

The Work of Christ as Prophet

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Introduction

When the Chairman's Advisory Council of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa-Zambia Conference (LCCA-ZC) asked me nearly two years ago to present an essay on "The Work of Jesus Christ as Prophet" at the Fourth Triennial Convention of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), the first thing that came to my mind was the question Jesus Christ asked his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, namely, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13). The disciples had enough information from people concerning Jesus Christ because on one occasion Jesus had sent them to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 10). Without hesitation they responded, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Mt 16:13,14). We note from this passage that the concept of what a prophet is had taken root in people's minds by the time Jesus was here on earth.

In this paper, which is the first of the three papers that will discuss the work of Jesus Christ in his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King, we shall consider the work of Jesus Christ as Prophet. First we must understand the definition of prophet. After that we will consider Jesus as Prophet according to this outline:

1. In the Old Testament
2. In the State of Humiliation (Exinination)
3. In the State of Exaltation

Common Definitions of a Prophet

Merrill Unger, in Unger's Bible Dictionary, page 890, gives his definition for prophet as "A prophet is one who is divinely inspired to communicate God's will to his people and to disclose the future to them."

Edward W. A. Koehler, in A Summary of Christian Doctrine, page 107, says "A prophet of God is one who speaks for God, making known and interpreting the word and will of God to man.

In Abiding Word, Volume 2, page 128, we read, "The function of a prophet therefore, might be described simply: God spoke to the prophet and the prophet reported to the people."

A Prophet According to African Culture

In African Traditional Religion in the Biblical Perspective, page 88, Dr. Richard J. Gehman, who did research among some African tribes, defines what a prophet is to an African: "A prophet is one who predicts the future. He warns of the impending danger such as drought, heavy rains, locusts, plagues and ensuing epidemic. The prophets are associated with ancestral spirits. They communicate with ancestors who inform them what shall take place and what remedies may be taken to prevent disaster or to protect against danger. . . . The primary means by which a prophet receives his revelations is by a dream. But he might also be possessed by the ancestors."

The Bible's Definition of a Prophet

The definitions of a prophet, as found in books and in culture, may be of interest as we study the thoughts of men. Finally, though, our definition must come from the Bible, as it is Scripture that defines the term.

According to God's inspired Word, a prophet of God is one called by God. This call is not an invitation. It is an appointment from God himself. The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5).

Scripture also tells us that the function of a prophet of God is to proclaim or preach the message of God to people. A prophet of God also foretells the future. "The Lord said, 'You (Moses) shall speak to him (Aaron) and put words in his mouth, I (God) will help both of you speak and I will teach you what to do. He will

“speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him” (Ex 4:15,16). The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah, “You must go to everyone I send you and say whatever I command you . . . Now, I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer 1:7,9). And when God called the prophet Ezekiel we read, “Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them” (Eze 3:4).

So far, we have seen that a prophet of God is not like the other prophets who claim to receive their revelations from ancestral spirits. The prophet of God does not speak his own words or thoughts. Rather, he speaks what God, who called and appointed him, commands and directs him to say.

1. Prophet in the Old Testament

Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word (Jn 1:1), performed his prophetic work of proclaiming God’s message in the Old Testament through the holy prophets. The Apostle Peter, one of the twelve, testifies, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently with greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings and the glories that would follow” (1 Pe 1:10,11).

Edward W. A. Koehler, in his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, on page 108 tells us how Jesus Christ performed his prophetic work in the Old Testament: “Hence, even before his incarnation it was Christ, the Son of God, who made known to Moses and the prophets the word and will of God by sending His Spirit into their hearts.”

True, what the prophets taught, proclaimed and foretold in the Old Testament, it was Christ who took part in creating all things (Jn 1:3), who then spoke to the serpent and Eve in the garden of Eden (Ge 3:15), performing his work of a prophet.

Christ Declared a Prophet

As noted earlier, the idea of a prophet was not something new in the Old Testament times. Moses, who lived about 1,500 years before Jesus Christ, told the Israelites about the Savior to come: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him . . . I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him” (Dt 18:15,18).

The Old Testament has many prophecies which tell us about the prophetic work of the Anointed One. The Prophet Isaiah, who lived about 760 years before Christ, prophesied, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice” (Isa 42:1-3).

In another place Isaiah wrote of the Christ: “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn” (Isa 61:1,2).

And again Isaiah wrote, “See I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you because of the Lord your God, the Holy one of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor” (Is. 55:4,5).

The Prophet Zechariah, who was also a priest, prophesied about Jesus, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord” (Zec 6:12).

2. In the State of Humiliation (Exinination)

In the days of his flesh, Jesus Christ, as a prophet, taught and preached the message of God personally. However, he chose twelve disciples and taught them for a period of three years in order that they would teach others when he left the earth. In all our four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we see Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, doing his work as a prophet, that is, teaching and preaching God’s Word. Some passages clearly reveal this:

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Mt 4:17).

“Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mk 1:14,15).

Jesus message was simply for people to acknowledge their sins and believe the good news which is centered in the promised Saviour of the world. A good explanation of this is found in Harold E. Wicke’s “The People’s Bible, Mark,” page 22: “The way to the king, as Christ points out, is to repent and believe the good news. Repent means to have a change of heart as far as sin is concerned and in this connection points to good news concerning the one in whom they would find forgiveness of sins. Jesus called on his hearers to turn away from the service of sin, to be sorry they had fallen away from God, and by faith to trust in him who alone offers forgiveness.”

This is what Jesus, as a prophet, wanted his people to know and do as he went about teaching and preaching in Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and to the regions beyond. He was doing the work of a prophet.

People Recognized Jesus as a Prophet

The power of the Word in Jesus’ preaching led people to recognize him as a prophet, as we see in a number of passages.

The Samaritan woman could not keep the information to herself. “Sir,” she said, “I can see that you are a prophet” (Jn. 4:19).

“Those who were at the feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, after hearing his message, said ‘Surely this man is the Prophet’” (Jn 7:40).

When Jesus raised a widow’s son at the town of Nain, we are told that “They (the people) were filled with awe and praised God. ‘A great prophet has appeared among us’ they said. ‘God has come to help his people’” (Lk 7:16).

Christ Proclaimed Himself to be a Prophet

In his first sermon at his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus Christ told the people who were in the synagogue that he was the prophet about whom Isaiah wrote. In Luke we read, “He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’” (Lk 4:16-19, compare with Isa 61:1,2).

Jesus told the unbelieving Jews, “I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say” (Jn 12:49,50).

And when Christ was honoring his heavenly Father for the work he was sent for, he prayed, “I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you and they believed that you sent me. I have given them your word. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known” (Jn 17:8,14,26).

Christ Preached the Law

Christ as a prophet preached the law for two reasons: First, he wanted to make people conscious of their sins, and secondly, he wanted the law to guide them in their Christian living. (We recognize that the law also has a third use, namely, to curb people from coarse outbreaks of sin.)

As an example of Jesus’ use of the law to make people conscious of their sins, we read from Luke, “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ‘What is written in the law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’ He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘You answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live’” (Lk 10:25-28, compare with Dt 6:5, Lev 19:18).

To show people the way they should live in accordance with the law, Jesus told them, "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48, compare with Lev 19:2).

Christ's preaching of the law was clear to the people; he was not like the priests, scribes, and Pharisees who burdened the people's consciences by their preaching of the law, and who gave them no hope. Besides the law, which convicts, Jesus preached the gospel, which saves.

Christ Preached the Gospel

The primary prophetic work of Jesus in the days of his flesh was always the preaching of the gospel, the good news of salvation for all mankind. This is shown in the following passages:

"The law was given through Moses, grace and truth come through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17).

Jesus Christ told the disciples of John the Baptist who came to Jesus to find out whether he was the one to come: "Go back and report to John what you have seen . . . and the good news is preached to the poor" (Lk 7:22). Jesus told the people of the town of Capernaum, which was his headquarters: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns also because that is why I was sent" (Lk 4:43).

Christ's preaching of the gospel was to bestow his salvation upon sinners, to turn their sinful hearts to God. Christ's gospel message could be summarized in a well known passage of the Bible, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

Christ, Prophet of the World

Christ's prophetic work in the days of his flesh (his exinanition) was conducted with the impression that Jesus was only designated for the nation of Israel. When the Canaanite woman, who had a daughter suffering terribly from demon possession, asked Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus answered, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 15:24).

When Jesus sent out his twelve disciples to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, he gave them stern instructions, saying, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10:5,6).

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "For I tell you that Christ has become the servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs" (Ro 15:8).

However, Christ showed that he not only came for the Israelites but for all the people who were under God's wrath because of their sins. We see this when he stretched his hand to heal the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28), when he held a conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4:1-26), and when he healed a servant of the Roman centurion (Lk 7:1-10).

In regard to Christ as Prophet for the World, the Old Testament prophets foretold that the prophetic work of the Anointed One would not be limited to one nation, the nation of Israel, but would be for all nations. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isa 60:3). August Pieper, in "Isaiah II," page 575, comments well on Isaiah 60:3: "He will extend his call to Gentiles whom he does not know, and Gentiles who do not know him will come running to him. He'll convert many Gentiles to Zion."

Another striking passage showing Christ's redemption of the world is found again in Isaiah: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa 49:6).

Again, reading from "Isaiah II, pages 360,361, August Pieper comments on this passage: "There are two points about this mystery that must be noted. The Gentiles are not an independent class of citizens in the kingdom of God, alongside the Jews, but a class such as has been incorporated into that citizenship which belongs to Israel by promise. In God's spiritual kingdom Israel is also God's firstborn, possessing all the rights of the firstborn. The Church of the Gentiles dare not forget that. The second point is that there is now

no distinction between Jew and Greek, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian and Scythian, slave and free, for they all have the one Lord who is generous to all who call upon him. Christ is our all and in us all (Col 3:11, Ro 10:12). The Gentiles who believe are naturalized citizens in God's kingdom, the believing Jews are natives."

The Prophet Haggai also prophesied that the Savior will be for the Jews and Gentiles: "I will shake all nations and the desired of all nations will come" (Hag 2:7).

Surely Jesus is the Savior for all people. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

Truly, Christ was first sent only to the nation of Israel, then for the rest of all people regardless of race, language, nationality, culture or status in society. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles" (Ro 1:16).

3. In the State of Exaltation

Nearly two thousand years have passed since Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. However, he still continues with his work as a prophet, that is, teaching and preaching the good news to all people here on earth. He does this through his Church. The writers of the four Gospels tell us how Jesus Christ entrusted the mission of teaching and preaching his word of salvation to the Church. Before ascending into heaven, he said to the eleven disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:18-20a). To those same disciples he said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15,16).

Jesus spoke of the Church continuing his prophetic work, when he said, "'Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive any his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'" (Jn 20:21-23).

In the same way Jesus said, "This is what is written, 'The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' You are my witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:46-48).

David J. Valleskey, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, comments well on the mission of the Church in his book, "We Believe—Therefore We Speak" pages 128,129,132 and 133:

"They (the disciples) were to make people Jesus' disciples by employing the means of grace (baptism in particular), through which the Holy Spirit creates faith. And they were to help people grow as disciples as, through the Word, they taught them to obey, to guard, and to hold fast to everything that Jesus had commanded, that is, all of his Word. 'Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' included the believer's life of sanctification that follows upon his or her becoming a believer through baptism . . . Be heralds of the gospel. The assumption is that to do this disciples will be going to those who have not yet heard and believed it . . . The church would be going to all people everywhere who have not yet come to repentance and received the forgiveness of sins, to tell them the good news that in Christ their sins have been forgiven. Those who receive their message in faith can be assured that heaven's doors are open wide to them. Those who reject it must be told that the doors of heaven are closed as long as they refuse to repent and believe the gospel."

John (Johannes) Schaller, from 1908-1919 the president of the Theological Seminary of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, USA, (later to be called Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, at Mequon, Wisconsin), in his book entitled "Biblical Christology," pages 140,141, wrote about Jesus Christ's prophetic work today through his Church:

"Whenever and wherever preached, the gospel is his word and he is the prophet, as he spoke aforetime by the mouths of his prophets (Lk 1:70, 1 Pt 1:10-11, Heb 1:1), so he has now charged his

church with the mission to proclaim his gospel, in his name, in his power and with the assurance of his invisible, bodily presence unto the end of days (Mt 28:18-20). In pursuance of this plan, he not only appointed his apostles to be his inspired witnesses and authoritative teachers of his Truth for all generations to come (Mk 16:15; Jn 20:21, Ac 1:8), but he also continues to bless his church with gifts of persons qualified by their endowment to carry on the work (Eph 4:8-12, 1 Co 12:28, Mt. 9:37f). In a peculiar and unique sense, the word of the apostles is the word of Christ himself (Isa 52:6; Lk 10:16; Jn 13:20). But the same is true of the preaching of all servants of the church as far as they take their message from the recorded word of Christ.”

In Conclusion

It is important for every Christian to recognize Jesus as Prophet. But why? It’s because Jesus did more for us than suffer and die on the cross and rise from the grave. As our Prophet, he gave us the message of his sacrifice on the cross, the word of salvation. If he had not acted as a prophet to share that message from God, how could any of us have faith? How could any of us receive eternal life if Jesus had not given us that word of salvation?

How wonderful it is that Jesus, a true man, walked on this earth to deliver to us the precious message of our eternal life! As we read in Holy Scripture, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Ro 10:15, compare with Isa 52:7). Paul was writing about more than the feet of the Apostles, the Evangelists and today’s pastors, teachers, lay messengers, etc. He meant the feet of Jesus as well, yes, Jesus, our Prophet.

May this message of Jesus as Prophet be yet another part of God’s Word that strengthens and sustains us in our faith.

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