

The Message of the Minor Prophets for Today

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In preparing to give our attention to the message of the Minor Prophets, it might be well to establish the meaning of the terminology—major and minor prophets. The distinction between major and minor prophets is really only a mechanical one—a distinction simply for the purpose of identification. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are called “Major prophets” because the sheer bulk of their written prophecy was of major proportions. The twelve prophets we will be studying in this paper are called “Minor Prophets” because the bulk of their written prophecy was smaller in comparison to that of the Major Prophets. Under no circumstances do we mean to imply that the minor prophets themselves, or their messages, were of lesser importance or inferior to the major prophets. The minor prophets wrote under no lesser degree of inspiration; they wrote by no lesser authority; the reliability of their message was in no way inferior to that of the major prophets.

When Christ told the Jews to “Search the Scripture; for in them ye think have eternal life” (John 5:39), His thoughts included also the writings of the minor prophets, because He was referring to the Old Testament in its entirety as it was known to the Jews at that time, and as it is still known to us today. The minor prophets, then, like any other Old Testament book, had a message which Jesus said would point to eternal life. The apostle Paul as he presents the doctrine of justification by faith in his letter to the Romans shows that this is not a new doctrine, but can be found already in the prophets. In Romans 1:17 Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, when he says, “It is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” Peter in Acts 15:15,16 quotes the minor prophet Amos. Perhaps most striking of all, we read in Matt. 2 that the wise men from the East had determined to seek out the Christ Child in Bethlehem because of the very explicit directions which they found in Micah 5:2. “But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

The minor prophets are as much a part of God’s inspired Word as any other part of the Old Testament. For this reason, they provide us with a most reliable source for the political and religious history of the people of Israel from the time of Amos to the time of Malachi. And since the minor prophets are a part of Holy Scripture they are also profitable to us for “doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). As we discuss the minor prophets, we want to see just that they are profitable for instruction in righteousness because the message of the minor prophets is the message of the rest of Scripture—the message of sin and grace. That is the common thread that runs through all of the minor prophets. They give us a faithful picture of man’s persistent abounding in sin, and God’s persisting in grace.

As we study the minor prophets we see that as the recurring theme. Broken down to its simplest terms that theme is a message of repentance to the wicked and a word of consolation to the faithful remnant. In short, it’s the message of sin and grace. The grace of God is proclaimed through the voice of prophecy. Christ would come! “The sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings” (Mal.4:2).

The assigned scope of this paper is to examine the message of the minor prophets for today. To borrow the popular term, we’re talking about their “relevance”. In speaking about their relevance, we must keep several things in mind. We must remember that the prophets were not merely soothsayers, or diviners, or prognosticators. Prophecy involved more than just the dictionary definition, “prediction of the future”. The prophets were spokesmen of a living God. They were primarily preachers in the highest sense of the word. Someone aptly put it, “They were forthtellers rather than foretellers.” Their repeated references to the future grew out of the existing conditions around them. God gave them the message to preach in answer to the existing spiritual climate in Israel, and often it was a message which spoke in reference to the future.

They did make predictions, but these were only incidental to their message. Their relevance today is therefore not that they foresaw the course of events in the modern world. But though

they do not speak of our age, they do speak to it, because our age is also critical and the issues at stake are spiritual and moral.¹

When one reads the minor prophets and hears them repeatedly denouncing the evils of the society under which they themselves lived, the temptation is always present to immediately make a comparison between their society and ours and to apply their message directly to 20th century western civilization. Many people, for example, would like to point to the prophets' message denouncing the lust for power, the oppression of the rich over the poor, the ways in which the rulers took advantage of the common people, and use that as a pretext for a kind of social gospel that is to be preached in the Church of the 20th century. But to do that requires a jump in logic. It means a transfer of thoughts made at a certain time to a certain situation to a far different time and a far different situation, without recognizing the difference involved. To properly understand the prophets, and then to apply their message to today, we'll have to examine the circumstances under which they preached, and the society to which they were sent. For that reason we would like to take a bit of time to look at the historical background that led up to the age of the prophets, and then to look at some of the minor prophets, individually, to see how they spoke to the situation into which God had placed them. Central to the whole discussion will be the role of the King of Israel.

God had referred to the matter of kingship already to Abraham when he promised a son to Sarah. "Kings of people shall be of her" (Gen. 17:16). Jacob had implied much the same in his blessing of Judah (Gen. 49:8). The people of Israel weren't content though to wait God's time on the matter, but prematurely demanded a king. "God give us a king to judge us" (I Sam. 8:6) the elders of Israel demanded of Samuel at Ramah. And God granted their request. Saul was made king and ruled for 40 years until his disobedience disqualified him as King. David succeeded, but for 72 years there was war between the houses of David and Saul, until David finally succeeded in uniting the two kingdoms again. The reign of Solomon was a time of peace and prosperity. But then after Solomon, after 120 years of fairly good leadership under the first three kings, the kingdom was divided between Jeroboam I and Rehoboam.

That division marked the breakdown of effective political and moral leadership on the part of the monarchy. The northern kingdom very quickly disintegrated, morally and politically. Jeroboam instituted the policy of estranging the northern tribes completely from Judah and the temple worship by setting up two golden calves at Bethel and Dan. The stage was in this way set for the idolatrous worship practices called "the sin of Jeroboam." It wasn't long before this quickly degenerated into worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. God's judgment was in store. Deportation to Assyria was in the offing. And this was the setting into which God sent His prophets like Amos and Hosea.

Amos was not a "professional prophet" by any stretch of the imagination. He was a simple herdsman who was called upon by God to speak against the existing conditions in Israel. Israel was at this time enjoying a period of great prosperity. King Jeroboam II had extended the boundaries of Israel to nearly the size of the kingdom under David and Solomon. It was a time of great wealth for the ruling class. Amos spoke of winter and summer homes. But it was a time of prosperity maintained by the oppression of the poor. Dishonest trading, selling of worthless goods, false weights in trading were commonplace. The message of Amos was a passionate plea for righteousness. He warned of the inevitable coming of God's judgment toward the wicked and ungrateful people of Israel.

Then came Hosea. The corruption of which Amos had spoken had now reached an advanced stage. Society was disintegrating as a result of it. "There is no truth, nor goodness, nor knowledge of God in the land," Hosea lamented. The Lord God Jehovah had indeed been incorporated into the Baal worship. The people desired fertility for their fields and herds, and so they began the practice of fertility cults and sacred prostitution. Ephods and teraphim were used for purposes of divination (Hosea 3:4). Soothsayers and practices of wizardry developed (2 Kings 17:17). Like the voice of Amos, the voice of Hosea came with warning against the threatening disaster which God would send. But the message of Hosea was not without hope. Hosea's own

¹ R. B. Scott, "Relevance of the Prophets", p. 14

family experience provided a wonderful object lesson for Israel. Hoses had married a harlot named Gomer. Gomer was symbolic of the people of Israel, because not only was she unfaithful to Hosea before the marriage, she was unfaithful after as well. She left home and became a practicer at the shrine of Baal and Ashtoreth. But still the Lord directed Hosea to go and reclaim her. God's message through the prophet Hosea was that there was still hope for the prostitute of Israel. She too was not beyond the reach of God's covenant of mercy. Like Gomer she had gone after other loves and bowed the knee to other gods. She was guilty of ingratitude and apostasy. But yet divine husband-love was seeking to reclaim her. The prophet Hosea preached a message of sin and grace, a call to repentance and the promise of mercy.

The prophet Jonah came into the picture at a very critical period in history, at about the time of the death of Jeroboam II and the ascendancy of Tegleth Pilezer III of Assyria. Jonah was God's instrument in dealing with the wicked city of Nineveh. Because of Jonah's preaching, Nineveh repented and was spared God's judgment. Assyria began to rise to the power which ultimately led to Israel's destruction.

One of the axioms that becomes quite clear through historical research is the strange phenomenon that people very seldom learn any lasting lessons from the example of history. It is so in secular history and it was also true among God's chosen people. The lessons taught by the experience of the people in Israel had little or no effect upon the course of events in Judah. And so we see that it wasn't long before the southern kingdom of Judah jumped onto the same downhill treadmill that Israel had ridden. Injustices, violence, oppression, robbery and all other manner of moral decay became almost as prevalent as they had been in Israel. And once more the Lord felt compelled to send a message of restraint through His spokesmen, the prophets. Joel was one of the earliest, probably appearing sometime during the reign of Joash. Isaiah came into the picture shortly afterward. But we're not especially interested in him, because of the scope of this paper. We're more interested in his younger contemporary, Micah, who was active between the reigns of Jotham and Hezekiah.

Because of the prevailing conditions of moral and spiritual decay, it is quite understandable that his message had a great deal to say about the evils of society. He spoke about the land-hunger of wealthy landowners.

And they covet fields and take them by violence, and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. Therefore thus saith the Lord, Behold against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks, neither shall ye go haughtily: for this time is evil. (Micah 2:1-2)

Micah had to speak an indictment against fraudulent business practices—the use of “scant weights” and “deceitful measures” and “wicked balances” (Micah 6:10-11). Micah too, like the prophets of Israel, had to denounce the oppression of the poor by the rich. In general, Micah gave voice to God's own lament, “O my people; what have I done unto thee, and wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against Me!” (Micah 6:3)

Micah was constrained by the Lord to speak out against the sin and wickedness of God's people. “Truly I am full of power by the spirit of the Lord, and of Judgment and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.” But he was a prophet not only of sin, but of grace. And it is in this that his message becomes meaningful or “relevant” for us today. That message of God's abiding grace and forgiveness is found so beautifully in the concluding words of Micah's prophecy when he says: “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage: he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy” (Micah 7:18). The key, of course, that unlocked that storehouse of God's grace, and made it possible for Micah to preach a message of deliverance to a sinful people, was the Gospel prophecy of the coming of Christ, the beautiful words of Micah 5:2: “But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” There lies the relevance of Micah, and of all the Minor Prophets. They were sent by the Lord to clearly label the sins of the people, but also to proclaim God's grace in Christ.

As we continue tracing the voice of the Minor Prophets, through Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk, we note an increasing sense of urgency, because the godlessness was continuing and increasing, and the day was coming closer and closer when God's judgment would fall upon Judah just as it had upon Israel. By the time of () the ruling classes at Jerusalem had gone from bad to worse. On the global scene the major world powers were plotting for supremacy. Assyria had passed the apex of her power. Nahum predicts the downfall of Nineveh, but in her place the Chaldean empire was rising to supremacy.

Zephaniah takes up where Nahum left off. Now the Babylonian Captivity was imminent. By now the people of Judah had begun to imitate everything foreign. "They were clothed with strange apparel," Zephaniah said (Zeph. 1:8). Worship had been corrupted by this same foreign influence. "Her priests have polluted the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law" (Zeph.3:4). And so in an age when the people had given themselves over to a syncretistic kind of worship Zephaniah's task was to attack the alien cults and practices in an effort to bring his people back to the true God. But again we notice in Zephaniah that even though he was compelled to speak out against the corruption of his people and to warn of the imminent threat of God's judgment at the hand of Babylon, yet his message was also a message of hope and deliverance, and especially of the grace of God. He said: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty. He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy. He will rest in His love. He will joy over thee with singing!" (Zeph. 3:17). The message of sin and grace!

By the time of Habakkuk the political situation for Judah was darker than ever before. The black clouds of Chaldean invasion were already hanging low on the horizon. In his first chapter Habakkuk gives a vivid description of the threat that the Chaldeans posed. His horses were "more fierce than evening wolves." They swoop down upon their prey "as the eagle that hasteth to eat." Her captives were as numberless "as the sand."

But even in the midst of this threat of the dreaded Chaldean Invasion Habakkuk points out that the faithful remnant could rejoice and calmly endure. He says, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab. 3:18). So once again the message of Habakkuk follows the pattern. He was compelled to speak against sin, to make an urgent call to repentance, to predict the consequences which sin would bring, but above all, Habakkuk brought a message of consolation to the little flock of believers who remained. They were to continue steadfast in their trust and confidence in God's promised salvation. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the words of chapter 2, verse 4: "The just shall live by his faith." That's God's grace pure and simple. That's The Gospel in all of its sweetness, as the Apostle Paul would later quote this very passage and expand upon it to demonstrate God's grace in Christ.

The last three of the Minor Prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were sent by God to testify in that period after the 70 years of exile in Babylonian Captivity had run their course. King Cyrus of Persia was a ruler who was shrewd enough to realize the advantage of having a grateful buffer state between himself and the rising power of Egypt. So he issued the decree permitting the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild the Lord's temple. Only 50,000 took advantage of the decree and returned. The project of rebuilding the temple was a slow one and filled with discouragements. Both Haggai and Zechariah had to repeatedly make appeals to the people to hasten with the work. Haggai, an old man who had witnessed the glory of the house of God in earlier days, especially had to reproach the people for being content to dwell in their own houses, at the same time letting the house of God lie in ruins. Finally, under the urging of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was rebuilt.

By the time of Malachi the temple had been restored, but once more we see a demonstration of that axiom of history. The lessons of history were not followed. The people of Judah had not benefited from the example of Israel, nor from their own captivity in Babylon. They were home again, but still under the yoke of Persia. They still were struggling to maintain the bare necessities of life. Where was the evidence of promised greatness? Had their God forgotten them? Little by little they began drifting away until finally they asked, "Where Is the God of Judgment?"

Malachi, like most of the other Minor Prophets, found it in his call from God to rebuke and warn his people. Their worship had again become polluted. Marriage vows were easily broken. The people were giving open evidence of impiety and unbelief. The laxity in morals was like a cancer infecting all of society, constantly spreading and becoming more infectious. Was it any wonder that the favor of Jehovah seemed to be lacking? So

the message of Malachi was one of repentance. If only his people would repent: Would not the windows be opened above them, and a blessing poured out, that there would not be room enough to receive it? But Malachi also had to warn that if there were not this repentance, the day of the Lord would come like a furnace to destroy the proud and the wicked.

But as with the other prophets, Malachi's message was not only one of sin, but of God's abiding grace. To the faithful remnant Malachi gave the assurance that "the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings." God's grace in Christ is nowhere more beautifully presented, not even in the New Testament. The concluding words of Malachi's prophecy in chapter 4, verses 4 to 6 provide us with a fitting conclusion to our examination of the message of the Minor Prophets: "Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And He shall turn the heart." That great prophet—Christ! God's grace in Christ! And that is the Message of the Minor Prophets, a renunciation of sin and a proclamation of God's grace in Christ.

There is no question but that the existing social order of the day was one of the recurring themes in the message of the Minor Prophets. Over and over again we hear them decrying the oppression, the violence, the greed, the misplaced values, the lust for power of the people: There's no question either but that these aberrations from righteousness were a cause of deep concern to the prophets, and became an integral part of their message. But we would hope that through this paper we have seen that those moral evils of society as the prophets outlined them, only served as the instruments to draw attention to the primary message of the Minor Prophets—the message of sin and grace.

And I think that this is important to our understanding of the prophets, and important in answering the question asked in the title of this paper. What is the message of the Minor Prophets for today? So many of the social evils which we saw in the days of the prophets are also painfully evident in society of our day—the materialism, the violence, the greed, the debauchery, the immorality. Like in Israel we can see too that we're not speaking only of individual aberrations from accepted morality, but that we're talking about an infection that is indeed characteristic of all society. The social evils of our day have permeated our family structures, our political structures, our economic values, our culture, our codes of morality, and even religion itself. The question then that remains for us to discuss is this: To what extent can we apply the message of the prophets to the society in which we live? How will the prophets speak through us in our pulpits?

We'll have to recognize one vital truth—there is a difference between ourselves and the prophets. They were God's spokesmen in a theocracy where the Lord Himself assumed the responsibility of giving not only spiritual guidance but also political guidance and social guidance. The kings of Israel had been entrusted by God, to a large extent, with the responsibilities in the areas of political and social guidance. When those kings failed to live up to their responsibilities, the Lord in this theocratic arrangement felt it more and more necessary to express His will through the voice of His prophets. I think that explains the repeated references in the prophets to the matters of social reform.

It is vital to our understanding of the prophets to recognize that we are no longer living under such a theocratic arrangement. Today in the era of the New Testament Church we are living under a different arrangement where God Himself has chosen to divide the responsibilities. According to Scripture the Church's responsibility is to concern itself with the proclamation of the message of sin and grace, the message of salvation in Christ. But the matters of civic righteousness, the external peace and order in this world, and even the matters of public morality, have been assigned by God to another agency—human government which He too has ordained.

In short what we're saying is that the example of the prophets as they dealt with matters of civic righteousness, does not give us warrant in the Christian church of today to assume that this is also our responsibility in the Church of the 20th century. This is, as we so well know, what many today feel should be the mission of the Church. The Church should be taking a more active position in all areas of social reform. The Church should be influencing society in matters relating to civil rights, racial equality, equal housing. The prophets had to speak about matters similar to these because they were living in a theocracy. We today are

living under a different arrangement, and today God has entrusted such things, not to the Church, but to the other agency, human government.

Perhaps we might add one other dimension to help in our understanding of the message of the prophets. When the prophets spoke, since God's theocracy naturally extended over all the chosen people, the prophets' message related to the entire Jewish society. When that society was in need of social reform, the prophets became the logical spokesmen to make God's will known. But today we are in a little different role as God's messengers in the Church. Our message too is universal in one sense. We are to go into all the world preaching the message of free grace in Christ. And those who embrace Christ in faith then become part of our audience. But a very important distinction must be made here. We can preach that Gospel of Christ all over, but until that Gospel has won over the heart of a person, we can't begin to preach to him in the area of sanctification. His heart isn't ready to hear about sanctification until it has been brought to a knowledge of his justification in Christ. In that sense our audience is more restricted than that of the prophets.

Let's use a practical subject to demonstrate this. Take for example the matter of abortion which is becoming such an issue in our society today. In the days of the prophets this would surely have been an issue that they might have addressed themselves to. In a theocracy the morality of God's chosen society was an issue to be dealt with through the voice of the prophets. But today that aspect of society as a whole is to be regulated by the agency that God has set up for that purpose—government. Certainly as a pastor I do have the right and the responsibility to speak out on this subject of abortion, but only to that restricted audience which has already embraced Christ. That's the only audience to which I have the right to speak as a pastor in areas of sanctification. So I can preach on Sunday morning to my congregation about this matter of abortion, because it does lie within the area of sanctification for the members of my flock. I can feel free to point to the social evils that are taking place where society draws itself away from the will of God in regard to the fifth commandment. I can and should warn my people against being swept along in the tide of moral permissiveness that would justify the killing of the unborn. I think I can even suggest to my people that they as individuals become more vocal and outspoken as private citizens against this ill of abortion. As private citizens they do have the responsibility of seeing to it that their government carry out its function of maintaining public morality. As an individual citizen I too can write my congressman or senator urging that my government carry out its duty to maintain the moral fiber of its citizens. But the point is—today it does not lie within the realm of the Church's mission to dictate to the government the standards of morality that must be imposed upon society as a whole. The church's role is to preach the Gospel and save souls. As God's messengers in the Church of today we have one task—to preach Christ, not to dictate morality to the rest of society.

Professor Lawrenz of the Seminary had an excellent series of articles in the *Northwestern Lutheran* (September-December, 1968) on this very subject, entitled *The Church's Business*. It would be well for all of us to reread those articles where Professor Lawrenz so clearly outlines the role of the Church and the role of the government. Many today maintain that the Church must follow a program of social involvement because Jesus was socially involved. Through His miracles and His proclamations, they say, Jesus showed Himself to be a kind of social activist. But Professor Lawrenz points to the real purpose of the Savior's work when he says:

In his preaching and teaching and in His conversations with groups and individuals Jesus had a great deal to say about God's holy will. He made His hearers aware of the deep spiritual meaning of God's holy will. Again and again He let God's holy will cast its illuminating light upon evidences of human injustice, selfishness, and hypocrisy, upon man's preoccupation with material things, upon man's exploitation of his fellow men, also upon God's ordinances of government and marriage, and man's responsibility in and toward these institutions. Yet all this testimony never aimed at mere outward reform, but it was given likewise in the interest of His Savior's mission. On the one hand Jesus sought to awaken consciences to a fuller realization of

their great plight of sin in order to prepare them for His Gospel invitation. On the other hand Jesus unfolded God's holy will to aid His believing disciples in their new life of sanctification.²

That is I think an apt summary of the message of the Minor Prophets. Their message had the same purpose as the message of Christ Himself. They brought the message of sin to point out the plight of Israel, to make Israel ready for the coming of the Savior. And they preached God's holy will to aid the faithful remnant in Israel in her life of sanctification.

And there lies the relevancy in the message of the Minor Prophets for today. As Gospel preachers let us use the prophets to bring the message of sin and grace. Let us use the prophets first of all to remind our people what sin itself is. We're living in a climate where 'situation ethics' and the so-called 'new morality' have pretty-well obscured the basic definition of sin for many people. Sin has taken on the meaning of anything that gets you into trouble and causes you problems and unhappiness. Morality is anything that suits you and keeps you happy. The Minor Prophets give us the correct definition of sin. Sin is any breaking of the holy immutable will of God. The Minor Prophets then can be very helpful to us in leading our people to realize their great plight of sin and thus to prepare their hearts for the Gospel invitation. The Prophets will be helpful too in aiding us as Christians, and especially Christians leading other believing disciples, in our new lives of sanctification. And so the Minor Prophets even have a direct message to us as the messengers of God today, that we keep all our activity and all of our testimony somehow related to the Church's mission of gaining sinners with the Gospel of Christ, and then leading those sinner-saints in their lives of sanctification.

² *The Northwestern Lutheran*, December 8, 1968, p. 414.