that our purpose is to speak not so much of prophets, as distinct people, as of prophetic ministry. It is the ministry with which we are concerned, and we shall arrive at the instrument better by recognising the ministry fulfilled; we shall understand the vessel better and see what it is, if we see the purpose for which it is constituted. So let me say that it is function, not persons, that we have in view when we are speaking about prophets or prophetic ministry.

I am quite sure that those who have any knowledge whatever of the times, spiritually, will agree with me when I say that the crying need of our time is for a prophetic ministry. There never was a time when there existed so extensively the need for a voice of interpretation, when conditions needed more the ministry of explanation. One does not want to make extravagant statements or to be extreme in one's utterances, but I do not think it would be either extravagant or extreme to say that the world today is well-nigh bankrupt of real prophetic ministry in this sense - a voice that interprets the mind of God to people. It may exist in some small degree here and there, but in no very large way is that ministry being fulfilled. So often our hearts groan and cry out, Oh, that the mind of God about the present situation could be brought through, in the first place to the recognition of His people, and then through His people to others beyond! There is a great and terrible need for a prophetic ministry in our time.

PROPHETIC MINISTRY RELATED TO THE FULL PURPOSE OF GOD

Recognising that, we must come to see exactly what this function is. What is the function of prophetic ministry? It is to hold things to the full thought of God, and therefore it is usually a reactionary thing. We usually find that the prophets arose as a reaction from God to the course and drift of things amongst His people; a call back, a re-declaration, a re-pronouncement of God's mind, a bringing into clear view again of the thoughts of God. The prophets stood in the midst of the stream - usually a fast-rushing stream - like a rock; the course of things broke over them. They challenged and resisted that course, and their presence in the midst of the stream represented God's mind as against the prevailing course of things. In the Old Testament, the prophet usually came into his ministry at a time when things were spiritually bad and anything but according to the Divine mind; the state was evil, things were confused, mixed, chaotic; there was much deception and falsehood, and often things very much worse than that. Here is the thing to which the prophetic ministry all-inclusively relates - the original and ultimate purpose of God in and through His people; and when you have said that, you have got right to the heart of things. We ask again, What is the prophetic ministry, what is the prophetic function, to what does it relate? - and the answer all-inclusively is that it relates to the full, original and ultimate purpose of God in and through His people.

If that statement is true, it helps us at once to see the need in our time; for, speaking generally, the people of God on the earth in our time have confused parts of the purpose of God with the whole; have emphasized phases to the detriment of the whole. They are confusing means and methods and enthusiasm and zeal with the exact object of the Lord, failing to recognise that God's purpose must be reached in God's way and by God's means, and the way and the means are just as important as the purpose: that is, you cannot reach God's end just anyhow, by any kind of method that you may employ, by projecting your own ideas or programmes or schemes to get to God's end. God has His own way and means of getting to His end. God's thoughts extend to and spread over the smallest detail of His purpose, and you cannot wholly realise the purpose of God except as the very details are according to the mind of God.

God might have said to Moses, Build me a tabernacle, will you? I leave it to you how you do it, what you use; you see what I am after; go and make me a tabernacle. Moses might have got the idea of what God wanted and have worked out the kind of thing he would make for God according to his own mind. But we know that God did not leave a single detail, a peg or a pin's point, a stitch or a thread, to the mind of man. I only use that illustration in order to enforce what I mean, that prophetic ministry is to present God's full, original and ultimate purpose, as it is according to His mind, and hold it like that for God; to interpret the mind of God in all matters concerning the purpose of God, to bring all details into line with the purpose, and to make the purpose govern everything.

PROPHETIC MINISTRY BY THE ANOINTING

(a) Detailed Knowledge of God's Purposes

This involves several things which are clearly seen to be features of prophetic ministry in the Word of God. First of all, it involves the matter of anointing. The meaning and value of anointing is that, firstly, only the Spirit of God has the full and detailed plan in view and can make everything to be true in principle to God's intention. I say only the Spirit of God has that. It is one of the most wonderful things in Scripture, to find that, when you get back to the simplest, earliest - shall we say, the most elementary - expression or projecting of Divine things in the Word of God, everything there is so true in principle to all that comes out later in that connection in greater fullness. It is simply marvelous how God has kept everything true to principle: you never find later, however fully a thing is developed, that there is a change in principle; the principle is there and you cannot get away from it. When you later take up a more developed matter in the Word of God you find that it is true to the original principle of that matter as it was first introduced.

And God has brought everything into line with those fixed principles. God does not deviate one little bit. His law is there and it is unchanging. The Holy Spirit alone knows all that. He knows the laws and the principles, all the things which spiritually govern the purpose of God; and He alone knows the plan and the details, and can make everything true to those principles and laws. And everything has got to be true to them. We may take it as settled that if in the superstructure there is anything that is out of harmony with God's original basic spiritual principle, that is going to be a defect which will spell tragedy sooner or later. The superstructure, in every detail of principle, has to be true to the foundation, to the original. Most of us are not enlightened as to all that. We are feeling our way along, we are groping onward, we are getting light, slowly, very little at a time; but we are getting light. But the prophetic ministry is an enlightened ministry, and is that which, under the anointing, is to bring things back to that position of absolute safety and security because it is true to Divine principle.

The anointing is necessary, firstly, because only the Spirit of God is acquainted with all the thought of God and He alone can speak and work and bring things about in true and utter consistency with the Divine principles which govern everything; and everything that is from God must embody those principles. The principle of the Church - that which governs the Church - is that it is a heavenly thing. It is not an earthly thing; it is related to Christ as in heaven. The Church does not come into being until Christ is in heaven, which means that the Church has to come, as to Christ in heaven, on to heavenly ground, in a spiritual way. It has got to leave earthly ground and really be a heavenly, spiritual thing, while still here, in relation to Christ in heaven. That is a Divine law and principle which is so clear in the New Testament. It is there from "Acts" onward most manifestly.

But this is not something new which has come in with the New Testament. God has put that law into everything that points in any prophetic way to the Church and to Christ. Isaac was not allowed to leave the land and go abroad to fetch his wife. He had to stay there and the servant had to be sent to bring her to where he was. There is your law. Christ is in heaven; the Spirit is sent to bring the Church to where He is - firstly in a spiritual way, and then later literally; but the principle is there. Joseph passes through rejection and typical death and eventually reaches the throne, and with his exaltation he receives his wife, Asenath. Joseph is a clear figure of Christ. It is on His exaltation that Christ receives His Church, His Bride. Pentecost is really the result of the exaltation of Christ, when the Church is spiritually brought into living relationship with Himself, the exalted Christ. There is your principle in the simple story of Joseph. You can go on like that, seeing how God in simple details has kept everything true to principle; you find His eternal principles are embodied in the simplest things of the Old Testament, fulfilling this final declaration that the testimony of Jesus is the very spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10). There is something there indicative of a great heavenly truth, which is the spirit of prophecy pointing to Christ.

I wonder whether you have really been impressed with the tremendous importance of Divine principle in things. There is a principle, and the recognition and the honouring of that principle determines the success of the whole. Now, only the Holy Spirit knows all those Divine principles, only He knows the mind of God, the thoughts of God, in fullness. Hence, if things are to be held to the full thought and purpose of God, it can only be under an anointing - which means that the Spirit of God has come to take charge. An anointed ministry means that God the Holy Spirit has become responsible for the whole thing; He has committed Himself to it, I do not suppose anyone would dispute or challenge the statement of the need for the Holy Spirit, the need for Him to be in charge, for everything to be done by Him. But oh, that means a great deal more than a general truth and a general position.

(b) Knowledge Imparted by Revelation

It leads to this second thing in prophetic ministry: By the anointing there comes revelation. We can accept in a general way the necessity of the Holy Spirit's doing everything - initiating, conducting, governing and being the power and inspiration of everything; but oh! that is a life-long education, and it brings in the necessity for everything to be given by revelation. That is why the prophets originally were called "seers" - men who saw. They saw what no other men saw. They saw what it was impossible for other people to see, even religious, God-fearing people. They saw by revelation.

A prophetic ministry demands revelation; it is a ministry by revelation. Later we shall examine that more closely, but I want just to emphasize the fact at this moment. I am not thinking now of revelation extra to the Scriptures. I cannot take the ground of certain 'prophets' (?) in the Church today who prophesy extra to the Scriptures. No, but within the revelation already given - and God knows it is big enough! - the Holy

Spirit yet moves to reveal what 'eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard'. That is the wonder of a life in the Spirit. It is a life of constant new discovery; everything is full of surprise and wonder. A life under the Holy Spirit can never be static; it can never reach finality here, nor come to the place where the sum of truth is boxed. A life really in the Holy Spirit is a life which realises that there is infinitely, transcendently, more beyond than all we have yet seen or grasped or sensed. People who know, who have come to a fixed place and cannot see - let alone move - beyond their present position, represent a position that is foreign to the mind of the Holy Ghost. Prophetic ministry under the Holy Spirit is a ministry through growing revelation.

A prophet was a man who went back to God again and again, and did not come out to speak until God had shown him the next thing. He did not just go on in his professional office because he was a prophet and it was expected of him. There was nothing professional about his position. When it became professional, then tragedy overtook the prophetic office. It did become professional through the 'schools of the prophets' set up by Samuel. We must not even confuse these schools of the prophets with true prophetic office. There was a difference between those who graduated in the schools of the prophets and the true prophets represented by such men as Samuel, Elijah, Elisha. Whenever things become professional, something is lost, because the very essence and nature of prophetic ministry is that it is coming by revelation afresh every time. A thing revealed is new; it may be an old thing, but it has about it something that is fresh as a revelation to the heart of the one concerned, and it is so new and wonderful that the effect with him is as though no one had ever yet seen that, although thousands may have seen it before. It is the nature of revelation to keep things alive and fresh, and filled with Divine energy. You cannot recover an old position by just the old doctrine. You will never recover something of God which has been lost by bringing back the exact statement of the truth. You may be stating the truth of the early days of the New Testament exactly, but you may be far from having the conditions which obtained at such times.

Prophetic succession is not the succession of teaching; it is the succession of anointing. Something can come in from God, by the operation of God; there may be something very real, very living, which God effects through an instrumentality, it may be individual or collective, which is alive because God brought it in under His anointing. And then someone tries to imitate it, duplicate it, or later someone takes it up to carry it on; someone has been appointed, elected, chosen by ballot to be the successor. The thing goes on and grows; but some vital factor is no longer there. The succession is by anointing, not by framework, even of doctrine. We cannot recover New Testament conditions by re-stating New Testament doctrine. We have to get New Testament anointing. I am not dismissing doctrine; it is necessary; but it is the anointing which makes things alive, fresh, vibrant. Everything must come by revelation.

Some of us know what it is to be able to analyse our Bibles and present, perhaps in a very interesting way, the contents of its books and all its doctrines. We can do that with "Ephesians" as well as we can do it with any other book. We can come to "Ephesians" and analyse it and outline the Church and the Body and all that, and be as blind as bats until the day comes when, God having done something in us, something deep and tremendous and terrific, we see the Church, we see the Body - we see "Ephesians"! They were two worlds: one was truth, exact in technical detail, full of interest and fascination - but there was something lacking. We could have stated the truth from beginning to end, but we did not know what was in it; and until we have gone through that experience and something has happened in us, we may think we know, we may be sure we know, we may lay down our life for it; but we do not know. There is all the difference between a very keen, clear, mental apprehension of things in the Word of God, and a spiritual

revelation. There is the difference of two worlds - but it is quite impossible to make people understand that difference until something has happened. We shall speak about that 'something that happens' later, but here we are stating the facts. By anointing there is revelation, and revelation by anointing is essential to the seeing of what God is after, both in general and in detail.

So, building up, we arrive at this. A prophetic ministry is that which - although much detail has yet to be revealed, even to the most enlightened servants of God - has, by the Holy Ghost, seen the purpose of God, original and ultimate.

(c) Exact Conformity to God's Thoughts

And then there is the third thing we find connected with this anointing. It is that to which we have already referred in general - exactness.

The anointing brings about that first-hand touch with God, which means seeing God face to face. Was it not that that was the summing up of Moses' life? "There hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10). And when that happens you come into the place of direct spiritual knowledge of God, direct touch with God, the place of the open heaven - you cannot, under any consideration, for any advantage at all, be a person who compromises, who deviates from what has been shown to your heart.

What is it that the Apostle says about Moses? "Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant" (Heb. 3:5); and the faithfulness of Moses is seen particularly and largely in the way in which he was governed exactly by what God said. You know those later chapters of the book of Exodus, bringing everything back again to the word, again and again and again, "as the Lord commanded Moses". Everything was done as God said; through the whole system which Moses was raised up to constitute and establish, he was exact to a detail. We know why, of course; and here is that great, that grand, comprehensive explanation of what I said just now about principles. God has Christ in view all the time, in every detail, and that system that Moses instituted was a representation of Christ to a fraction; and so it was necessary that in every detail he should be exact. It is a difficult, costly way, but you cannot have revelation, and go on in revelation, and at the same time compromise over details and have things at any point other than exactly as the Lord wants them. You are not governed by diplomacy or policy or public opinion. You are governed by what the Lord has said in your heart by revelation as to His purpose. That is prophetic ministry.

Prophets were not men who accommodated themselves to anything that was comparative in its goodness. They never let themselves go wholly if the thing was only comparatively good. Look at Jeremiah. There was a day in Jeremiah's life when a good king did seek to recover things, and he did institute a great feast of the Passover, and the people did come up in their crowds for the celebration of that Passover, and it was a great occasion apparently. They were doing great things there in Jerusalem, but with all that was going on which was good, confessedly good, Jeremiah did not let himself go. He had a reservation, and he was right. It was seen afterward that this thing was very largely outward, that the real heart of the people had not changed, the high places were not taken away, and Jeremiah's original prophecy had to stand. If the apparent reformation had been the true thing, then Jeremiah's prophecies about the captivity, the destruction of the city, the complete handing over to judgment, would have gone for nothing. Jeremiah held back. He may not have understood, he may have been in perplexity about it, but his heart would not allow him to go wholly with this comparatively good thing. He found out the reason why afterward - that, although it was good up to a point, it did not represent a deep heart change, and so the judgment had to

be.

The prophet cannot accept as full and final what is only comparative, though he rejoices in the measure of good that there may be anywhere. We should, of course, be generous to any little bit of good that is in the world - let us be grateful for anything that is right and true and of God; but oh! we cannot say that is altogether satisfying to the Lord, that is all that the Lord wants. No, this prophetic ministry is one of utter faithfulness to the thoughts of God. It is a ministry of exactness. That is what the anointing means, and we have said why - it is a full Christ who is in view.

That last statement in Revelation 19:10 sums it all up. It gathers up into one sentence prophetic ministry from the beginning. I suppose prophetic ministry commenced in the day when it was stated of the seed of the woman that it should bruise the head of the serpent, and then passed on to Enoch, who prophesied saying, "Behold, the Lord came..." (Jude 14), and so right on from then. It is all gathered up at the end of the Revelation in this thought, that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." That is, the spirit of prophecy from beginning to end is all toward that - the testimony of Jesus. The spirit of prophecy has always had Him in view from its first utterance - "the seed of the woman" - to "Behold, the Lord came" (and how beginning and end are brought together so early on!). All the way through it was always with the Lord Jesus in view, and a full Christ. "He gave prophets... till we all attain unto... the fullness of Christ." That is the end, and God can never be satisfied with anything less than the fullness of His Son as represented by the Church. The Church is to be the fullness of Him; a full-grown Man - that is the Church. The prophetic ministry is unto that - the fullness of Christ, the finality of Christ, the all-inclusiveness of Christ. It is to be Christ, centre and circumference; Christ, first and last; Christ in general and Christ in every detail. And to see Christ by revelation means that you can never accept anything less or other. You have seen, and that has settled it. The way to reach God's end, then, is seeing by the Holy Spirit, and that seeing is the basis of this prophetic ministry.

I think that that perhaps is enough to show what I said earlier, that if we see the nature of the ministry, we at once see what the vessel is. The vessel may be individuals fulfilling such a ministry, or it may be collective. Later we may say something more about the vessel, but let us not now think technically, in terms of apostles and prophets and so on, as offices. Let us think of them as vital functions. God is concerned that the man and the function are identical, not the man and a professional or official position with a title, whatever the title may be. The vessel must be that, and that must justify the vessel. We will not go about advertising ourselves as prophets; but God grant that there may be raised up a prophetic ministry for a time like this, when His whole purpose concerning His Son is brought back into view amongst His people. That is their need, and it is His.

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