

# **The Minor Prophets Cry to the Christian Teacher Today**

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The Minor Prophets cry, we say. They do not merely speak, or preach, or even orate: they cry. We say they cry because there is an unquestionable passion in their message. Their words are often brutal, chosen for impact, shocking in their harshness. They are not like the mighty pulpit pounders of midnight radio who berate their audiences from a safe distance. They stand toe to toe with their listeners. They do not even possess the security of a clergy title as a psychological barrier against assault. Nor, like many a pastor in our older churches, do they emerge from a doorway and into an ornamented pulpit towering an awe-inspiring fifteen feet above the pews of the parishioners. Amos, the strange shepherd from the Southland, and Hosea, the cuckolded husband, must have actually been objects of some considerable condescending interest and sneering gossip, but no one could deny that they had a message fortified by conviction and passion. Even now that their voices are long silent and lent refinement by the printer's art and the translator's urbanity, their message carries such potency that we cannot fail to sense that their call to our generation is a "cry."

Never has the message of the Minor Prophets been irrelevant but never more relevant than today. The audiences, which hear God's Word today, may well be as self-satisfied as the gatherings that assembled to hear the original prophets cry. We are secure in ourselves, in our competence to meet any challenge, in the progress we have made toward humanistic endeavor, in the quality of our godliness. Perhaps American religious man in particular is convinced that he lies under divine blessing, that the future is his, and that God is beholden to him. Sated with success, he desperately needs a prophet from the wilderness to let him know what life is really like.

The coming of the fullness of times has not made the message of its portenders irrelevant. If anything, the coming of the new age has served to add a becoming luster to the old revelation. From the New Testament vantage point we may derive benefit better than the men of old as we watch how God works out his purposes, educates the world and establishes his kingdom.

Who were these men we call the Minor prophets? Their names we can recite; but if we want to understand them well, and surely if we want to teach them to others well, we must know them against the background of their times. Luther wrote:

For if one would understand the prophecies, it is necessary that one know how things were in the land, how matters lay, what was in the mind of the people—what plans they had with respect to their neighbors, friends, and enemies—and especially what attitude they took in their country toward God and toward the prophet, whether they held to his word and worship or to idolatry. (*LW* 35, p. 274)

In this essay we can afford only enough time to introduce ourselves to them as a group with characteristic themes. Even the name prophet tends to mislead us. We think of a prophet's task as foretelling the future. Actually the prophet was far more concerned with the present experience of his people. The word prophet is much like the term "indicate." We use the term "indicate" in the following ways:

- a. A frown indicates disapproval, and
- b. clouds indicate rain.

When we say that clouds indicate rain, there is a strong prophetic element implied by the word; but when we say that a frown indicates disapproval, we are explaining present experience. The Minor Prophets, too, are basically dealing with the present experience of God's people; the

predictive element in their message is minimal although not incidental for their God is not only the Lord of history but of the future.

We shall now make it our business to isolate and investigate several distinctive themes in the Minor Prophets that made their message crucial to the world of the past and no less relevant to the world and church of the present.

## **I. The God Who Cares**

One of the most vital emphases of the Minor Prophets is their clear signal that in the heavens there lives a God who cares. He really cares. He is not a god-afar-off. He pays attention. He involves himself directly in the rule of men. The God of the prophets is never indifferent or apathetic. What goes on among men is not insignificant to him. It is a matter of deep and passionate concern to him. He cares.

The eleventh chapter of the prophet Hosea serves to illustrate a number of different aspects of the demeanor and behavior of the God who cares.

In Hosea 11:1, 2 we read:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
But the more I called Israel  
the further they went from me.”

The God of the prophets is no impersonal force, no blind fortune: he is Father. The term father implies a capacity for caring. The will to be a Father requires the will to love a child who most likely will never return the investment in love which he makes. The God who dwells in the heavens, who makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall, is such a father. He has the will to love people who will never return to him the investment in love that he makes.

God elected Israel to be his children, his family. He willed to love them. They were nobodies by any yardstick you might want to choose, moral, military, or political. As a good father, he willed to love a people from whom it seemed unlikely he would ever regain his investment in love. He called them out of Egypt, which had been for them a mother's womb. It had sheltered them and imprisoned them. But God called them forth to become independent people whom he might love and raise to become a mature people in his image, even as a father loves and raises his children to become mature persons like himself.

Our generation of the church is as much in bondage to the world as Israel was to Egypt. The world oppresses us. Its sophisticated wisdom, boldly proclaimed, makes us feel stupid. Its celebrated achievements in space and even in humanistic endeavor make us feel ineffectual. We begin to feel so puny, so purposeless, so nameless, dwarfs in a land of giants. To make matters worse, the world dings it into our ears that this is all there is to it. This is the whole bag. This is all that counts: there is no hereafter. It's now or never. There is no hope, no destiny beyond this world and its three score years and ten. But the Father's electing love reaches out to us. His electing love gives us a name, the sons of God. His electing love gives us a purpose, a mission, a destiny—and a present that is marked by longsuffering fatherliness toward faithless sons whose infidelity calls into question the worthwhileness of his risking his name upon them. But such is the God who dwells in the heavens. He might have been free of all risk and care just by letting us alone. His heart is such a father's heart that he simply must risk hurts to fulfill himself in showing love. Our Father is a God who cares. He submits to the possibility of failure in raising up good children because he simply will not live without loving.

How different he is from many in our generation. Many husbands and wives today feel it is better to have an abundance of things rather than to have children. Better to have a nice car and a nice home, which require a minimum emotional investment and therefore entail a minimum emotional risk. Better to have things than a family, which requires a maximum emotional commitment with the real risk that the investment may never begin to be returned. When we step on the accelerator of our car, it roars off. When we step on the brakes, it trembles obediently to a

stop. Our children, let us admit it, are not nearly that responsive to us! But such is the Father's love. A love strange to our generation, a love so deep he is willing to risk being snubbed rather than fail to express it. Self-fulfillment is not his nature; emotional commitment is. Our God is a Father who cares.

As a caring father, God assumes responsibility for the training, healing, guiding, and rescuing of his children:

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
    taking them by the arms;  
But they did not realize  
    it was I who healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
    with ties of love;  
I lifted the yoke from their neck  
    and bent down to feed them. (Hosea 11:3, 4)

Our Father's mighty historical works are represented as the winsome task of helping a toddler learn to walk. Life is a learning to walk uprightly before the Father and with the Father and by the Father. Life is falling down holding onto the Father's hands but even more certainly it is a falling down with the Father holding firmly onto our hands. Life is the Father's letting us suffer, in his safe grip, small bruises that we may learn to walk independently and surely on our own in the upright style of the Father. Life is the Father's love in not smothering our personality and uniqueness, letting us learn to walk our own way, to make our own mistakes, and to correct our own mistakes under his unseen guidance and strength. Every day, every hour, in every activity and non-activity God is on duty helping us learn to walk uprightly through the valleys of sin and the dark woods of temptation.

Of course, we never see our Father's hand, we never feel it gripping ours. The Father calls us to live by faith, not by sight. If we could actually see how much our lives at every moment and turn depend upon the Father, if we could see how many and how great evils he averts from us at every minute, we would immediately enter into a state of shock. It is by faith we say God cares as a father. By faith we tell our sons and our daughters, "*God* gave to me a faithful wife. *God* gave to you a good and dutiful mother who was willing to be concerned enough about you to train you and to wash, fold, and iron your clothes." By faith we say to our children, "When I was young, the Lord gave my poor but pious father and mother few of the things people call the good things of life. Seldom did we have frosting on a cake though we did have cake. The Lord never let us go away hungry from the table." By faith we may, and if we wish to be faithful to the spirit of the prophets, we must talk like that about our caring Father's work in our lives. The prophets teach a Father whose care for his people is demonstrated by concrete deeds that constitute the fabric of life. They are unabashed in identifying as the works of God what we, in the fashion of the godless, refer to as events of history or of nature. Rain (1:3), the harvest (2:9), clothing (2:9), peace (2:18), good government (3:4), and the vitality of wildlife are claimed as God's works. Not only bread and frosting, seedtime and harvest, hot and cold, but politics and law enforcement, airplanes and atomic energy, World War II and the United Nations are works in which God is present to educate and heal, to guide and rescue his people. Our atheistic age explains life by scientific or social laws and seeks mastery of life by learning to manipulate them. The prophets explain life as the Father's patient dealing with his difficult children, and they call upon us to endure life by faith and obedience toward the Father. The Christian teacher today must labor to help his students understand that we are living in a Father's world. He must labor as the Minor Prophets did, to relate all that happens in life to the will of a gracious Father who involves himself in the day by day management of this world, in its every detail, just as certainly as he created this world in its every detail.

## **II. God as Lion**

There is another extremely important dimension to the Heavenly Father's care for his children. And the Minor Prophets are never better than in their stark treatment of this side of the Father's will. They teach us not only that the Father cares but that he cares what his children become. He desperately cares what his children become! And he cares enough to discipline his children that they may have help in becoming what he means them to become. The prophet Amos (3:2) put it this way:

You only have I chosen  
of all the families of the earth;  
therefore I will punish you  
for all your sins.

God's caring Fatherhood is not doting Fatherhood. His love is righteous love. In his love he punishes:

Will they not return to Egypt  
and will not Assyria rule over them  
because they refuse to repent?  
Swords will flash in their cities,  
will destroy the bars of their gates  
and put an end to their plans. (Hosea 11:5, 6)

When God punishes, he remains hidden, hidden behind history, behind the unbridled temper, the greedy hearts, and the violent hands of evil men who become his instruments just in their lawlessness and in their indomitable will to serve themselves. Hosea tells us that God let Assyria grow strong to torment his disobedient children of Israel. We may learn from this not to

think that our wars today are meaningless accidents. Nor are they history gone out of control. Bad government, inflation, recession: are they not the works of God? Are they not his modern scourge on people whose hearts have grown fat? The prophet Amos wrote (3:6), "When disaster comes to a city has not the Lord caused it?" Teachers, I am concerned that the atheism of our society has influenced also the church to the point where it does not see the Lord's hand in national and personal misfortunes. To fail to see the Lord's hand in judgments is to thwart his purpose in sending them: It is the blindness of men who prefer darkness to light and therefore suffer darkness.

The God of the Minor Prophets is a God whose Lordship of history earns him the title of Lion. The Lord of the prophets is the Lion of History. In Hosea 5:13-15 we read:

When Ephraim saw his sickness,  
and Judah his sores,  
then Ephraim turned to Assyria,  
and sent to the great king for help.  
But he is not able to cure you,  
not able to heal your sores.  
For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,  
like a great lion to Judah  
I will tear them to pieces and go away;  
I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them.  
Then I will go back to my place  
until they admit their guilt  
And they will seek my face;  
in their misery they will earnestly seek me.



The prophets were not embarrassed to admit that the Father is a lion. A lesser Father would not have been an adequate God for hard-headed Israel. He had brought judgment on his people Israel because they would not turn to him as Lord and repent before him. He had admonished them that when they experienced his judgment they were to turn to him and seek escape from his judgments through repentance. But they sought escape from his judgments by allying themselves with foreign nations. Therefore the Lord brings them also their fit judgment by foreign nations as he raises up the Assyrians to scourge them. Through Assyria he plays the lion to Israel. He robs them of the security they seek by their human strength and conniving. He forsakes gentleness for language they will understand. He lets them experience the horrors of Assyrian brutality. The Assyrian king Ahurnazirpal boasted that he carved up a nest bunch of captives, broiling some and disfiguring others: "from some I cut off their hands and their fingers, from others their noses and their ears, of many I put out the eyes." God cares enough to let his people experience the sternest of disciplines, the kind of discipline that may penetrate their thick skins and bring understanding.

Our God is a Lion. A lesser Father would not be an adequate God for this world. A lesser Father, let us admit it, would not be an adequate God for me or for any of us. God must be a lion for his world is full of resolute enemies; and even his friends tend to become hardened enemies when they think God has grown old, declawed and defanged.

When people forget that the Lord is a Lion, terrible in his works, then they make bold to ignore his Word and counsel. When they think of him as a toothless and lazy old pussycat, they think they can get out of trouble without repentance and get ahead without the Lord's will. Even if they don't forget their morning and their evening prayers, their heart is not in them. Their heart is in their head. Their confidence is in their ability to wheel and deal. They despise the preached Word, thinking it a kitten's purr rather than a lion's roar. They don't know how to understand the commandments which say, "We should *fear* and love God...."

One of the great disasters of modern American Christianity is that it has lost its fear of God. If the Old Adam in us is not taught to tremble at the power and rage of God, the Old Adam is sure to grow bold and take over. Our children need to be carefully taught the fear of God. The

Minor Prophets can help them learn. They teach that God's tearing and clawing as a lion is not merely spiritual or poetic but real. He brings men under judgments that involve the woof and the warp of life. He punishes and his punishments hurt. Let there be no doubt in our children's minds: when wars bring disaster to a nation, when recessions bring hardship and famine, when bad weather destroys crops and homes, when disease brings disability or death, the Lion is roaring. God is acting. They cannot blame bad luck; they cannot blame heredity or "circumstances." That's the atheist's way. The Minor Prophets way is to say: "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?"

When God has to remind us that he is a lion, it is usually not enough for him to speak in the still small voice of a preacher. We are too deaf, too busy to pay attention to a God who merely purrs. So He roars. He acts with might. He gets our attention when we are distracted, not by the preached cross, but by the acted out cross.

All history is a story of the cross imposed upon the world in Genesis 3. God brings judgment on his creation by his creation. The man becomes a cross to the woman; the weed becomes a cross to the man. The Gospel invites us to believe that the Lion of Judah has borne the cross for man, absorbed, and removed its curse. But the Lion of History must continue to impose the cross or he will wait in vain for man's repentance. By the cross he cuffs our Old Adam into submission, that we may live in constant repentance and so constantly live. The Minor Prophets bear conspicuous witness that it is the Lion's will to impose the cross upon his unrepentant people that they may cry to him from the depths and find life in him.

### **III. Meaningful Confession**

In Hosea 11 we are taught that when the Lion has cuffed his people, then he returns to his lair to wait. He waits for his people to admit their guilt. This divine quest for confession and repentance is a characteristic mark of the Minor Prophets and will become the final focus of our attention.

In its ministry of the Gospel the Lutheran church takes an enormous risk week by week. We assume this risk right at the beginning of the worship service when the pastor invites us to make confession of our sins, leads us in confession, and then pronounces God's absolution. The great blessing of this procedure is that timid souls, who are afraid to make private confession to a pastor or to another Christian, may have the burden of sin lifted from their hearts. The great risk, of course, is that spiritual pigs will trample upon the pearls of divine grace. It may happen that unrepentant people will accept for themselves God's absolution though they have no right to it; and thus they may be confirmed in their unrepentance.

In the prophet Hosea are two confessions that we can study with profit. The first of these confessions occurs in 6:1-3:

“Come, let us return to the Lord.  
He has torn us to pieces  
    but he will heal us;  
he has injured us  
    but he will bind up our wounds.  
After two days he will revive us;  
    on the third day he will restore us,  
    that we may live in his presence.  
Let us acknowledge the Lord;  
    let us press on to acknowledge him.  
As surely as the sun rises,  
    he will appear;  
he will come to us like the winter rains,  
    like the spring rains that water the earth.”

Do not these words seem to be full of a wonderful confidence in the goodness of God? But wait. It may be that this is not faith in a Father who is to forgive sins that are hateful to himself and sins which he has given his solemn word to punish by death. Maybe these glib words betray a conception of God as a heavenly fuddy-duddy, too senile to recognize when self-willed mockers are taking advantage of him. There is, after all, no explicit admission of sin in these words. There is no expression of contrition. Is there not an awful presumptuousness in expecting forgiveness for sins which we ourselves do not despise? If this is faith, it is faith without fear, which is impossible.

The Lord responds to their confession like this in verses 4-6:

“What can I do with you, Ephraim?  
What can I do with you, Judah?  
Your love is like the morning mist,  
like the early dew that disappears.  
Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets,  
I killed you with the words of my mouth;  
my judgments flashed like lightning upon you.  
For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,  
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Israel’s love for God was shallow; it lacked commitment. When people regard their God as a weak-kneed Image of Man who has no depth of feeling about right or wrong, how can one feel lasting commitment to him? A God who has no commitment does not inspire commitment.

God charges that Israel’s confession was just words, just formal worship, empty of meaning. It was an empty confession for it does not disavow former behavior nor propose change. Confessions which do not take sin seriously or which expect that the Father does not take sin seriously, as well as confessions, which do not take seriously the call to a new life, are no

confessions at all. They are confessions without repentance and confession without repentance is a mockery of God.

Hosea records for us quite a different confession in 14:2, 3:

“Forgive all our sins  
and receive us graciously,  
that we may offer the fruit of our lips.  
Assyria cannot save us;  
we will not mount war-horses.  
We will never again say ‘Our gods’  
to what our own hands have made,  
for in you the fatherless find compassion.”

In this confession we find an express plea for forgiveness. The confessors recognize themselves as beggars without rights. They speak with the sense that their sin is a grave offense against God. They cry for grace because they recognize that any mercy shown them would be undeserved. There is here no glib praise of God for his goodness for they recognize all such effort of the lips is meaningless unless their lips and lives have been cleansed of sin through repentance.

Here in Hosea 14 we find a confession of specific sins and a renunciation of the same. Israel had made alliance with Assyria against God’s command; she had joined in the false worship of the successful nations round about her in direct violation of God’s command. Israel therefore publicly acknowledges that in the relationship between her and God, she is the offender. And she declares at what points she has offended God. Genuine confession decisively admits to God our sin and our sins. It fears that to fail to admit our specific sins is to confess that we still cherish them and do not wish them crucified.

Genuine confession is also a cry of repentance in that it springs from dismay with sin, hatred for sin. It wishes to renounce sin. It yearns for change, for a new start with the Father by the grace of forgiveness and by the strengthening of his Spirit.

In Hosea 14 we learn that genuine confession is a conversation with God. It must not be merely a conversation with oneself. Confession easily becomes that today. It easily becomes an internal act, a man's conversation with his own mind. Then it is just a case of a man feeling sorry for himself. His "contrition" consists in his feeling bad that he has not achieved the standards he would like. When confession is a conversation with ourselves, a meditation upon our shortcomings, then our confession is an act of idolatry; for then we are only admitting that we have failed to be the kind of persons we want to be. We have fallen short of the glory that we believe is ours.

If our confessions are just a conversation with ourselves, then we are also left alone to perform our own absolution. Then we excuse ourselves on our own authority. If we are insensitive people, we can say to ourselves, "Ah, you are not perfect, but you are all right. Don't take it so hard." We then go from our false confession uncleansed; and, unstrengthened, we return to our sin. Or if we are sensitive people, after confessing to ourselves, our hearts still remain in turmoil. They lack peace. They cry up a storm like the heart of David in his agonizing year of unrepentance.

The Minor Prophets are single-minded in their studied effort to call God's people to repentance and to make confession in repentance. The church today needs instruction in repentance and confession of sins. Our children need the same instruction. Let the Minor Prophets convince us that repentance belongs to the essence of what it means to be a child of God. A child of God is good and does good, a child of God is a good steward and a good witness, but above all a child of God is one who repents of his sins and comes to Jesus for cleansing. As much as I appreciate evangelistic witness, I worry when the familiar words of Romans 10:10 are consistently interpreted to refer to evangelistic witness. The verse reads: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Here

Paul is instructing us, on the basis of the Minor Prophet Joel, not to be witnesses, which we surely also must be, but to be repentant beggars, crying to the Lord for grace. Paul seeks that confession which is an expression of the heart's repentance. Our goal in teaching Bible history and Bible doctrine is to lead our young beyond mere intellectual apperception of the truth to the heart's cry of repentance and faith before the God who is Lion and Father.

As teachers of the church we will want to help our students appreciate what we are doing in public confession just as we help them to appreciate the exercise of public prayer and praise. In our church's public worship we include a public confession of sins. We make our repentance as a public act before the assembled church. Thus we expose ourselves to public shame as evildoers. We do this very deliberately. It is our way of saying we are not ashamed of Jesus who exposed himself for us to public shame upon the cross. By confessing our sins publicly we say that we stand where Jesus stood under the public judgment of God, exposed to public shame because of the offensiveness of our acts and the social implications of our sin. For our sins are never purely private matters. Our sins always in some way or another make a hell out of society. They are a part of that tangled web of deceit and lies and selfishness that make a shambles out of life in community. By our public confessions we admit this to God and stand with Christ under public judgment. But standing with Christ means also letting him be what he wants to be, our substitute under the curse of God. So in our public confessions we are not only declaring to God our public shame, but we are crying for his Son's blood to cover our shame. And his blood does cover our shame. God's appointed witness tells us so. By some such teaching we want to teach our children to hold dear the confession to which the Minor Prophets and all Scripture urge us.

The Christian teacher will also want to be conscious of the importance of confession in his counseling with students in matters of discipline. He will see that there are times to crush young hearts and times to woo young hearts to repentance. He will not allow them the 20<sup>th</sup> century indulgence of laying the blame on environment or breeding. He will seek specific confession of sins that they may be clearly recognized and exposed to crucifixion. And he will never, never forget to offer absolution to the repenting heart. The Minor Prophets oscillate between calls for

repentance and declarations of forgiveness. The forgiving will of God must be declared to our immature and unstable youth. What can win them to constancy except God's unchanging love? And why should they want to repent before a God who is only Lion and not Father?

#### **IV. The Minor Prophets in our Schools**

Having never taught in a Christian day school, I speak very tentatively about how the Minor Prophets may be used in the elementary school. I really think that the most important point I could make is that the teacher immerse herself or himself in the Minor Prophets by reading the *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, Laetsch's *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, and Bernhard W. Anderson's *The Eighth Century Prophets*. These, of course, should be read in conjunction with the reading of the NIV itself. Even if we never teach the Minor Prophets directly, a conscientious attempt to master a few of them will help us to capture the spirit of what prophetic speech for our age should be all about. It will help us to sense what the essential message for a disobedient people must be. And if we never bring the Minor Prophets into our classroom, this understanding will permeate our Bible teaching and make it vital.

The upper grades may also read the prophets with profit. They will need to be given a very good feeling for the historical situation of the prophet you have chosen. This should not be regarded as wasted time. Historical understanding is one of the most vital clues to interpretation of any document. The sensitive teacher will also recognize that not every word or chapter of a prophet necessarily contains a message for today that he can easily help the children to appropriate. The teacher will, therefore, read the prophets selectively. He also will not let his series of lessons from the Minor Prophets become too long. There is a severity about their call to repentance, which if unrelieved by other studies, may prove too oppressive for a classroom of the young. But our generation of the church, at least, unlike the previous generation, has a translation that the young and Biblically unsophisticated can understand. The Minor Prophets are now laid



bare for intensive study by people who are not language experts. This should prove a great blessing for the devotional life of the teacher and also for the devotional life of his children.