



The Twenty-seventh Century of His-Story: The Church under the Judges Needs the Office of Prophet

As the twenty-seventh century of His-story opens, the tribes of Israel have settled into their appointed places in the land of Canaan. They have been delivered from the bondage of Egypt, organized as a nation, and given the promised land. If this were an ordinary earthly story, we might expect them now to live happily ever after; but this is no ordinary history, and the real significance has only just begun. These people are the church, the beloved people of God. Canaan is still a picture of eternal life with God. The full revelation of deliverance from the cruel bondage of sin in Christ is still over a thousand years away. The church is, as it were, still in school being trained and prepared for eternal life with God. They have been introduced to the whole plan of God regarding deliverance from sin and now begin to live a life of gratitude and fellowship with God. They have graduated from elementary school and are moving on to high school, but they have not yet arrived at the real thing. They will now have a taste of freedom and independence, but will quickly experience that there is much more to learn about the power of sin and the value of the offices of prophet, priest, and king to bring true peace and joy to the covenant life of the church with God.

The period of the judges lasts about 350 years and therefore will be covered in three articles, each in connection with one of the three offices through with the church experiences covenant fellowship with God. In this article as we look at the first hundred years of judges under Othniel and Ehud, I want to show how the history exposes the need for God to feed his people with his word through the office of prophets who speak the word of God. In the following article I hope to show how this history exposes the

need for the office of priest, and in the final article on this period of the judges we will see how this history exposes the need for the office of king. While this division is somewhat arbitrary in that there is nothing historical in the first hundred years that points directly to the office of prophet in distinction from the rest of the history of the judges, the history of the judges as a whole clearly exposes the value of these God-ordained offices for the peace and joy of the church. This history reveals this need for these three offices by demonstrating what life is like without having these offices firmly established in the life of the church.

The dominant characteristic in the church of this period of time is captured in the phrase “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” Doing what you want sounds like freedom, but the reality is that the church over and over again finds herself deeper and deeper in the despair of sin. Freedom to do what one wants is not the key to peace and joy. By nature our will is in bondage to sin and does not choose for the glory of God. Real peace and joy comes in the way of knowing God’s will and living in obedience to Him. Real peace and joy comes only through the regenerating, powerful work of God’s grace in the hearts of His people. He has created us for a purpose, and when we are ignorant of this purpose and how to attain it, life is shallow and empty. By nature we are not interested in listening to God to learn his will, and what we may have learned quickly fades away. The church as a whole and its individual members find peace when the knowledge of God is alive in the mind and soul. This peace and joy God provides through the means of the faithful prophet who preaches the gospel of God.

Forgetting and a lack of knowledge is exactly what happened with Israel in Canaan. Shortly after the people began to settle into their new life in this promised land, Christ himself, the Word of God and chief prophet, came in the form of the angel of Jehovah (Judges 2:1) and warned the people that of themselves, they were not going to discover God’s will and live accordingly. The people understood what the angel was saying, and they cried because they were beginning to see how life on this earth involved a battle of the old man of sin and the new man in Christ. Given a little earthly peace, we are inclined to become spiritually lazy. Parents slack off on teaching their

children, and the children are pulled in a thousand different directions with the distractions and pleasures of this world. God says of the church at this time, “and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim” (Judges 2:10–11). They forgot Jehovah their God (3:7). We see then that God must continually speak his word to the church and give her a heart that will listen. The church must have the office of prophet. The office of prophet must be active, boldly and continuously preaching the word of God.

When his people departed from covenant fellowship with him and turned to the treasures and pleasures of this earth as their gods, God used a descendent of Ham and Nimrod, Chushanrishathaim, a king from Mesopotamia and the region of Babel and Babylon, to oppress them for eight years. The Bible does not describe any details of physical cruelty or earthly oppression other than that they served this king. All their resources and talents were used now in the service of the enemy instead of their God. As the enemy of God and the church, this king sought to drive them completely away from God, but by the grace of God, the true church cried out, and God raised up Othniel.

Othniel was a nephew of Caleb, who was one of the faithful spies. He was from the tribe of Judah and was actively involved in leading his tribe in the conquest of cities in Canaan (1:13). His name means “lion of God” and pointed ahead to Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. As a judge and picture of Christ he was given the authority and power to deliver Israel from this enemy. After delivering them from the power of the enemy, he had the authority to instruct Israel to worship God alone and enforce that instruction. It is especially in this role as instructor that we see the value of the office of prophet because Israel was again brought to a knowledge of God and enjoyed rest for forty years.

The chapters toward the end of the book of Judges give specific stories and details about life within the church during these years of painful spiritual growth. Today we hear on the news dreadful stories of famine, poverty, violence, murder, and sexual perversion, but there really is nothing new under the sun. These same things were

happening even within Israel and demonstrate the corruption and misery that quickly develops when the people are not being fed with the word of God. One shocking news story that aroused the whole nation to action was the news that the body parts of a woman had been sent from a man in Gibeah to all the tribes in Israel! Behind this story were even more heinous scandals of prostitution, violence, homosexuality, and murder. We read the details in the last three chapters of Judges, and we read a summary of the story in Judges 20: 4–6: “And the Levite, the husband of the woman that was slain, answered and said, I came into Gibeah that belongeth to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to lodge. And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and beset the house round about upon me by night, and thought to have slain me: and my concubine have they forced, that she is dead. And I took my concubine, and cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel: for they have committed lewdness and folly in Israel.” The tribe of Benjamin was unwilling to discipline these crimes and the ensuing civil war nearly wiped out the tribe of Benjamin.

Another example of life apart from the pure preaching of God's word is the story of Ruth. The story of Ruth begins with the words "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons." We don't know exactly when this famine occurred, but the famine may very well have been the result of the oppression of one of the nations God sent to chastise Israel. We bring up this story of Ruth at this time because it illustrates the misery brought on by belittling the office of prophet and ignoring the word of God. God was speaking through the famine, and they disregarded it, as well as the whole picture of the promised land as their place in heaven where they would experience the peace and blessedness of fellowship with God.

Only after Naomi returned to Israel (in every earthly way very miserable and bitter), did she begin to taste the sweet mercies of covenant fellowship with God. The office of prophet was alive and well within the sphere of Boaz and his household. Here was true peace and rest. The words of Boaz brought comfort and hope to Ruth and

Naomi, and God used this office of prophet to reveal that he was working in Israel, and even through the enemy, Moab, to bring the promised Messiah who would deliver Israel from the bondage of sin and speak the words of eternal life. The story of Ruth also reveals God's plan to strengthen the offices of prophet, priest, and especially king in the line of Ruth.

Ruth was from Moab, and we conclude this article with the second judge, Ehud, who delivered Israel from the oppression of Eglon, king of Moab. Eglon had succeeded in taking control of Jericho, from which he was able to force the church to bring their offerings to him instead of to God. This oppression went on for eighteen years before they cried out to God for deliverance. "But when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded: and by him the children of Israel sent a present unto Eglon the king of Moab." (Judges 3:16) It is striking to note that Ehud was from the tribe of Benjamin, which had nearly been destroyed by the other tribes because it had been unwilling to discipline the crime of the men from Gibeon. The Benjamites were known for skill in war, and in particular their skill in using both hands with accuracy and power. During the civil war, it was noted in chapter 20:16 " Among all this people there were seven hundred chosen men lefthanded; every one could sling stones at an hair breadth and not miss." In this judge the office of king is more prominent in the fact that he leads and fights for the people and encourages them to the battle. When he himself comes personally to Eglon to deliver the present, he speaks as a prophet who brings the word of God when he told Eglon, "I have a message from God unto thee." (3:20) It was a message of judgment on those who hate God and oppress the church.

The rest of the judges who came after Ehud in the next two hundred years also brought the word of God to the people. Notable among them is Deborah, who is called a prophetess and a judge (4:4). Because the church had grown apostate and the men were neglecting their leadership roles in the church, God under these special circumstances appointed Deborah to judge and bring God's word to the people. Through her God called Barak to fight the enemy, and together they sang the song of

praise to God in Judges 5, which proclaimed the word of God in song even as the Psalms do.

The office of prophet was not brought to its full force and action as an office of service in the old testament church until the end of the period of judges, when Samuel was prepared by God to fill this role. Professor Engelsma writes in *Unfolding Covenant History* volume 5: “The period of the judges shows that the office of the prophet is necessary for the life of the covenant. God’s purpose with the history of the judges is to introduce this office into the nation with the call of Samuel” (p. 5). Let us give thanks to God for his covenant faithfulness as he continues to provide faithful ministers of his word and elders to feed the flock. May each of us be diligent as prophets learning and speaking this word.

Rubric: Church History

Title: The Church under the Judges Needs the Office of Prophet

Author: John Huizenga

John is a member of Hull Protestant Reformed church in Hull, IA, and a former editor of *Beacon Lights*.