

A CHRISTIAN TRAGEDY

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Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For Amos says, 'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of his land.'" Amaziah also said to Amos, "You seer, go, flee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: but don't prophesy again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a royal house!"
Amos 7:10-13 WEB

It's easy to read this vital event as if it were merely part of a rather meaningless story from Old Testament history. But that would be a big mistake because this short but tragic account tells how God measures the national character of his people with a plumb line, finds them falling short of his will, and then announces to his prophet Amos the news of impending destruction upon the house of king Jeroboam and the remainder of the nation.

Amaziah, priest of Bethel, hears of Amos's vision and notifies the king, saying that Amos had conspired against Jeroboam by predicting both his death and the coming captivity of Israel into Babylon. Amaziah considered the transgression serious enough that he notified the king that "the land is not able to bear all his words."

Then follows the tragedy as Amaziah, priest of Bethel bans Amos and his prophecies from Bethel, which was then a place of great historical significance as the "House of God"; where kings and prominent leaders worshipped. So the priest of the greatest place of worship in the land now commands that the rites of worship no longer include either Amos or his prophecies. Thus was a major source of contact with God's will removed from a prominent place of worship. And why did this tragedy occur? It was because prophecy threatened the rigid contours of worship and the strict construction of what was to be held as "sacred";

Prophets like Amos sometimes predicted the future, but also performed another role in calling for justice and obedience to God's word. Amos did both, thus earning the disapproval of frightened and careful religious leaders like Amaziah who feared doing anything to make the people less than comfortable. He certainly did not wish to allow Amos to "speak truth to power" in the church because of feared consequences that might even take the form of rebellion against established religious practices. Thus was one great function of the church removed---that of hearing God's assessment of national character and obedience and then pronouncing the sometimes fearful outcomes.

Why is the religious establishment seemingly so afraid of prophets and prophecy? The prevalence of false prophets is obviously one reason, since false prophecies can induce serious issues in the body of Christ by creating schisms and cliques around what is held to be true. How many churches have broken up over differences in the perceived will of God that later turned out to be erroneous?

But I think the major reason many churches tend to avoid prophecy is the fear that if they learn something about God's will for serious issues--- like income distribution and its role in creating poverty--- that they might have to do something about it. The impetus associated with parishioners hearing and comprehending God's word, then being motivated to action by the Holy Spirit, is a powerful force that has moved entire nations away from moral evil (think about slavery) and toward God's will.

It's frightening to established authority to face the power of people organized for change and driven by the moral authority of Scripture. It's a power that moves nations and brings down the mighty from their thrones. So be careful with prophecy---it might lead somewhere you don't want to go.