



The State of the Church, Part 17

Last time we primarily looked at Ezekiel 13:1-7 and how God punishes a people by giving them over to certain types of leaders. In that text it is obvious how men are given over to speaking their own minds and feelings rather than preaching the Word of God. Now it might be thought that these things are only true of certain groups or of those who hold to certain types of theology. It is entirely possible for a man to hold any theological position and still be a man who preaches his own mind and feelings. What must happen in our day or in any day that wishes to be instruments of God out of love for His glory is that men must be broken from any desire to be glorified or honored themselves and be given over to preach the Word of God to the pleasure and glory of God. Men must see that they are nothing but instruments that God will use if He pleases. Men must see that they must be given over to love God with all of their beings and not leave a bit for themselves and their own honor. Even the most orthodox and conservative pastor can preach and teach to his own glory out of love for himself and his own honor. The finest scholar can be one that, in all pretended humility, inwardly glories in his own publications. No one is immune to desires for the honor of self. Only the Spirit can break a person and empty that person of self and make that person a tuned instrument fit for God to play the music of His beauty and glory on and through.

Ezekiel 13:8 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, "Because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you," declares the Lord GOD. 9 "So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord GOD. 10 "It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, 'Peace!' when there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold, they plaster it over with whitewash; 11 so tell those who plaster *it* over with whitewash, that it will fall. A flooding rain will come, and you, O hailstones, will fall; and a violent wind will break out. 12 "Behold, when the wall has fallen, will you not be asked, 'Where is the plaster with which you plastered *it*?' 13 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, "I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will

also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume *it* in wrath. 14 "So I will tear down the wall which you plastered over with whitewash and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation is laid bare; and when it falls, you will be consumed in its midst. And you will know that I am the LORD. 15 "Thus I will spend My wrath on the wall and on those who have plastered it over with whitewash; and I will say to you, 'The wall is gone and its plasterers are gone, 16 *along with* the prophets of Israel who prophesy to Jerusalem, and who see visions of peace for her when there is no peace,' declares the Lord GOD.

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The One True Resting Place

The one true goal or resting-place where doubt and weariness, the stings of a pricking conscience, and the longings of an unsatisfied soul would all be quieted, is Christ Himself. Not the church, but Christ. Not doctrine, but Christ. Not forms, but Christ. Not His life for ours; sealing the everlasting covenant, and making peace for us through the blood of His cross; Christ the divine storehouse of all light and truth, "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge";² Christ the infinite vessel, filled with the Holy Spirit, the enlightener, the teacher, the quickener, the comforter, so that "out of his fullness we may receive, and grace for grace."³ This, this alone is the vexed soul's refuge, its rock to build on, its home to abide in till the great tempter be bound and every conflict ended in victory.

1. From *Words to Winners of Souls*, 14-15.
2. Colossians 2:3
3. John 1:16

Horatius Bonar

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The State of the Church (Continued)

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In the days that this text was written the prophets who were speaking peace were declaring that Israel would not go into captivity despite what Ezekiel was saying. Those prophets were claiming to have heard a word from the Lord and were going around saying that things were okay. But God had spoken on the subject and those men were speaking their own minds and desires in contrast to what God had spoken. These men were going around cloaked in the robes of religion and piety telling people that they had peace with God when in fact God was bringing judgment down upon them. In fact, their judgment was going to be worse if they did not hear the words of the Lord. But the false prophets were evidently smooth talkers and had skill at rhetoric because the people believed them rather than Ezekiel who spoke the truth. It is that way even now. Falsehood is more popular than truth.

If it turned out so badly for the people in Israel who listened to the soothing proclamation of peace instead of the truth of God, how much worse is it for those who listen to smooth words or words that they agree with when the eternal wrath of God is upon them? How many preachers and evangelists do we have in our day that go around preaching how easy it is to have peace with God when people do not have peace with God? How many are there, Reformed or Arminian, who preach a message with no true repentance and no real change of heart? How many are there that preach a soothing message rather than the truth of who God is? How many teach that all people have to do is to pray a prayer or walk an aisle and then make some moral reform and then they will have peace with God? How many in our day talk much about external sin much less drive deeply into the hearts of people to expose their wicked hearts and natures so that they can see that they are at enmity with God and hate Him in reality? Is this not the same thing as preaching peace when there is no peace?

We live in a day when the preaching of the Word of God has been forgotten in different ways. The reasons for this are perhaps many, but we live in such a time where people will not tolerate preaching on sin and preaching to the heart and so preachers have softened the message in order to please people. When sin is spoken of, it is more in terms of external things that are much easier to deal with than sin of the heart. We have people with skill in

the languages that skim along the outside of a text though they think they are going deep with the languages and leave the hearts of men and women untouched. Thomas Hooker put it this way: "What does it profit a man to scrape up a little Greek and Latin together, and to leave the sense of the Scripture undiscovered, and the conscience no whit touched, nor the heart stirred?" In other words, even with all the languages along with all of the homiletical and hermeneutical skills possible, a person may not arrive at the true sense of the Scripture and so leave the conscience untouched and the heart without a stir. This is to be unfaithful to the Word of God and it is also to go around crying peace when there is no peace. Until the heart is touched and a person is made aware of the depth of his or her sin, that person is not even going to hear what the Gospel is really about.

"This is the reason why our ministry thrives not, and the hearts of men are not wrought upon; because we labor not the right way, to show men their sins, and to convince their conscience, that they may not flinch out from the ordinances of God; nay, I take it to be the special cause, why after all the precious promises that God makes known, no man receives good by them; we offer salves to them that know not whether they have sores or no; and we offer medicine to those that know not whether they have any disease or no; we speak of grace and Christ, but people think they have no need of them; suffer me to speak my mind herein freely. That ministry which does not ordinarily humble the soul, and break the heart for sin, does not convert and draw home to Christ." Thomas Hooker in (The Soul's Preparation for Christ).

This is telling us that when ministers preach in such a way that souls are not humbled and hearts are not broken for sin, then those people will not be converted and drawn home to Christ. When ministers offer medicine to people who think they have nothing wrong, those ministers are being unfaithful to the Gospel and to Christ. The ministers are crying out that there is peace in Christ when the people have no idea of what is really meant. But then again, perhaps the minister does not know what is meant in that case either.

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The State of the Church (Continued)

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Thomas Shephard wrote *The Sincere Convert and The Sound Believer* in the 1600's. Interestingly enough, he was also the founder of Harvard University. In the introduction (p. clxxxvii) of that volume it says this in regards to Thomas Shephard and what he believed. "A ministry, to be truly fruitful, must show to the people their transgressions; and that doctrine that does not humble the sinner and require unconditional submission, while it offers redeeming grace, though it were preached by an angel from heaven, is anathematized by the gospel." We must grapple with statements like that because of the man who believed that and because of the vital nature of the Gospel involved. Shepherd is saying that a man who preaches and offers redeeming grace without preaching sin in such a way that it humbles the sinner and requires unconditional submission to God is preaching a false Gospel. In other words, he is standing with Thomas Hooker and telling us that many are calling out with peace and with something they call a gospel and yet they are not preaching the Gospel of Scripture.

In a letter to an anxious inquirer in 1649 Jonathan Mitchel (a pastor) said this: "I have no greater request for myself and for you, than for God make us see things as they really are, and pound our hearts to pieces, and make sin most bitter, and Christ most sweet, that we might be both humbled and comforted to purpose. An imperfect work of the law, and then an imperfect work of the gospel, is the bane and ruin of these days. Some fears and affections, and then some hopes of mercy, without finding full rest and satisfaction in Christ alone, men rest in, and perish." When men rest in something they think is the Gospel and rest in something they have heard of Christ and yet they are not humbled and broken by the Law with the Gospel not applied to the soul with power and truth, those people are deceived. The ministers are then those crying out peace when there is no peace at all.

The judgment of God is upon the professing Church in America. It is seen by the fact that there are so many false prophets/ministers in the land. It is seen by the fact that so many ignore the Law and how it is to be applied to the soul so that a person may be broken from pride and self and so united to Christ in truth. It is seen when

the Gospel is so abused as to give false confidence and assurance to so many. Surely it is obvious that the judgment of God has arrived when He has turned His face from the professing Church and has turned it over to a ministry that is largely unfaithful which is the spiritual equivalent of having prophets preaching and teaching the people that they have peace with God even while His wrath burned against them. There are indeed many people who are wondering around not knowing what is going on with them and why they are so miserable. Their ministers are applying whitewash to them with false words and a false gospel. People are lost and are without shepherds while those with the title preach soothing words that tickle the ear. We have ministers pleading with people to believe in Christ and yet those poor people are not taught the depths of their sin and are led to believe that faith is simply an intellectual assent or a commitment. Ministers are telling people that they need to repent and yet the people are not told that repentance is of the sins of the heart as well. In the words of Solomon Stoddard, "This is a very dark cloud, both as it is an evidence that men do not have the experience of that work in their own souls, and as it is a sign that such men are utterly unskillful in guiding others who are under this work. If this opinion should prevail in the land, it would give a deadly wound to religion. It would expose men to think of themselves as converted when they are not." That opinion has prevailed and true Christianity has received a deadly wound. We are under the judgment of God and despite our external riches and glowing numbers; we live in a very dark land where the Gospel is virtually extinguished. The Lord has turned His face away from us and has given us over to the power of our own sin.

Richard Smith

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