

prophets False and True

J. Gresham Machen

*‘And Micaiah said, As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak’
(1 Kings 22:14).*

THE text is a great text and it is taken from a great chapter. Some chapters of the Bible are certainly greater than others, and it is by no means derogatory to the authority of Scripture to recognise their special greatness. The doctrine of plenary inspiration does not mean, as its opponents often represent it as meaning, that all parts of the Bible are equally valuable — it only means that all parts of the Bible are equally true. Even the least valuable parts of the Bible have, indeed, their place. Lovers of poetry love the level lines of Shakespeare; so we Christians cherish the great level, prose chapters of the Word of God. Even in the level pathways of Scripture we can walk with God and learn of Him. But then when we have passed through such a stretch in our reading of the Bible, where distant scenes are concealed, suddenly we emerge sometimes as we read, as upon the brow of some hill, and discern before us with wondering eyes a wide, free prospect of the world and destiny and human duty. And there, through the great expanse stretched out before, may be seen a narrow path that leads over hill and dale until in the dim distance it loses itself in the mysterious brightness of the city of God.

Such a great chapter of the Bible, such a Pisgah height of vision, is found in the twenty-second chapter of the First Book of Kings. The two kings sat on their thrones at the gate of Samaria; the armies were marshalled before them for the battle. But before they went forth Jehoshaphat said unto the king of Israel: ‘Enquire, I pray thee, at the word of the Lord today.’ And the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said unto them: ‘Shall I go against Ramoth-Gilead to battle, or shall I forbear?’ And they said: ‘Go up; for the Lord shall deliver it unto the hand of the king.’

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied. Why he was not satisfied I do not know. Perhaps it was because of conscience. He was doing that which he knew in his heart of hearts to be wrong— what part had he with the wicked Ahab? Perhaps, as men will do when conscience speaks, he sought ever further confirmation of that thing, really wrong, that he desired to do. Four hundred prophets had spoken, but their hubbub had not quite succeeded in drowning the inner voice. So Jehoshaphat said: ‘Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him?’ And Ahab said: ‘There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord; but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.’ And Jehoshaphat said, ‘Let not the king say so.’

So Micaiah was brought and stood before the king. The messenger who brought him

was his friend, and coached him as to what he should say. 'Behold now, the words of the prophets declare good unto the king with one mouth; let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good.' But Micaiah said: 'As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak.' So he came and stood before the king. And the king said unto him: 'Micaiah, shall we go against Ramoth-Gilead to battle, or shall we forbear?' And he answered him: 'Go and prosper: for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king.'

Do you think that Micaiah was untrue to the word of the Lord that was in him; do you think that he belied the brave words that he had just spoken to the officer who had brought him to the king? Oh no, my friends; the words of Micaiah were no denial of his sacred trust, but they were the words of a devastating scorn. 'I will give you,' he said in effect, 'the only prophecy that you deserve, the prophecy of a parrot that speaks only what others speak, the prophecy of a courtier who speaks only what will win the favour of men. Go and prosper: for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king.' Ahab agreed with our exegesis; Ahab knew well enough that he was being mocked. 'How many times shall I adjure thee,' he said, 'that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the Lord?'

And then came a surprising thing; then came, when it was least to be expected, in that unfavourable atmosphere, a true word of the Lord. Even in form it was quite different from the words that had gone before. There was no more parrot-like repetition of optimistic words; there was no more vulgar shoving of imaginary Syrians with horns of iron. Instead, in the answer of Micaiah, we suddenly find ourselves in the region of high poetry where the great prophets move. 'I saw all Israel,' said Micaiah, 'scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd, and the Lord said, These have no master, let them return every man to his house in peace.'

The rest of the story is quickly told. The word of the Lord was unheeded; Micaiah went back to partake of the bread of affliction and the water of affliction; the kings went up into the battle; and the dogs soon licked the blood of Ahab by the pool of Samaria. Which kind of prophets will you be as you go out from this place? Will you be like Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, pushing imaginary Syrians with horns of iron, speaking the word that others are speaking, speaking the word that men want you to speak? Or will you be prophets after the order of Micaiah?

In one sense, I admit, you cannot be prophets at all. A prophet was a man to whom God had directly spoken, who appealed to no external authority, but said simply, 'Thus saith the Lord.' There are those who claim to be such prophets today. But few of us, I think, will be inclined to accept their claims. True prophecy, in the supernatural, biblical sense does not exist today; like other miracles it has ceased. Why it has ceased we may not perhaps be able to say; the ways of God with men in the Christian religion constitute not a scheme that we can work out according to principles of our own, but, as Chesterton says, for us at least, a story, a romance, full of strange, unexpected things. Perhaps, indeed, we may see a little way at this point into the purposes of God, we may perhaps understand a little of the reason why prophecy has ceased. There is a wonderful completeness in the revelation that the Bible contains. We have in the Bible an account of the great presuppositions that should underlie all our thinking — the righteousness and holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. And then we have an account of the way in which God saved man once for all by the redeeming work of Christ. That redeeming work was not partial but complete. It needs to be applied, indeed, by the Holy Spirit; but the redemption that is to be applied was accomplished once for all by Christ. It is hard to see, therefore, what need there is of supernatural revelation until that great day when the Lord shall come

again to usher in His kingdom in final power.

But although no fresh supernatural revelation is given in the present age, it would be a great mistake to disparage the dispensation under which we are living. That dispensation is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit: even the absence of new revelations is itself in one sense a mark of glory; it is an indication of the wondrous completeness of God's initial gift to His church. In Old Testament times there was prophecy, because then God's redemptive plan was still in the process of unfolding; but we are the heirs of the ages and have the Saviour Himself. Only one great act remains in the drama of redemption — the mighty catastrophic coming of our Lord in glory.

Meanwhile we have the Holy Spirit, and we have the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments that the Holy Spirit uses. Much mischief has been wrought in the church by false notions of 'the witness of the Spirit'; it has sometimes been supposed that the Holy Spirit makes us independent of the Bible. Just the opposite is the case. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. He does not contradict in one generation what He has said in another. He does not contradict the Scriptures that He himself has given. On the contrary, what He really does is to make the words of Scripture glow with a heavenly light and burn in the hearts of men. Those Scriptures are placed in your hands. You may not say with the prophets of old: 'God has spoken directly and independently to me; I appeal to no external authority; when I speak it is "Thus saith the Lord."' But you can do something else. You can mount your pulpit stairs; open reverently the Bible on the desk; pray to the gracious Spirit to make plain the words that He has spoken; and so unfold to needy people the Word of God.

Do you think that that is a low function? Do you think that it involves a slavish kind of dependence on a book? Do you think that it means that advance and freedom are to be checked? The history of the church should be the answer. Again and again history has shown that the Bible, when accepted in the very highest sense as the Word of God, does not stifle life but gives life birth; does not enslave men, but sets them free. Those who talk about emancipating themselves from the slavish doctrine of what they call 'verbal' inspiration are not really emancipating themselves from a tyranny, but they are tearing up the charter upon which all human liberty depends.

And so, after all, you can say in a high, true sense, as you draw upon the rich store of revelation in the Bible: 'Thus saith the Lord.' If you accept the Bible as the Word of God you will have one qualification of a preacher. Whatever be the limitations of your gifts, you will at least have a message. You will be, in one respect at least, unlike most persons who love to talk in public at the present time; you will have one qualification of a speaker— you will at least have something to say. But what is it that you will have to say? What will be the kind of message that God has given you to proclaim?

In the first place, it will unquestionably be a message of warning; you will be called upon to tell men of evil that is to come. That will no doubt make you unpopular. Men like encouragement; they like to be told, with regard to the Ramoth-Gilead of their pet projects, to go up and prosper, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king; they do not like to see gloomy visions of all Israel scattered upon the hills as sheep that have not a shepherd. It is not Micaiah the son of Imlah but Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah that often has the favour of the crowd.

I am going to venture, however, to say a brief word in defence of pessimism. There are times when pessimism is a very encouraging thing. Last summer I took a voyage down the New England coast one foggy afternoon and night; it was one of the thickest

nights that I have ever seen even on those fog-bound waters. Now I am glad to say that the captain of each of the two boats on which I travelled was a thorough pessimist. For a time the boat would plough along at full speed; but then, for no apparent reason, she would stop and rock quietly upon the gentle swells, and then proceed at a snail's pace. Presently the mournful sound of a buoy would be heard and then the buoy would come into sight. The buoys were usually exactly where the captain expected them to be; but unless he saw them he took a thoroughly pessimistic view as to their whereabouts. The result of such pessimism was good. The sound of the foghorn was, indeed, lugubrious and hardly conducive to repose; but at least we got safely into Boston in the morning.

There are ship-captains who are less pessimistic than the captain of that boat. Such an one, for example, was the captain of the ill-fated '*Titanic*. He hoped that all was well, and kept the engines going at full speed. I am certainly not presuming to blame him. Perhaps every captain not gifted with superhuman vision would have been as optimistic as he. But, whether excusably or not, optimistic he certainly was; and his optimism was fatal to many hundreds of human lives. The great ship ploughed onward through the night; and now she lies at the bottom of the sea. Oh, that no mere weak mortal but some true prophet of God had been upon the bridge that night!

That disaster is a figure of what will come of optimism in the churches of today. Superficially our ecclesiastical life seems to be progressing as it always did: the cabins are full of comfortable passengers; the orchestra is playing a lively air; the rows of lighted windows shine cheerfully out into the night. But all the time death is lurking beneath. In this time of deadly peril there are leaders who say that all is well; there are leaders who decry controversy and urge peace, declaring that the church is all perfectly loyal and true. God forgive them, brethren! I say it with all my heart: may God forgive them for the evil that they are doing to Christ's little ones: may the Holy Spirit open their eyes while yet there is time! Meanwhile, in the case of many of the churches, the great ship rushes onward to the risk, at least, of doom.

Yes, my friends, if you be true prophets like Micaiah, you will be called upon to warn the church. But you will also be called upon to warn individual men and women. And the thing about which you will be called upon to warn them is sin. In warning men of sin you will of course often have to cast popularity aside. Like some good physicians, you will be laughed at as alarmists and hated as those who take the pleasure out of life. Men love to be encouraged by false hopes; the world is full of quack remedies for sin. In this spiritual sphere, moreover, there is no protection against quacks; there is no paternalistic state legislature to regulate medical practice and protect the unwary from their fate. In such a world of quackery and of false optimism you will have to come forward with your terrible diagnosis of sin.

You will come, indeed, not merely with a diagnosis but also with a cure. Only, the cure is no light, merely palliative, thing, but one that enters into the very depths:

**There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.**

I am perfectly well aware that many men do not like that hymn; it offends their sensibilities; they are omitting it, I believe, from their hymnbooks. Now I am perfectly ready to confess that I myself do not like it so much as I do some other hymns. Possibly its imagery is too bold and too fully carried out; possibly it spreads a little

too unreservedly in the light of day what would better remain hidden in the depths of the Christian heart. I do not know. I prefer to it, I think, that hymn of Isaac Watts:

**When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.**

And if I want bold imagery I turn to the original fourth verse of that hymn.

**His dying crimson like a robe.
Spreads o'er His body on the tree.
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.**

I quite agree with Matthew Arnold in holding that that hymn is the greatest of all those hymns that go to the depths in presenting the remedy for sin.

There are those, I know, who tell us that we ought not to place such emphasis upon the cross. They talk to us — these men who belittle the cross of Christ, these men who trouble its divine simplicity with the wisdom, or rather the folly, of this world — they talk to us about having a living Christ and not a dead Christ. Well, my friends, I think we certainly ought to have a living Christ. Without a sweet, intimate communion with Him there is no Christian experience; without service of Him as a present Companion and Helper and Judge, as we go about our labours from day to day, there is no Christian life. Yes, we certainly ought to have a living Christ. But let us never forget one thing — that living Christ with whom we have communion bore in His hands the print of the nails. Oh, no, my friends; only at the foot of the cross is there a remedy for sin; there only is peace, there only do we find our first communion with the Christ with whom then we shall live forevermore.

Certainly if you preach this gospel of the cross, you will have to bear reproach. If you preach this gospel faithfully, you will see men whom you have called your friends, men whom you have served in the hour of need, turn against you and join the general hue and cry; you will be subjected to misrepresentation and slander of all kinds; you will bear both ridicule and abuse; you will be attacked behind and before. But there are some compensations in the prophet's life. Many will speak of you; but there is One who will say: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

Men sometimes think that the day of Christian heroism is over. I do not believe it. There may come, sooner than we think, even physical persecutions. Around us there is slowly closing in the tyranny of a democratic collectivism which is far more inimical to liberty of conscience than the comparatively ineffective despotisms of the past. But however that may be, even now you will be called upon to endure hardness for the cross of Christ. You will face in subtle forms the age-long temptation to mitigate the exclusiveness of the gospel — to preach it as one way of salvation without denying that other ways may lead to the same end, to make your preaching, as Satan persuasively puts it, 'positive and not negative,' to be 'tolerant of opposing views,' to work contentedly in the church with those who reject the cross of Christ, to preach Christ boldly in your pulpit (where preaching Him may cost you nothing) and then deny Him by your vote in church councils and courts. But God grant that you may resist the Tempter's voice; God save you from the sin of paring down the gospel to suit the pride of men; God grant that you may deliver your message straight and full and plain. Only so, whatever else you may sacrifice, will you have one thing — the

favour of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And only so will you be the instrument in saving souls. Do you think men's souls are satisfied by the current preaching of the day, with its encouragement of human pride? It might seem so. The churches are crowded where Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah and his associates hold forth; one can sometimes in those churches scarcely obtain a seat; hundreds are turned away at the doors. But let us not be deceived by appearances. Among those crowds — contented though they may seem to a superficial observer to be — there are many hungry hearts. Despite all the apparent satisfaction of the world with this 'other gospel' of a non-doctrinal Christianity, this 'other gospel' that is dictated by human pride, there is deep down in the human heart a hunger for the Word of God. Despite all the efforts of modern prophets, all that Zedekiah and his far more than four hundred associates can do, despite the hubbub of modern optimism, you will find, here and there at least, in this modern world, listening to these modern preachers, those who say, after listening to it all: 'Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides that we might enquire of him?'

And then, when you find such persons, you will have your chance; then, while angels look on, you will have your moment of glorious opportunity — the moment when you can speak the word that God has given you to speak. It will be a word of warning; false hopes must be ruthlessly destroyed. But it will also be a word of wondrous joy. What can be compared, brethren, to the privilege of proclaiming to needy souls the exuberant joy of the gospel of Christ? Can all the plaudits of the world, the false reputation of breadth and tolerance, and praise of those who know not Christ? I think not, my brethren. I think that those things, when we come to face the great issues of life and death, will seem more worthless than the dust of the streets. There is one thing and one thing only that is worth while; it is to be faithful to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us; it is to be faithful to Him who is Judge and Ruler of all, and to speak His word for the salvation of dying men.

Pray God that you, whom we have come during your stay here to know and love, may be thus faithful; pray God that you may be true prophets after the order of Micaiah; pray God that you may say to those who would persuasively turn you aside from your true calling, who would urge you to trust in human influences for the success of your labours, who would urge you to speak the words that others speak, who would say: 'Behold now, the words of the prophets declare good unto the king with one mouth; let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good' — pray God that you may say to them, with Micaiah, after you have been at the foot of the cross: 'As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak.'

Author

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937), was an American Presbyterian scholar and apologist. Born in Baltimore, he was educated at Johns Hopkins, Princeton University and Theological Seminary, Marburg, and Gottingen. He was ordained in 1914. He taught NT at Princeton Seminary from 1906 to 1929, apart from a brief period of YMCA service in France. As a defender of the classic Reformed position, he was influenced by his teacher B.B. Warfield. When Warfield died in 1921, the mantle of leadership for the "Princeton Theology" fell upon Machen. He resigned in 1929 due to the Liberal realignment of the seminary. Machen was a principal founder of Westminster Theological Seminary (1929) and what is now the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936). He served as president and professor of NT at Westminster

Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA from 1929 to 1937.

In 1935 he was tried and found guilty of insubordination by a presbytery convened at Trenton, New Jersey, on charges brought by the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. It condemned him for activities in connection with an independent mission board. He was forbidden to defend himself and was suspended from the Presbyterian (PCUSA) ministry. Machen is regarded by friend and foe as a leading conservative apologist in the modernist-fundamentalist era. Among his most significant publications are *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1927); *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923): most definitive of his thought; *New Testament for Beginners* (1923); and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930).

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