

HOSEA NO. 4
November 20th, 1988
Like Priest, Like People

Hosea 4:1-19

TEXT COMMENTS:

V. 1: The prophetic lawsuit. ‘charge’ a technical term. vv. 1-3 the charge in general, with evidence and judgment; vv. 4-19 specifications of certain charges with evidence and judgment.

V. 4: Alternate translations in the margin. We have here a situation not unlike the familiar scene in a Perry Mason drama, when Perry suddenly turns, and dramatically points out the guilty party sitting there, unsuspecting, in the courtroom.

V. 5: My subject this morning is this accusation against the priests. So it is important to remind you that the priests of the Old Testament were just what we would call ministers or pastors. Their responsibility (Deuteronomy 33:10) was the preaching of the Word and the superintendence of the worship of the church. When the church was reorganized after Pentecost, the Apostles undertook those functions, and subsequently ministers, as they do in most churches today, whatever title they may be given. What Hosea has to say about priests has direct and immediate application to those Presbyterians call ministers of the Word, or pastors, or teaching elders.

V. 7: the alternative (in margin of Bible)

V. 8: is the suggestion here something akin to the sale of indulgences?

V. 14: Probably should be a rhetorical question: ‘Shall I not punish...’ as he has already said that the people will be punished, and the children as well.

Hosea’s great point in this ‘lawsuit’ against Israel is that the priests have forsaken their true calling and responsibility and bear a primary responsibility for the spiritual defection of the people and the debacle that God is about to bring upon them for their betrayal of the covenant.

In a very large measure, so far as it is possible to assign particular blame for Israel’s apostasy, Hosea is willing to say it is the ministers’ fault; that

the people are perishing and will perish under God's judgment, because the priests have led them astray, have kept them from a true knowledge of God and his covenant, and have encouraged the very unbelief and disobedience which God, in his holy vengeance, now intends to punish.

No doubt, this does not excuse the people, for, as another prophet puts it, the priests may have exercised a completely faithless ministry, but 'the people love it this way.' (Jeremiah 5:31). Nevertheless, the priests, the ministers bear the first and the primary responsibility for the spiritual collapse of God's people.

Now this is a conviction which is by no means unique to Hosea. It is frequently to be found stated and illustrated in the prophets. In Jeremiah's great 'Sermon on Apostasy' in chapter 2 of his Prophecy, he makes the same point. Some years ago, reading through Jeremiah, I was struck by how often he made that point, and so I collected his various references to the priestly responsibility for the spiritual condition of God's people, and put them next to the first reference which is at Jeremiah 2:8. I have collected there eleven references from Jeremiah alone to the same effect, as well as many others from other prophets.

“ ‘Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord!” (Jeremiah 23:1)

The New Testament has the same viewpoint. To the Apostles, false teachers and a false ministry are no mere irritant in the life of the church to the apostles. No! They destroy the Church and so must be guarded against with great care, and when they appear, must be resisted to the death.

And, conversely, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the minister who discharges his calling faithfully, who watches his life and doctrine closely, will save, Paul says, many hearers.

Now, in our egalitarian age, in which all of us have breathed—especially in America—an anti-authoritarian spirit since our earliest days; and in which anti-clericalism is widely regarded in evangelical circles as an important virtue, we are inclined, I fear, to read Hosea chapter four more as an interesting historical artifact than as the living Word of God to be heard and believed and obeyed.

1. It is not natural for us to think of ourselves as so dependent upon the

officers of the church; to think of our well-being and our spiritual life as so intimately connected to the work of our minister.

2. Not so long ago I saw Tony Campolo quoted as saying: ‘Seminaries have been spending too much time preparing clergy-persons. What I would love to see is the seminaries of America filled with people learning theology so that they have a basis for doing ministry in worldly vocations.’ That is a very commonly expressed sentiment in our day. The new emphasis on ‘body-life’ and ‘spiritual gifts’ has, somehow, seemed to make the office of minister less important, less crucial; and, in fact, many ministers have contributed to that sentiment in the church by seeing themselves or speaking of themselves as less ministers of the Word of God in the classical sense and more as ‘facilitators’ or ‘change-agents’ after the fashion of the teaching of Carl Rogers.

But, however popular, this is not the Bible’s view; it is surely not Hosea’s view. He laid blame first and primarily upon the priests, because they bore a greater responsibility for the spiritual life of the people of God than anyone else; and their ministry of the Word and worship had, and was understood to have, a far greater influence upon the people—for good or for ill—than the ministry of any other.

In Malachi 2:6 we are given what may be the Old Testament’s most succinct description of the calling of a priest or a minister, in the Lord’s reminiscence of the priestly ministry of Aaron: ‘True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.’

Well, the priests of the northern kingdom in Hosea’s day were the perfect antithesis of that!

1. Their teaching was false. As Hosea explicitly says in vv. 5 and 6, they perverted the law of God and though their calling was to teach the knowledge of God to Israel, in fact, under their teaching, Israel was perishing for lack of knowledge. No doubt that teaching included a great deal of paganism, drawn from surrounding culture and mixed with the instruction which Moses had given; and, no doubt, there was a radical undermining of the authority of God’s law and a relaxing of the standards of the holiness which God required; so much so that it was

possible to be a member in good standing of God's covenant people, and to engage in all manner of sexual immorality, cursing, lying, even murder—as Hosea charges in the verses we have read. (It evokes a very contemporary image, does it not, this covenant lawsuit; for the church of God is today full of such teachers who refuse to condemn what God condemns and who encourage what he abominates and forbids.)

2. Further, their own lives were the furthest thing from the uprightness and integrity which God required of them. They relished wickedness instead of mourning and opposing it. They were nothing like the Poor Parson of the Canterbury Tales, of whom Chaucer says,

“But Christ's loore and His Apostles twelve
He taughte, but first he followed it himself.”

3. And, finally, far from leading men away from sin, they rather encouraged them in its commission. No doubt they even demanded the participation of Israelite adults in the pagan and adulterous practices of the idolatrous worship which they directed.

Oh yes! the Devil had played his last card for a winner in Samaria! Do you remember how, right at the end of the battle for Mansoul, in Bunyan's Holy War, when things were looking grim for Diabolos and his troops, he made an offer to Emmanuel, whose troops were ready to storm the city in a final assault. Would Emmanuel lift his siege, if Diabolos would undertake a reformation of Mansoul himself? ‘Why,’ said Diabolos, ‘I myself, at my own expense, will set up and maintain a ministry in the City.’

Well, so the Devil had done in Israel; the ministry was of his own choosing and training, and were doing his work. And the result, Hosea warns, is doom for the priests who have so offended the God they were supposed to be representing; doom for the people who had been so terribly infected by their ministers' contempt for God; and, alas, doom for their children as well.

Now, I wish to make an application of Hosea's point regarding the priesthood, and its primary responsibility for the spiritual well-being of God's people, to you and to your life today, and that in three particulars.

I. First, it is very important that you consider how vital your own

minister's faithfulness to his charge is to your own spiritual health and that of your family.

In God's kind providence, as I was preparing this sermon on Hosea 4, a brief essay by Henry Venn fell into my hands. Venn was one of that circle of godly and influential Anglican ministers during the eighteenth century Great Awakening. In this little work, Venn, now an older man, enumerates some of the mistakes he made as a younger minister. The very first one he mentions is as follows:

“Several bad consequences, I judge, might have been prevented entirely, or in a great measure, among my people, had I taken care frequently to let them know how greatly I stood in need of their prayers, that the Spirit of God might be given to teach me so to preach as to do them good, and to make me feel more love for their souls;—if I had also often pressed them to consider how great a charge was laid upon me, and what a solemn account I was to give of the doctrine I delivered to them, and of the awful relation there was between them and myself. These things I did often allude to, and even briefly mention. It would have been better had I dwelt often upon these subjects; because the flock listen, with peculiar attention, when their pastor proves the care and affection he owes them; and when he solicits their prayers, that nothing may be wanting, on his part, which may promote their present and eternal welfare. At the same time, a full explanation of the duty of a pastor towards his flock is the means of raising their esteem for him, and a more earnest attention to his word.”

“I did not choose to treat on these subjects, from an apprehension that I should be thought to aim at pre-eminence, and at bringing them into subjection to myself. But there would have been no difficulty in proving the good which would follow from a just esteem for the minister of Christ—the wise ends for which he had required it: and a behaviour void of all arrogance and self-exaltation would have shewn plainly to them, that I aimed at nothing but their profit and salvation.” [Banner of Truth 302, not 1988, pp.16-17]

Well, I am sure that I am subject to the very same temptation, to be silent about what concerns your relationship to me as your minister. So God sent

Henry Venn to tell me to be as candid as I ought to be for your sakes. Hosea and the whole Scripture teach us that it is matter of great importance and bears directly on your own spiritual health and wellbeing. You ought to care about me and about my faithfulness to my charge *for your own sakes and for the sake of your children!*

It is not an easy thing to be a minister, if one seeks to be a true minister of Christ. One will never do justice to the horribly great responsibilities of that calling—responsibilities which no young minister understood or had any real sense of when he entered upon his work. It was John Newton who said:

“... a distant view of the ministry is generally very different from what it is found to be when we are actually engaged in it... If the Lord was to show us the whole beforehand, who that has a due sense of his own insufficiency and weakness, would venture to engage?... The ministry of the Gospel, like the book which the Apostle John ate, is a bitter sweet; but the sweetness is tasted first, the bitterness is usually known afterwards, when we are so far engaged that there is no going back.”

It is still less easy to be a minister when you are as well acquainted as I am with the searching literature of the Christian ministry, with its impossibly high ideals, and its marvelous examples of faithful pastorates and powerful preaching. I am thinking of George Herbert's The Country Parson, Richard Baxter's, The Reformed Pastor, The Memoirs of Thomas Boston, Charles Bridges' The Christian Ministry, and the like.

It is not easy to hear Baxter say

“I am afraid, nay, I have no doubt, that the day is near when [many] ministers will wish that they had never known the charge of souls; but that they had rather been colliers, or sweeps, or tinkers, than pastors of Christ's flock; when, besides all the rest of their sins, they shall have the blood of so many souls to answer for.”

Nor is it easy to hear one's own hero, Alexander Whyte, usually so gentle, so understanding, so largehearted a man and a minister, say

“I would have all lazy ministers drummed out of the Assembly. . . I would have laziness held to be the one unpardonable sin in all our ministers.”

And then, thinking of all the study, and prayer, and visiting my people which I never get done, for him to go on and say:

“We have plenty of time for all our work, did we husband our time and hoard it up aright. . . Oh no! We cannot look seriously at one another’s faces and say it is want of time. It is want of intention. It is want of determination. It is want of method. It is want of motive. It is want of conscience. It is want of heart. It is want of anything and everything but time.” [Bio, pp. 282-285]

And, after all that, to hear that Rutherford’s habits of pastoral work became a proverb among his people at Anwoth. They used to boast that their minister was

“always at his books, always among his parishioners, always at their sick beds and their deathbeds, always catechising their children, and always alone with his God.”

I tell you, my people, that to perform the intellectual labors by which alone you may be assured of being fed all of the milk and then all of the meat of God’s Word; to combine in a perfect balance first gentleness and kindness so that the weak and the young are encouraged and comforted and then firmness and even severity so that no one can find rest in the church without repentance; to set an example which both adorns the gospel and commends the truth of God both to those who are within the church and to those without; I say, these are exquisitely difficult and painful things to do.

But, my chief point this morning is, that your own spiritual wellbeing is not unrelated to how well or how poorly I perform my labors as your minister. So says the Lord in his Word.

I have no fears whatsoever that you, Americans and Presbyterians as you are, stand in any danger of any superstitious reverence for your minister. You know your Bible and without a doubt, you know your minister too well for

that! Your danger lies in the opposite direction. You do not think enough of how closely the Scripture connects his life and work with your own or his faithfulness with your own spiritual growth, strength, joy, and peace.

And, not thinking of these things, you do not pray for your minister as much as you should, as much as your own spiritual life and the life of your children deserves. Pray that I will be the precise opposite of those priests in Hosea's day, that Lord's Day by Lord's Day, my teaching will enlarge and deepen both your knowledge of God and his truth and your commitment and devotion to the Lord. This is Hosea's point: it is in your own best interest that your minister be as godly and as faithful and as hardworking and as persevering in his labors as he can be. So do your part to make him so!

II. In the second place, it is important for you to recognize how vital a role the ministry plays in the life and wellbeing of the whole of the church of God.

It is not enough to concern yourself with your own pastor; for no church, no congregation is an island to itself. It belongs to the whole church, whose health, whose faithfulness, whose divine favor waxes and wanes in large part according to the character and labors of the ministry as a whole.

It is a very easy thing to show both from Scripture and from church history that the church is as healthy as her ministry, that she rarely if ever rises above a poor and unspiritual ministry, but that she rarely fails to prosper when the Lord provides her with godly and gifted men for her pastorates and her pulpits. Is it not the simple fact, for example, that we associate all the great movements of reform and revival—whether narrated in Scripture or happening since those times, with the men under whose preaching and leadership God brought them about?

Has not the Lord so fixed in this matter the means to the end, that one can scarcely find a time in the history of the church that spiritual blessing has not been preceded by and brought to pass through the reformation and revival of the church's ministry. Would the church have weathered the Arian storm of the 4th century without Athanasius; would she have withstood the siren call of Pelagianism had God not sent Augustine to help her; would there have been a reformation without Luther, Calvin, Knox and the rest, or a Great Awakening without Whitefield, Wesley, and Edwards?

No, beloved; if you are earnest in seeking for revival, you would do well to

pray that the Lord would raise up the ministers who will preach it in and the pastors who will fix it in the life of the church.

And as I said, following Hosea, it is in your own best interest so to pray—and so to support and work for the best possible ministry for the church, because you are part of that church, her fortunes are your own, and it is altogether unlikely that you or your children will prosper greatly, or your own congregation, if the church as a whole is languishing.

Moses understood this principle and so he prayed in this way:

‘Bless all Levi’s skills, O Lord,
and be pleased with the work of his hands.
Smite the loins of those who rise up against him;
strike his foes till they rise no more.’ (Deut 33:11)

You should pray the same and do all that falls to you to do to contribute to the best possible ministry for the Christian church, praying for and supporting the best seminaries, encouraging those training for the ministry, and holding those presently in it to the highest possible standards and praying for them that they might attain to them.

III. Then, finally, it is incumbent upon all of us who are the parents of sons, and as a church incumbent upon all of us in so far as we are the congregation for these little boys and young men, to see to it that we excellently prepare as many of them as the Lord may call for this work of ministry, upon which the fortunes of the kingdom of God so largely depend.

You Christian parents of sons! Do you desire, as I hope you all do, to do during your brief life in this world, something great for the kingdom of God? Have you thought that the greatest thing you might do, that which might well result in more than you now can imagine, would be to give to the Christian ministry a young man, well taught from his youth in the things of God, a practiced student of the Bible from his earliest years, one who is a hardened warrior in the fight of faith by the time he enters upon his theological training, and one who, by his parents example and exhortation has fashioned for himself no other purpose for life than this: but to spend his few days in this world serving Christ, the gospel, and the church.

So many of the men who were God's instruments of great advance for the kingdom of God or the revival of the church and the salvation of great multitudes, were the sons of godly homes, whose parents took care to ensure that if God should make their sons ministers, they would see to it that the young men would be well prepared and ready when the divine summons came.

Origen, the church father, was the son of godly parents who trained him so well in the things of God and of God's Word and devoted their young son so magnificently to a holy life when he was still very young, that by the time he was sixteen, he was ready to begin making his great life's contribution to the kingdom of God. Is there an infant or a young Origen here? Or Matthew Henry? Or Jonathan Edwards? Are there homes and parents in which such men, such ministers might be nurtured?

Oh, believe me; I know the temptations of this world, and how easily it is to want for our sons other things than what is most important and what will matter most in the great day! But tell me, Christian parents, what you think of what Thomas Goodwin said: "God had but one son, and he made him a minister!"

And, not denying that God must call any Christian son to the ministry, that God must give the gifts and the summons, what would you give, what would you sacrifice, how hard would you work at cultivating the spiritual knowledge and love and conviction of your son, that you might someday have etched on your gravestone the same epitaph that lies above the mortal remains of Richard Mather, the New England puritan minister, and father of Increase Mather and grandfather of the very important and godly puritan minister, Cotton Mather:

"Under this stone lies Richard Mather
Who had a son greater than his father,
And [again] a grandson greater than either."

Do you love the church of God, the apple of God's eye; and for your Savior's sake, do you wish to do some great thing for her—well, listen to Hosea the prophet. There is no greater thing you can do for her than this—to give her now and later the most faithful, devout, and spiritually muscular ministers you can.

I will tell you quite frankly that a number of things have deeply discouraged me, of late, with the prospect of things in our land and society. The shadow

of death seems in so many ways to be darkening our land. And the church herself is in such a sad state. What does the future hold for us and, yet more, what does it hold for our children? I see very grim days ahead! Days in which this church will require a better man than now she has, and in which the whole church of God will need a great multitude of better men than now fill her pulpits and her pastorates. Where will those men come from: they will come from the prayers and the eager support and the high ideals of Christian people and they will come out of the homes of Christian parents who loved the church and wished to give her the greatest gift they had to give!

“Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious,
Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way.
Pour out thy soul for them in prayer victorious,
And all thou spendest Jesus will repay.”