

The Integrity of the Prophetic Gift

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General Lesson Study - Transcript

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I can't help but feel just a bit nostalgic being here this morning (which I guess, after all, is the sort of thing you're supposed to be feeling on homecoming weekends). Certainly, there have been a lot of rather impressive changes that have taken place over the 30 years or so ago since I was a student here. And, thinking about my own life, there's been a lot of water under the bridge since then as well. Yet, even though in a lot of ways, many of us find ourselves in different places now, there is still much here that feels very familiar.

One of those things may well be the topic of the lesson study this morning. If you have been following the Sabbath School Quarterly, you know that we are in the middle of a series of studies on the topic of "The Prophetic Gift," or to be more precise, as is clear when you look at the dominant theme that runs through them all, the ministry of Ellen White. Which, by the way, is in itself something I think is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon.

There is something significant going on when a church devotes 1/4 of a year to talk about one person and the issues related to them. As significant and formative as they were to their respective movements, I'm not sure that people like John Wesley gets quite this kind of treatment among Methodists, or Luther among Lutherans, at least not in quite the same way that Ellen White does among Adventists. That, in itself, says something. For anyone who continues to generate this much conversation almost 100 years after their death, clearly is playing a significant role! According to Jim Nix (in one of the January 2009 issues of the Adventist Review) Ellen White's little book Steps to Christ alone has been translated in 160 languages, making her the most translated American female author in history. That is pretty significant in its own right, and gives her an influence that is truly global!

But what I find most intriguing about all of this, (somewhat in harmony with the spirit of what we experience on homecoming weekends like this one) is not only *that* the impact of her life and the conversation about the significance of her contributions still persists in significant ways, but also *how that conversation has changed over the years*.

Those of you who remember taking classes here in the 70's from Dr. Haussler on the writings of Ellen White (an amazing man in many ways, who had committed massive portions of her writings to memory, and who loved to illustrate his points in class by telling stories about "Patrick" and "Patricia") would find a different kind of conversation today if you were to take the contemporary equivalent of that course from Dr. Teel. While much of the subject matter would be the same, the way we frame that conversation today is different from the way we did in the 70's.

But what is certain, whether you took formal class work or not, is that over the years,

there are few aspects of life on this campus or in this church community where she has not made an impact or her influence felt. Just one bit of evidence for which, is the fact that we find ourselves here again, this morning in the midst of this series, looking at this lesson on “The Integrity of the Prophetic Gift.”

Interestingly enough, this was also the topic that was being somewhat vigorously (and sometimes heatedly) discussed when I was a student here, 30 some odd years ago. It was a time when, at least among the church in general, some were becoming aware for the first time of things like the role that literary assistants played in Ellen White’s writings, or of other works that Ellen White had read and drew from, or of problems with certain historical and other details in some of what she had written, or of the realization that some of what she believed and wrote about early in her ministry seemed to have changed over time, and finally, what the implications of all this was for the integrity of her work.

So, in preparation for this morning, as I began to look at the way this conversation is framed today, in our quarterlies, printed in 2009, I got to wondering about how this conversation just might have changed over the years, and what we might be able to learn from that. And so, just for fun, I decided to look back through the archives and see if I could find a Sabbath School quarterly from the 70’s that explored this issue.

Sure enough, 4th Quarter, 1974, there is a quarterly entitled, “A Gift from Jesus.” Now if you have ever wondered about what a monumental task it must be for someone to have to sit down and go through the process of designing new series of Sabbath School quarterlies each year, I may have solved part of the mystery for you. Maybe it doesn’t always work this way, but in this case at least, what I discovered is that, with only a few relatively minor changes, the overall structure of the topics covered in the 4th quarter of 1974 and the 1st quarter of 2009, are amazingly similar!

To illustrate, lesson 7 in the 1974 quarterly was entitled “Integrity of the Prophetic Message.” This sounds strangely similar to title of lesson 9, which we are looking at today, and which is entitled “The Integrity of the Prophetic Gift.” As it turns out, not only are the titles virtually the same, so is the overall structure of the material covered. But even though (some 35 years later) it would appear that we are having the same conversation all over again, when we place the two quarterlies along side of each other, there are some intriguing shifts in focus that can be detected, which I think are actually quite significant, particularly when we talk about what it means for a prophetic gift to be exercised with integrity. I am not sure to what extent this was the intent of the authors, but it is interesting just the same.

Let me begin, however, by noticing a couple of points of similarity in terms of the passages of scripture used. Leaving a more in-depth look at these passages for another time, I’ll just highlight them briefly and make a couple of brief observations about what they might suggest about what the experience of a prophet is like, and which I think are helpful in understanding the integrity of the prophetic gift.

The first (and the shortest) of these gives us a glimpse of one of Jeremiah's experiences as he carries out his prophetic role. In the first few verses of Jeremiah chapter 43, we read about how Jeremiah faithfully delivers God's message, to which the people receiving that message respond, essentially, by calling Jeremiah a liar. Apparently personal attacks, and having your integrity questioned, is not something prophetic figures are immune to.

A second referenced incident which both quarterlies have in common is found in 1 Kings 22. Ahab and Jehoshaphat are making plans for a joint military endeavor. Ahab secures the endorsement of 400 of his best prophets, but Jehoshaphat remains unconvinced, and asks if there is a prophet of the Lord around that they might inquire of. Ahab concedes that there is the prophet Micaiah, but that he doesn't like him much because he tends to prophesy against him. Never-the-less, they summon him (the king's messengers being careful to tell him what all the other prophets have been saying so he can be sure to get it right). But while Micaiah objects to their suggestions, curiously enough, when he appears before the king, he goes ahead and tells the king (some would suggest contemptuously) just what the king wanted to hear, that they would be victorious. Well, for whatever reason, the king doesn't buy it, and makes him swear to tell the truth. This time he does, prophesying defeat for the king. For this Micaiah is thanked by being sent to jail. The king and his armies go on into battle and are defeated, just as Micaiah had said they would be.

While both quarterlies use these stories as examples of prophets being called to speak truth to power, and the fact that doing so often comes at considerable personal cost to the prophet, what neither one of them seem to develop, which I think is also illustrated here, is the reality that prophets do not exercise their office in a vacuum, in isolation from the pressures of their culture, or the political forces that surround them. It's pretty clear that the 400 prophets employed by Ahab had long since ceased speaking truth to power, but even for Micaiah, (who was not perfect) whether it was the political pressure, his own sarcasm (or maybe some understandable cynicism) that seems to have gotten to him, integrity appears to be something he eventually arrived at, rather than something that blossomed right away.

But in any case, both of these stories remind us that the environments in which prophets are called to do their work, and to do it with integrity, are often ones in which they will be subjected to both powerful political pressure as well as personal attacks, making living out their callings quite challenging - to say the least.

Having noticed some of the key similarities between the 1974 and the 2009 versions, let's notice a couple of places where shifts seem to have occurred. In 1974, with a strong emphasis on the divine origin of prophetic utterances, the early sections focus on texts which appear help reinforce and reflect a somewhat straightforward, unambiguous, "Thus saith the Lord" kind of tone for prophetic messages. Clear, authoritative answers to questions is the overall feel I get reading this section (Something which was, by the way, in high in demand, in and around 1974 - and which also reflected the political and cultural influences of the time).

In contrast, the 2009 quarterly, while still acknowledging the divine source of prophetic inspiration, also makes reference to passages like the one in Daniel 8:27, where Daniel describes his visionary experience like this:

I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days . . . I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

Here there is the additional reminder that prophets themselves didn't always fully understand the full implications of their own messages, either when they received them, or when they give them, and that sometimes it took awhile before all the pieces come together and fuller understandings to emerge.

But perhaps the clearest example of the shift in focus is seen in how the story of Balaam in the older quarterly, is replaced by the story of Nathan in the new. In 1974, the framing story that is suggested for understanding the integrity of the prophetic gift is that of Balaam, (Numbers 22 & 23) who, in spite of the urging of Balak, no matter how hard he tried, when he stood there overlooking the Israelites and tried to curse them, only blessings would come out of his mouth. This gives one the impression that our assurance of "integrity" in the prophetic message is all about God somehow controlling and guaranteeing every word that comes out of the mouth of a prophet.

In the 2009 quarterly however, the framing story that is suggested for understanding the integrity of the prophetic gift is the story of Nathan. 2 Samuel 7 recounts the story of King David talking with the prophet Nathan, about his desire to build a temple for God. Nathan tells him that he should go ahead and do this, for the Lord is with him. In contrast to the story where God seems to be controlling the mouth of Balaam, here Nathan gives his best counsel, believing that it was the will of God, only later to discover when God comes to him that he was, in fact, mistaken. The prophet Nathan got it wrong. He had to go back later and tell David that God was not going to approve the project after all. Apparently, not all wise and thoughtful counsel, even if it comes from the mouth of a prophet, is always exactly what God intends.

Perhaps, one of the things that we have learned a little better between 1974 and 2009 has to do with the realization that, instead of the stained glass, monolithic figures that are somehow removed from, or above, life as we experience it that we have sometimes imagined prophets to be, (while they were people who were used by God) prophets were people who struggled with the same challenges, pressures and personal flaws that the rest of us do. While they often bravely spoke truth to power, and sometimes at great personal cost, they didn't always understand everything right away, and didn't always get it fully right the first time. Sometimes, at a later time, when what God had been saying became clearer, they found themselves going back and saying something to the effect of, "You know what? I didn't get that one quite right. Here is what I now understand God to be saying. It's much clearer now." Sometimes they may live long enough to do that, I'm not sure what happens if it turns out that they don't. But I do believe that, quite often, things do have a way of

becoming clearer over time, as we continue to listen and to grow. (After all, wasn't it Jesus who started off a number of His best remembered sayings with "You have heard that it was said . . . but now I say to you . . .")?

When I think of the people in my life that get high marks for "integrity," those that come to mind are often not so much perfect "stained glass" sorts of people, but rather honest, genuine people who stay open and responsive, and who keep on growing in their understandings of things in spite of their flaws. As time goes on, I also am finding myself more and more convinced that, in some cases at least, the way God uses people, even those he calls to prophetic kinds of ministry, might not so much be as people whose job it is to settle things and end conversations, but as those who continue challenge us, and maybe even open some new ones? These are the kinds of people who encourage us to continue to study and listen, to re-examine and reflect, confident that things will eventually become clearer as we do.

It's Homecoming weekend. Nostalgia is good thing. But I am also very grateful for the 30 plus years that have ensued since for me, and for what still lies ahead. It does make you kind of wonder though, doesn't it, if we are still here, what the quarterly will be like in 2039?