

Old Prophets

“And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the LORD unto Bethel: and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. And he cried against the altar in the word of the LORD, and said, O altar, altar, thus saith the LORD; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men’s bones shall be burnt upon thee . . . And the man of God said unto the king, If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place: For so was it charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest. So he went another way, and returned not by the way that he came to Bethel. Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel; and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel: the words which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father . . . And he said unto his sons, Saddle me the ass. So they saddled him the ass: and he rode thereon, And went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak: and he said unto him, *Art* thou the man of God that camest from Judah? And he said, I *am*. Then he said unto him, Come home with me, and eat bread. And he said, I may not return with thee, nor go in with thee: neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place: For it was said to me by the word of the LORD, Thou shalt eat no bread nor drink water there, nor turn again to go by the way that thou camest. He said unto him, I *am* a prophet also as thou *art*; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. *But* he lied unto him. So he went back with him . . . “ (I Kings 13:1, 2, 8-11, 13-19)

I am about to be misunderstood.

Nevertheless, the very fact that the thoughts expressed here will be shocking is added reason why they ought to be said.

A hoary head on a prophet of God does not indicate superior wisdom. In fact, it might be a warning to hear him with extreme caution.

We have been warned against the novice, instructed to lay hands on no man suddenly, encouraged to seek a man of experience in serious and important matters. Now I suggest we exercise the same caution about extreme age as we do about the premature youth.

The passage in I Kings 13 is not to be taken without warning. Here is a true prophet of God with a direct commission and specific instructions on how it is to be carried out. He executes it faithfully and carefully with admirable courage. He does not shirk to pronounce the curse of God’s judgment upon king Jeroboam. God faithfully vindicates His man by withering the hand put forth to apprehend him. He then again attests to His approval of His servant when the repentant king prays his hand to be restored. The prophet’s prayer is heard and the withered member healed. Also, we must admire the prophet’s courage and devotion to every detail of duty when he refused the king’s invitation to dine with him in deference to the Lord’s command that he is to “eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the way that thou camest.”

The fact that this true and faithful servant of God, in the face of all this, was persuaded to turn away from the explicit command of God by an old prophet at Bethel underscores our point. What physical threat, intimidation, flattery, and favor could not do, an old prophet of God did. He successfully turned a true child of God away from the path God had assigned, and occasioned his destruction. This is a point that ought not be considered lightly.

Of course the primary lesson to be learned here, is to obey what God tells you no matter who tells you that God told them you ought to do something contrary. But the second lesson is also important: An old prophet does not mean an infallible oracle of God; and because he *is* an old prophet, he may be a particular treacherous snare.

It has come to my notice in recent years that a man may have a profoundly rich and fruitful ministry most of his life, and then in his later years do, say write or embrace something that almost, if not actually, brings a disgrace upon the name of the Lord and casts a shadow on his entire ministry.

Consider a few contemporary cases in point.

- A Scotsman, converted to Christ in his youth, became a devoted and flaming evangelist. His ministry included some marvelous revivals in Eastern Europe, a number of which countries now are locked up behind the Iron Curtain. He is the author of scores of inspirational books, biographies and booklets centering around true evangelism, revival and the Holy Spirit. His entire ministry was characterized by joyous victory. Even in some of the most depressing and contrary circumstances, he seemed to be never without a pronounced sense of the Lord's presence and power. Yet in the last few years of his life, he became a cringing, whining picture of defeat. He was convinced the Lord had forsaken him, feared the company of people and was in constant depression. It must be said, however, that it grieved him extremely to be in such a condition, and he mourned continually, fearing his present state would bring a reproach on his life's work and would be a stumbling block to those who knew him.
- A prolific writer of great stature, who (as is so often the case) was not fully appreciated until his decease, wrote some of the best books and commentaries from the Reformed viewpoint of this century. As he grew older, he became increasingly bitter and intolerant of those who held views contrary to his own. He first ignored, then fought and railed against a mighty God-sent revival in the Islands off the coast of Scotland where he then lived. Before he died, he was known to have a serious drinking problem. Fortunately, because he was in an isolated part of the world and he was not accepted as he is today, his latter years' deterioration was not widely known.
- Another famous preacher and writer of deeper life books, though more in the Arminian persuasion, has been used in one of the foremost Missionary Societies in Britain. In his old age, his lectures and at least one of his more recent books is nothing less than thinly veiled Pantheism. He stoutly declares it is not, but it has all the main elements of the ancient heresy. This man is still a strong voice in deeper life movements, along with his false doctrine.
- Here is another man, a powerful evangelist from the old country. His star has faded, his type of preaching which once stirred thousands, is no longer heard seriously. Even though his preaching ministry is for all practical purposes finished, he is still in demand as a novelty or a drawing feature in conferences and in some churches. He is lonely in his rejection, sick and disillusioned over the apostasy of churches. He has been associated with a number of evangelical associations. Dissenters soon are drawn to him, through his powerful influence and strong denunciations. A split soon follows. He continues to attract malcontents and soreheads, who mistakenly associate his severe denunciations with their own hatreds and prejudices. He, in turn, mistakenly identifies their hatreds and prejudices with his own holy indignation at the apostasy of churches and evangelism. In such a way he strengthens the hand of the wicked in their uprising and rebellion against their spiritual leaders.
- One of the most prominent evangelists of this country is now well up in years, but continues to attempt a driving pace. His preaching in the past has been superb. The fruits of his evangelism are everywhere. By his own example in prevailing prayer, he has inspired many into the ministry of intercession. But now his preaching does not have the power it once had. Crowds do not attend as they once did, and those who come do not respond as he has been accustomed to. In his frustration he will at first cheapen the terms of salvation, then lower the commitment of response, begging, and then harangue and harass people to come forward. In one conference which I attended, he displayed a boorish contempt for an humble, yet mighty man of God who was ministering there at the same time. He refused to stay in the building when his colleague was ministering, and jealously attacked his ministry at every opportunity. Here is another recently deceased man of God, a native of this country and one who spent practically all his life preaching and evangelizing in it. He was a mighty and effective preacher of the grace of God in salvation.

Never too popular, he became increasingly rejected in his latter years. He was persuaded that all organized churches were apostate, the whore of the Apocalypse, and spent his last years warning people to “come out.” The great flood of deception and apostasy of our times goaded him into an obsession with “false prophets.” This, coupled with an old man’s natural interest in the second coming of Christ succeeded in turning his interest away from his sound and profitable ministry to the quagmire of speculative prophecy. The mark of the beast, the Anti-Christ, the great tribulation, false prophets and the millennium. He began to call all preachers who did not agree with his views of prophecy false prophets. Since his views were so radical, scattered and uncertain, this meant just about everyone. He drove away all his sound minister friends with these radical obsessions, so that when he died, his followers consisted mainly of a few women who had rebelled against their husbands and pastors. These expect to carry on what they have been led to believe is “the end of time ministry” he left with them.

- An English educator, though not a clergyman, was one of the stoutest defenders of true Christianity of our century. Having been a renown atheist before his sound conversion to Christ, he became an intellectual barrage against the heresy of humanism. His books, essays and lectures on crucial religious issues were clear, profound and powerful. Yet in his late years, the death of his wife threw him into such a state of profound grief and despair, he wrote a book that put in serious question all his stalwart stands for the faith. He complained against God, railed against the hopeless and futile state in which he found himself, and foolishly charges himself with having had no faith at all. There is nothing in this latter book to comment faith in God and plenty of fuel for the fires of skepticism.
- Here is an old veteran preacher from the mountains of the Southeastern United States. His preaching, books, records and tapes have warmed and thrilled the hearts of people who love truth and righteousness for fifty years. He is especially a master at taking the word of God and cutting to pieces the shallow evangelism, the phoney churchianity, the utter foolishness of churches today. His sharp satirical style has set in bold, clear relief the far departure of popular evangelical Christianity from the purity of the early church and the person of Christ. Indeed, so bold and clear have been his prophetic denunciations and cry for repentance, that only his keen wit has kept him a place of popular acceptance in the very church situations he deplors.

Yet this precious man seems to have, in recent years, capitulated to popular demands to produce the same sort of artificial results his whole ministry has decried. After preaching, he will stand and make one silly proposition after another, until he has practically the whole congregation stand down front, indicating, if not that they love Christ and want to serve Him, that they love mother or country or any other such acceptable and inoffensive proposition. After attending such a blatant display of compromise, one is made to wonder if the man really meant all he has preached and written for fifty years, or has it been just his particular brand of religious merchandise.

The above examples are of actual men either now living or recently deceased. To give their names would serve no practical purpose. I am sure some of my readers will recognize some of them. Many other such illustrations could be set forth, and we could go back into the past and pick up scores more. But these suffice to illustrate the point.

It is significant that the Levites were not allowed to enter into the service of the tabernacle of the congregation before the age of 25, nor allowed to continue in it past the age of 50. “This *is it* that *belongeth* unto the Levites: from twenty and five years old and upward they shall go in to wait upon the service of the tabernacle of the congregation: And from the age of fifty years they shall cease waiting upon the service *thereof*, and shall serve no more:” (Numbers 8:24-25) The marginal reading on “wait on the service of the tabernacle of the congregation” is “war the warfare.”

After reading this, it occurred to me that most of the problems in churches and in evangelical Christianity centers around either very young or very old men. What pastor has not had to deal with the subtleties, the deceit, the eccentricities of an old preacher in the congregation, in the community, on the radio,

TV, etc., who by his past reputation, accomplishments and present persuasive powers, has gained a following from the flock?

The gospel ministry, if a man is *really in it* intensely, takes a terrible toll of the mind, emotion, body and whole psychological makeup. It is a rare man indeed, who can continue under such a strain into the twilight of his life and maintain sound judgment. The courageous cliché, “I’d rather burn out than rust out,” sounds noble and commendable. But the fact is that preachers do not usually go out in dazzling brilliance. They usually fizzle out long before they shut up. No man’s star burns brightly his whole life span unless he is martyred, killed, or translated, as Elijah.

No man gains perfection in this life. Unsound ideas harbored in the back of the mind but kept suppressed by an alert mind that is disciplined by God’s word may be spoken or written when judgment weakens and personal discipline is slackened. Weaknesses of the flesh, petty jealousies, fears, lusts, secret desires that have been suppressed for years often burst out in old age as senility takes its toll on the mind, and the body weakens. Ministers are not impervious to becoming childish, insecure and petty in old age. As their following diminishes and other men’s increase, jealousies may arise. In order to hold on to men’s admiration or attract others, one may leave sound doctrine in favor of sensational extra-scriptural teachings. He may hold out, as an attraction, experiences and power that the scriptures do not promise. They are likely to pass over the glaring faults, ignorances, prejudices of the few followers they have, flatter and puff them up with vain-glorious illusions of their own spiritual superiority, knowledge and wisdom.

Rebellious soreheads, childish, immature believers, young novices, are all prime targets for such an old prophet’s weenings. Flattered that they have been selected by this great man to learn at his feet and to succeed him, they greedily and thoughtlessly devour every word he throws out. It is little wonder that such men are then remembered more for the error than their truth.

*Because* a man’s ministry has been great in the past, young preachers are likely to attempt to emulate him even when he is at his worst. *Because* he has been a stalwart defender of orthodox truth in the past, the false teachings of his old age are likely to be accepted. *Because* of his dogmatic unwavering stands throughout his life, his faltering doubts in his old age may cast doubts about the certainty of any truth.

What are we suggesting in this? Should men be retired from the active gospel ministry at the age of fifty? Certainly not! The grace and providence of God, and the great variations in capabilities and durabilities of men preclude our setting rigid limits on a man’s usefulness in the gospel ministry. Rather, here is what I am suggesting:

God’s men should welcome the closing of their ministry, as did John. “I must decrease that He might increase.” Instead of trying to hold on to the limelight, continually pushing to expand our horizons or cling tenaciously to the measure of ministry we have had at our peak, we ought to be encouraging younger men to move on. We ought to be pulling in our personal powers and influence and recommending our followers’ confidence and support to our successors. All of us have ideals, goals, objectives, longings, that we will never attain in this life. Forget about them. You cannot master every musical instrument in one lifetime. Be content with the glorious ministry God has given you and step aside for the next fellow. I am not suggesting retirement. The Levites that “ceased waiting upon the service of the tabernacle of the congregation” did not retire completely. Rather, they “ministered with their brethren in the tabernacle of the congregation to keep the charge.” So can we, as we become “old prophets,” be assistants and helpers to the men whom God has raised up to replace us in the ranks to “war the warfare.”

Now a few words of caution concerning our attitude and responsibilities toward the old prophets. Don’t write off an old man simply because he is old and “out of touch” with what is going on today, or doesn’t understand contemporary issues. But neither accept his ministry as infallible simply because of his grey head. Here are a few things to watch out for:

1. A bitter, critical, railing spirit tending to put down every other ministry or work outside his own.
2. One who tells everyone to “come out” from whatever he is in. No man can call another man out. Only Christ can tell a man to come out to Him. But when a man tells you to come out, he is not saying “Come to Christ,” but “Come to me.”

3. An obsession with his interpretation of difficult and obscure passages of scripture, especially those related to prophecy. It is not likely the Holy Spirit has left the Church ignorant of these things for 2000 years and revealed it privately to one old prophet in the fading years of his life.
4. A new teaching that has not been a part of his greater ministry. A departure from the emphasis that God blessed in the most fruitful years of his life. "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance." God does not change a man's ministry, nor does He give him a new doctrine after his anointing is gone.
5. A negative spirit which ministers defeat, discouragement, gloom and depression.
6. A claim to have infallible revelations by the Holy Spirit that are not consistent with the scriptures.
7. A man that demands to be heard because he is aged. A grey head no more validates what a man says than the fact that he is the bishop or the Pope. Homes for the aged are filled with grey heads devoid of sound judgment and spirituality. A man's credentials consist, beyond his proven ministry, of the anointing of God, not his titles or his age.

We owe a great and impossible debt of love and gratitude to the old prophets who have served us well. They are our spiritual fathers. We ought therefore honor them as our parents in the Lord, see that their physical and emotional needs are well cared for. We ought visit and care for them, kindly entreat and hear them. But we must remember that they *are* old prophets, and their day is past. The weight of the burden of ministry is now shifted to our own shoulders. The same God that was mighty in them will be mighty in us.

- C. M.