



## THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 3)

### *The Church "off-message"*

#### **MAIN CHALLENGE**

*Prophets have an awesome responsibility to faithfully preach the message they have been given. As believers in Jesus with a prophetic calling, we have been given the responsibility of preaching the glorious message of the gospel involving God's love shown in forgiveness, the need for us to be reconciled to God through surrender of our self-life, and the warning that this world will be destroyed by fire, and that those who do not bow the knee to Jesus will perish with it on the final Day of Judgment. Where believers go "off-message" by misrepresenting any aspect of this key message, we compromise our effectiveness, and risk the judgment of God as false prophets. Are you and your church faithfully discharging your prophetic responsibility to a lost and dying world?*

We are examining the nature and purpose of the Church from the standpoint of the key Scripture found in Joel 2:28-29 and Ac. 2:16ff, namely that we are called to be a prophetic people. This means we are fundamentally a people endowed with the personal presence of the Spirit of God, called to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God and called to live lives consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus".

In the previous message, we identified three key dimensions of that calling: our primary identifier, our primary role in society, and our primary behaviour requirement. Although these do not cover all that the Christian life entails, they go a long way to explaining what our priorities need to be.

In this message, we will examine what happens when the Church forgets the second of these priorities, that our primary role is to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God.

#### ***The prophet's awesome responsibility***

Throughout the Old Testament, God called men and women as prophets and gave them a single task to perform: to preach faithfully the message he would give them, no matter what the personal cost. They were told that they themselves would be judged entirely on their faithfulness to this calling. Indeed, there is a strange story (in 1 Ki. 13) of an unnamed prophet from Judah sent to prophesy judgment against Jeroboam king of Israel. An essential part of his calling was to not eat or drink with anyone in Israel. When he was tricked into disobeying this injunction, he was judged by being eaten by a lion! Interestingly, there is no suggestion that this man was a "false prophet" – merely that he was a disobedient one. It is indeed fortunate that those same stringent consequences do not apply to God's people today!

This awesome responsibility is best summed up in a word given to the prophet Ezekiel at the start of his ministry:



*"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself." (Ez. 3:17-19)*

Note that this is not a requirement that prophets had to be perfect, merely faithful; that is, they were allowed to suffer from any manner of human failings (and presumably would be treated the same as anyone else when they fell into them) *except in the one thing they were called to minister*; in this matter alone, they were to be judged by a higher standard, because they had been given a responsibility (and the power to carry it out) given to none other.

If the Church of Jesus Christ is a prophetic body, and if we as disciples are called to be prophets, it therefore needs to be asked: what is this one task we are required to discharge? How faithful have we been over the years in discharging it? And, where we have been unfaithful, what are the consequences of that failure?

## **Our key message**

At one level, the message we have been given to preach to the world can simply be summed up as "the gospel" or even "the word of God"; that definition is profoundly true, but it is also profoundly unhelpful. It is unhelpful because a simple survey of Church history over the past 2,000 years, and indeed of the state of the Christian Church today, shows that there are many different interpretations of what "the gospel" or "the word of God" actually is! And so, if we adopt this definition, the question itself degenerates into the simple one of "whose interpretation is right?" (which is simple as a question, but not so simple in terms of its answer!)

This question, moreover, disguises the fact that there are many issues of non-critical importance that believers may validly disagree upon, and these issues are surely not part of the prophetic brief we have been given to preach to the world. Our responsibility in dealing with outsiders must undoubtedly be focused on the key aspects of the gospel message, not on these peripheral details.

So what is our key prophetic message, the message which we have been given responsibility to preach to a lost and dying world, the message that we will be held accountable for if we do not preach it? I believed this "key message" consists of the following four non-negotiable elements:



**1. That God loves all people, and wants them to be saved from the peril of sin and death that threatens them (Jn 3:16).**

If love is not seen unequivocally as the motivating force behind God's actions in the world, then everything else we might say is by definition a false message. How can our message be "true" if we do not truly reflect the heart that drives it?

**2. That, through the cross, God has acted unilaterally to forgive all people their sins, no matter who they are or what they have done (Rom. 3:23-24).**

God's forgiveness is unilateral; that is, it is a sovereign action by him to not count our sins against us, no matter who we are or what we have done. All humanity alike share in the problem of sin; all humanity alike share in the miracle of God's forgiveness.

**3. That all human beings need to be reconciled to God by turning to him in repentance and surrendering their lives to Jesus (2 Cor. 5:20).**

Forgiveness is a one-way street: God forgives those who wrong him (and we also are commanded to forgive those who wrong us) regardless of whether or not the sinner responds to that forgiveness. But reconciliation is a two-way street, involving both the offer of forgiveness by God *and our acceptance of that unmerited gift for ourselves*. The only way we can be reconciled to God is through surrender. Just as the heart of sin against God is the rebellious desire to live lives our own way, the only way we this can be rectified is if we voluntarily give up this self-life.

**4. That the only thing that now matters is the new creation which God has instituted through the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Gal. 6:15).**

As individuals, we participate in the new creation by being "born again" into God's kingdom when we surrender our lives to Jesus. That new creation will grow inside us until Jesus returns and everything belonging to the old creation will be burnt by fire. There is no part of the old creation – neither humans nor institutions nor nations nor even inanimate matter – that will survive; all is destined for destruction. Our message, therefore, is to call people to be saved from this sinful world before it is too late (Ac. 2:40; 1 Cor. 15:50ff).

### ***Implications of this key message***

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you are doubtless familiar with these key themes of the gospel message. It is not my intention to elaborate on them; nevertheless it is necessary to discuss the implications of this message. For, it is my belief that, even when Christians claim to believe these key truths, all too often we are led astray into betraying them by not following through with the implications of them.



## *The centrality of the love of God through forgiveness*

We all agree that love is the motivational force behind all of God's saving acts. Why would he sacrifice his Son in so horrendous a manner if his love for all humanity was not something incalculably deep?

God's love is inextricably linked to his forgiveness. Paul expresses this link in these words: *"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us this message of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."* (2 Cor. 5:14, 19). Each one of us had a need – to be forgiven for our many misdeeds. We could do nothing to earn this, so God acted out of love to do what we could not do. This is the very definition of what love is.

God is never shocked or surprised by our human depravity; he knows what we are all capable of! Moreover, when he looks at our sinfulness, he looks at us from the inside-out, not from the outside-in: he sees the loneliness, the desperation, the brokenness that inspires our worst misdeeds. That is why his solution is always to go to the heart of the matter and deal with the internal problem of sin, and not to focus on the external symptoms of our malady. The worst sins are not murder or adultery, terrible though these are; the worst sins are the unbelief and idolatry, the greed and the selfishness, that cause us to do such acts. Since we know (or should know!) what our own hearts are capable of, we should never be surprised at what deeds others are capable of committing – and neither should we be shocked.

## *Forgiveness vs reconciliation*

God has acted unilaterally to forgive all humanity, but that does not mean that we have all received that forgiveness and been reconciled to God. There is a fundamental difference between forgiveness and reconciliation.

What this implies is that, when viewed through the prism of the cross, sin looks completely different to God – and it needs to look different to us. Our outward sins (whatever they should be) are still terrible, hateful things, but they are no longer the problem they once were; God has already taken care of that, because they never were in fact the real problem, only the symptom. He has disinfected the symptoms (our outward sins) so that he can focus on the real, underlying problem – our inward sinfulness, our heart of rebellion. And this is what we also need to focus on, both in dealing with ourselves and in relating to others.

On the Day of Judgment, no human beings will ultimately face condemnation because of any bad things they have done; rather, they will be condemned only if they failed to surrender their lives to God in response to the forgiveness that was freely offered them. This is the heart of our message of reconciliation: the rebels must surrender their arms and receive mercy! If we do not do that, none of the good deeds we have done will matter; but if we do surrender, none of our bad deeds will matter either.



We need to learn to look at sin the way God looks at it – through the prism of the cross. We do not need to focus on endless lists of wrong things that have been done, either by ourselves or by those outside the faith we minister to. *"From now on we view no one from a worldly point of view"* (2 Cor. 5:16). Even if we listed all the evil deeds we know about, that would still only be a small percentage of the total list! Rather, we need to focus on the single greatest need we all have, which is to surrender our lives to the personal control of Jesus the Messiah. If we do that, of course, we will naturally confess and renounce those particular sins that we know we have committed, but this is more a symptom of our surrender, not a pre-condition for it.

*"Do not love the world ..."*

God's means of salvation is through the setting up of a brand new creation. This new creation starts in the hearts of men, women and children who accept the reign of Jesus the Messiah, but will be consummated with a whole new world when Jesus returns. In the meantime, we are instructed very distinctly to view ourselves as pilgrims and foreigners in this life (1 Pet. 2:11), and not to love the world, or any of the things of the world (1 Jn 2:15ff). And the reason for this is clear: since the only thing of eternal value is the new creation, and since the new creation only yet exists in the hearts of those individuals who have bowed the knee to Jesus, it follows that anything else – especially all human social and political institutions – is irreparably condemned, and will one day soon be totally destroyed.

There is a fine line we need to tread here. Human beings are social and political creatures, so being involved in human affairs (which we need to do in order to build bridges to the lost) must involve social and even political activity. It is especially complex in modern western democracies where our societies' rules allow citizens to take an active role in government. Nevertheless, there is a definite line we should never cross, and it is this: our involvement in this world's affairs should never be at the expense of our key message, which is (a) that human institutions can never be perfected, and will one day be destroyed because of their frailty and brokenness, and (b) that our message is no call people to be saved out of the nations, rather than to somehow redeem, sanctify, or otherwise "Christianise" those same nations.

*"The flesh counts for nothing ..."*

The other implication of the new creation is expressed succinctly by Jesus himself in Jn 6:63: *"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing."* Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, "flesh" refers to the whole human realm belonging to the old creation. It "counts for nothing" because it involves activity without the direct energisation of God. This is the reason also why it is set against "the Spirit" which, both here and throughout Paul's writings, refers to God's direct interaction with redeemed people through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Putting it simply, the only thing in the life of human beings that will survive the coming judgment is that which is birthed by the Holy Spirit. Everything else will be destroyed on the last day (see 1 Cor. 3:10ff).



The implication of this truth is we need to see all human beings the way God sees them. The rich man is no better than the poor man, the religious man is no better than the unreligious, and so on. *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal. 3:28). The new creation is the universe's great leveller, for it does not discriminate on any of the issues that divide human beings. We need to see all human beings the way God sees them – according to their potential in Christ, not according to their fleshly identity – and to treat them in line with this.

## ***The most significant "false messages"***

Mistakes by Christians and churches, of course, are all too common and a function of our immaturity and imperfection. However, our shortcomings are only significant when they impact on the key message God has given us for the world. When they do so, not only do we open ourselves up to the accusation of being false prophets, but we do incalculable harm to our witness and the effectiveness of our ministry.

Here are some of the most significant areas where we are in danger of preaching such fundamentally false messages in the modern world.

### *Judgment, not love*

The gospel message is a message of love for sinners, not judgment. Sinners always felt comfortable being with Jesus because he accepted them exactly as they were. If we do not have the same attitude towards sinners, then we are fundamentally misrepresenting God.

Is there a Day of Judgment appointed? Yes – but it is not today! Today is the day of mercy, not judgment.

### *Being shocked and outraged by certain sins*

You do not have to spend much time on social media before you realise that many Christians are either shocked or outraged (it's a bit unclear which it is sometimes – perhaps both) by certain sins. For those on the political "right", it is usually sins of personal morality, such as homosexuality or abortion. For those on the political "left", it is usually sins of social injustice that spark the reaction.

Outrage and shock can be tools to raise consciousness and awareness, but they still misrepresent our key message. God is saddened by sin – *all* sin – but he is never shocked or outraged. He knows what is in the heart of mankind, knows it so well that he sent his Son to die to deal with the problem.

Shock and outrage build walls against sinners, walls of shame and rejection. As tactics, they are aimed to motivate the "righteous" (i.e. those not guilty of these sins) at the expense of the "guilty". This is never God's way, and is a total misrepresentation of the message of the cross.



## *Picking and choosing which sins to condemn and which ones to excuse*

The problem of shock and outrage is exacerbated by the fact that we pick and choose which sins to be outraged at or shocked by! Are the anti-abortionists shocked by injustice towards refugees or corporate greed? Do the social justice warriors cringe with horror at the murder of the unborn? Instead, on both sides of the political spectrum there is a tendency to balance the outrage against certain sins by having a commensurate level of empathy and understanding towards other types of "sinners" – often to the extent that their sins are completely overlooked. (Perhaps the reason we are like that is that we subconsciously realise we cannot be shocked and outraged about everything if we want to keep our sanity?)

There is a reason why God commands us not to judge: only he has the understanding of all life's circumstances to know exactly how culpable we each are for the evil (or apparent evil) we are responsible for. We should neither be condemning or excusing any sin, but rather bringing it all to the cross where it can be cleansed. Our message to the sinner should be neither: "You disgust God!" nor "Don't worry, it doesn't really matter that much!" – but rather: "This is evidence of how broken you are, just like I am. Come to Jesus and begin to be made right."

## *Focusing on outward appearances rather than the inward heart*

The underlying problem with both our shock / outrage at certain sins and our excuses for others is that we inevitably focus on the outward appearance of things. We think that some sins are worse than others because they seem to have more significant immediate consequences. Murder is worse than theft, because people die – or so we think.

Are sins different in their impact? Undoubtedly. It is probably even true that God views some sins as worse than others. And we should certainly act (where it is possible to do so) to restrain someone from committing an outrage that will have immediate negative consequences (such as murder). But, having said that, God looks at sin in terms of its total consequences, not just its immediate ones. We see murder as the cause of death and misery to innocent victims; but God sees hatred, bitterness, unforgiveness and even self-centred indifference as the cause of all murder; so which is actually worse? If we are honest with ourselves, the only reason we don't see that is because we know we are all guilty of these inward sins.

It was foundational to Jesus' message that the inward sins of the heart are just as significant to God as the outward ones that the law focused on (e.g. Mt. 5, 15:1-20). If this perspective does not frame our response to unbelievers, then we are seriously misrepresenting the gospel message.

## *Not being clear on the need to be reconciled to God*

Another way we can seriously misrepresent the gospel message is to so emphasise forgiveness that we avoid the need for people to be reconciled to God by surrendering their self-will to Jesus. "God loves you just as you are!" – yes, this is true. But, unless we make it clear that any unrepented sin has the power to lead us to death and destruction, we are seriously distorting the teachings of Jesus.



According to Jesus, any sin – whether in the lives of a believer or anyone else – is so serious that we would be better off maiming ourselves than tolerating it (Mt. 5:29-30). It is serious because it is evidence of our inward heart of rebellion against God. Now, this is undoubtedly an example of hyperbole, but the message is still very clear: do *anything you can* to avoid sin! Our message to sinners has to be: “This is what you can and must do – surrender to Jesus!” rather than: “Don’t worry, it really doesn’t matter!”

Remember Ezekiel’s call to be a watchman: if Ezekiel was to be held accountable for the sins of Israel if he failed to warn them of the consequences of their misdeeds, how much more will our own culpability be if we fail to warn sinners of the consequences of their refusal to repent?

### *Social and political activism*

The role of the prophetic church in social and political activism is a complex one, and deserves a whole message on its own. At the simplest level, God clearly wants his people to be actively involved in this world at all levels as “salt and light”, where such activity is designed to show forth his justice and mercy, especially to those who are weak and vulnerable in this corrupt world. This role is also endorsed to some extent by western democracies who encourage all citizens (including Christians) to play a role in government.

However, there are certain lines that we as believers should never cross; indeed, when we do cross them, we seriously misrepresent the gospel message. One is where we use our political freedom to sow hatred, division and discord by belittling or shaming those who disagree with us. Another is where we seek to impose our moral views on unbelievers in our community, effectively creating a theocratic mentality – if that were an option to save the world, why would God ever have needed to send his son to the cross? A third line we can never cross is where our motivation is to “Christianise” our society (or, usually, to “re-Christianise” it, since this attitude is usually found among those who look back nostalgically on an era when western society was nominally Christian) to make it easier for us and our children to live a righteous life, rather than to change sinners from the inside-out and to fortify believers against the temptations of the world.

Unfortunately, the Church has almost 2,000 years of political and social involvement in the western world, and much of it has seriously undermined our key message. This topic will be revisited in a later message.

### *Seeking to save the world, not save people from the world*

This issue complements that of social and political activism, and involves a wrong understanding of our relationship with the world. God’s plan is to save individuals from the ravages of a sinful world by changing them inwardly and giving them “new birth into a living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3). He has no plans to save “the world” (in the sense of society as a whole, or any nation as we know it). Indeed, human society as a whole is under judgment, and will be destroyed by fire on the Day of Judgment, with a new society, the Kingdom of God, replacing it for all eternity.



Some Christians so identify the coming Kingdom with their own nation (especially in the USA) that it amounts to idolatry. No nation is righteous; there is always the need for believers to choose to serve Jesus over their country; and more pointedly, there is no political or social leader that God has appointed, or will ever appoint, who will lead any country into God's "promised land".

A prophetic voice must always warn people of the need to escape from the world by living to a higher standard – it will never try to make the world live up to a standard it can never achieve.

### *Discrimination*

As we have already noted, the Kingdom of God involves inward transformation so that *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal. 3:28). It follows that any attitudes or structures within the Church that discriminate on the grounds of race, sex, marital status, economic situation, or any other thing that is earth-bound in nature, is a serious misrepresentation of the gospel message. The Church needs to preach a message of radical equality in Christ.

Note that equality in Christ does not equate to equality in worldly condition. For example, the gospel does not encourage the poor to take from the rich on the grounds that "we are now equal". Rather, the equality is inward and spiritual, a prophetic witness of a world yet to be fully seen. This distinction is seen in the personal letter of Paul to Philemon. Never in this letter does Paul suggest that Philemon should release his slave Onesimus from his state of bondage – but rather, he preaches something far more radical, *that Onesimus as a believer is now Philemon's beloved brother – and therefore his equal*. This is the true message of anti-discrimination that the Church today needs to epitomise.

Similarly, there is a reasonable debate about where men and women are able to fulfil the same roles in the Church. Without entering into this complex debate, the following is a line that we should never cross: so long as we treat men and women with equal value, worth and dignity, and allow them to contribute fully in accordance with their gifts; and so long as it is clear to all that this is what is motivating us – then our theology is not a misrepresentation of our key message (even if it may turn out to be "wrong"). But where our structures and institutions are a thin veil for misogyny, discrimination, and ensuring women remain tied "traditional roles" in subservience to men – then this is a definite misrepresentation of our message (even if our theology is in fact "right"). May God give us the wisdom to understand and apply this principle!

### *Valuing or emphasising fleshly activity*

And finally, since "the flesh counts for nothing" (Jn 6:63), we seriously misrepresent our key message when we value any human activity that does not show evidence of being the work of the Spirit. God never endorses our plans, and we should never expect him to; rather, he commands us to surrender our self-will, enter into relationship with him, and take on *his* plans, in *his* power – through the Holy Spirit.



We need to take a hard look at what we are labouring at, both as individuals and as congregations. Is God at work in our endeavours? Are lives being transformed? Are people being built up in faith? Are we growing in holiness? Is God working miracles in our midst? If the answer is "No" to all of these questions, then it is time to let it go and find what God is doing; busy-ness is not necessarily a sign of faithfulness or obedience.

### ***Sins that do not misrepresent our key message***

When we go through the list of things in the previous section that misrepresent our key message, we can easily be overwhelmed, and then react defensively by saying: "But we are not yet perfect! He is just telling us we need to be perfect!" But that is not the case. These transgressions are not even close to a list of all the wrong things believers do – they are simply *the things we do which misrepresent the key message we believe*. And the distinction is important.

Consider the situation where a Church leader falls into sexual sin. This is a terrible situation, a grievous sin – but it does not misrepresent our message so long as we deal with it with grace and mercy. It does not misrepresent our key message because the gospel does not claim any of us are perfect. Such a situation, sad though it is, does however provide us with an opportunity to demonstrate that:

- we take the problem of sin seriously (so we deal with the problem, rather than hiding it);
- the blood of Jesus has taken away our guilt and shame (so we do not hide the problem, but rather deal with it openly, but sensitively);
- the gospel is about redemption, not judgment (so we institute a process of leading the guilty person to freedom and, ultimately, restoration);

and so on.

Sadly, many churches find this journey almost impossible to even begin; often, this is because we are too focused on outward sins rather than the inward need for transformation. This means that we are overwhelmed by the sins of the flesh, but allow the sins of the heart to go unchecked. How we need to understand the key message of the gospel afresh!

### ***The consequences of being "off-message"***

So what happens when individual Christians, or whole churches, go "off-message" and act in any of the ways that seriously misrepresent our gospel message? There is no easy way to say this; but, if we are called to be prophets and we preach a message that seriously misrepresents our key message, then *we are effectively exposing ourselves as false prophets*.



Some would say that "God will never judge his Church"; but in Rev. 2-3, we read of seven churches in Asia Minor that *were* judged by the risen Jesus. In the cases of five of those seven churches – those in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea – that judgment involved correction, and in each case it was because they had gone "off-message"; either they had forsaken the work of the Spirit in inner transformation (Ephesus and Laodicea) or had become tolerant of sin in the body (Pergamum and Thyatira)<sup>1</sup>. The ultimate sanction for the "off-message" believers is described in Rev. 2:5: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." Similar judgments are found in Rev. 2:16 (Jesus will fight against rebellious believers), Rev. 2:22-23 (Jesus will repay all according to their deeds, even if it involves suffering and death), and Rev. 3:3 (Jesus will come upon them like a thief). These are all serious consequences that I would not wish any of us to have to face today – but it is a serious thing when believers who are called to be prophets allow themselves to become false prophets.

The punishment of Jesus removing a church's lampstand is symbolic of many things, not least of which is the loss of the ability to be the "light of the world" (Mt. 5:14). We can only save people out of this world of darkness if we shine the true light of the gospel; and we cannot expect God to bless our endeavours if we are undermining what he has already done for, and what he wants to say to, a lost and dying world. Could this be the real reason why the Church is declining in numbers in much of the western world?

## **Conclusion**

This has been a long message, and very hard to write; I wish it did not have to be written! But our key message is so simple – God loves sinners so much that he freely forgives them, but they need to humble themselves, surrender their self-life to Jesus, and begin the process of inward transformation – and yet, so much activity that goes on "in the name of Christ" is at best marginal to this message, and sometimes in opposition to it. We need to take a sober look at our own lives, and the work of our own congregations, to see if they truly represent the key message of our glorious gospel.

We have now looked at the situation where churches forget their primary identifier (the presence of the Spirit) and their primary role (the message of the gospel). In our next message, we will discuss what happens when we forget our primary behaviour requirement – to live according to the key message of the gospel.

**Phil Stott**

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<sup>1</sup> We are not told what the besetting sin was of the church in Sardis.