

The Schools of the Prophets

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It was on the failure of the law, that the value of the priesthood as ordained of God became known to Israel; but, in the days of Eli, the priesthood itself became corrupted, — the priest's sons, themselves priests, being the leaders in the most flagitious practices. They ground down the people by their exactions, and men "abhorred the offering of the Lord; wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord." The feeble remonstrances of Eli himself were not the sharp rebuke which the occasion needed. And solemn warning — Eli himself, as the one responsible for the maintenance of the honour of God in the priesthood, is made to hear the grievous burden that awaited all his family, and at the same time to know that, although man had profaned the ordinance of God in priesthood, and that God would for this set aside His own order: yet He said, "I will raise up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind, and I will build him. a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever." How refreshing to the weary soul thus constantly to see mercy rejoicing against judgment, and the sure establishment of all that had failed in man's responsibility in the hands of One Who alone is "the faithful and true Witness." But God raised up in Samuel a most distinct witness of the failure of the priesthood, and then it may be said that the ministry of the Prophets commenced (Acts 3: 24). And from this time the heart of faith turned from the priest to the prophet, and it was not that which was in existence which sustained it, but that which was in prospect. The thing announced by Samuel was the execution of summary vengeance on the house of Eli, "because his sons made themselves vile and he restrained them not." And now Israel was sustained by an extraordinary energy from God in the person of His prophet. He sacrifices as well as judges, taking as it were the place of both Moses and Aaron. "And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord."

In all this we find God teaching Israel that their alone power of standing was in that energy which was immediately from, Him. Samuel raised the stone of Ebenezer; but they understood it not, and vainly thought they could stand in their own strength under another arrangement, and they desired a king. Thus was God's prophet set aside as the priesthood had been corrupted, and surely too with the same end to show that there was only one perfect prophet (Deut. 18), as well as only one faithful priest and righteous king. But we find not only the wilfulness of the people in the rejection of God by rejecting His prophet (1 Sam. 8: 7), but their willingness also to have the ministry of the Prophets in having a king. It was too valuable a blessing to do without; and accordingly we find, throughout the history of the kings, of Judah and Israel, a class of men known by the name of "sons of the Prophets" or "Prophets," apart from those immediately raised up by God Himself. Among them there were many whom God owned and used, but in later times they became the great instruments in fostering rebellion against God and causing the rejection of His word. The origin of this class so conspicuous in later times, we are not able scripturally to determine. But doubtless at first it arose from piety and the fear of God. In the days of Samuel those who feared God would have looked to him more than to Saul; and we find a company gathered round the aged seer, either placed there for instruction by their parents or led by the fear of God themselves, who are distinctly called Prophets (1 Sam. 19: 20). "And Saul sent messengers to take David, and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as appointed over them, the Spirit of God was upon the messengers of Saul and they also

prophesied." It is from this that the term "Schools of the Prophets" appears to have so generally obtained. That there were institutions of this character appears clear, but the question is, Were they of divine or human origin! We have no scriptural authority for believing them to be of God, but that these men of God, Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, should have gladly given themselves to the instruction of the young committed to their charge, teaching them those things which God, had revealed to them, and bringing them up to reverence God in all His institutions, is by no means improbable. God was now with the prophet and not with the priest, and therefore real godliness could only be secured through the prophet. It appears also that these young men were used by the prophets, who were raised up by the special energy of the Spirit of God, on any service or errand they might be pleased to send them. Thus we read, "Elisha the prophet called one of the children of the prophets, and said unto him, Gird up thy loins and take this box of oil in thine hand and go to Ramoth-Gilead: and when thou comest thither, look out there Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat the son of Nimshi, and go in and make him arise up from among his brethren, and carry him to an inner chamber; then take the box of oil, and pour it on his head, and say, Thus saith the Lord, I have anointed thee king over Israel. Then open the door, and flee, and tarry not. So the young man, even the young man the prophet, went to Ramoth-Gilead " (2 Kings 9: 1-4).

There can be little doubt that young men so educated would by degrees have a character attached to them, not according to the actual energy of the Spirit of God in them, but according to the education they had received. And although God from among them might raise up instruments fitted to be employed in His service, yet that is not the thing which would have been regarded so much as their official training. And the influence which they had with the people would not have been that which flowed directly from God, but from that which men had instituted, to perpetuate a class among them, which might be useful to them as expositors of the mind of God.

This has been one way of man's waywardness — to seek to secure God's blessings by his own wisdom and prudence. If God gave a prophet, man would desire to have this blessing in his own way; and accordingly he contrives an institution for the supply of prophets. God may bless such an institution, and doubtless did under the instruction of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, who appear in their respective times to have been looked on as the heads of these institutions. It was thus that Elijah was looked upon, "and the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off; and they two stood by Jordan. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The Spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha " (2 Kings 2: 3, 5, 7, 15).

So we have seen Samuel regarded and subsequently Elisha (2 Kings 9). But the attribute of "jealous" belongs to God; and it is in this that He is especially jealous, that He will not allow any human institution to supply the place of His own prerogative grace. And it was not in the power of any of these illustrious men of God to impart to another the energy of the Spirit in which alone they could act efficiently. Doubtless these schools of the prophets were a means of spreading the fear and knowledge of God. The priest's lips which should have kept knowledge had become corrupted and testified against by the prophets. But when the master-spirit of these men of God had departed with them, the institutions which had been under their superintendence survived; but instead of ensuring the end for which piety had set them up, they became the greatest means of producing corruption and aiding apostasy. These institutions had the same moral power after the death of Elijah and Elisha as

when presided over by them. And those who issued from them came to the people with a claim of authority which usage had rendered venerable. And thus, by the very means of perpetuating prophets, was this ordinance of God corrupted, not that He gave it up, but raised up, not in these schools but in the energy of His own Spirit, His prophets to prophesy not only against the priests but against "the prophets of Israel." And real discernment then stood in distinguishing between the Lord's and the people's prophets. It does not appear that any one of the authenticated prophets of the Lord was raised up from out of these schools.* But from hence it came to pass that in process of time there was an accredited class of persons, consulted on special occasions and exercising an immense moral influence, the value of which must have depended on their individual piety and simple subjection to what God had revealed.

* Elisha may seem an exception, but he stood as the servant of Elijah, as Gehazi subsequently to him, to pour water on his hands.

But the weight of that influence was speedily turned against God. It was more popular to prophesy smooth things and deceits, and nothing is so dear to the human heart as to have God's sanction to its own lusts. And hence the popularity of the prophets who would say, "Thus saith the Lord," when the Lord had not spoken. It is not to be supposed that these prophets were always inventing lies, but they corrupted the word of God and rendered it suitable to man's taste (2 Cor. 2: 17). They must imitate the real prophets in many of their expressions, and yet after all only produce their own vain speculations.

"I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? Yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, which think to cause My people to forget My name by their dreams, which they tell every man to his neighbour, as their fathers have forgotten My name for Baal. The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not My word like as a fire? saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal My words every one from his neighbour. Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the Lord, and do tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord. And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What is the burden of the Lord? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the Lord. And as for the prophet, and the priest, and the people, that shall say, The burden of the Lord, I will even punish that man and his house" (Jer. 23: 25-34). And the misery and wretchedness of the people was, that they had not the ability to discern between the real prophet of God, and the educated prophet of man.

Man had taken God's ordinance into his own keeping — he had an institution of his own for supplying that which God could only efficiently supply. Accordingly we find the prophets as much testified against by the special witnesses of God in the midst of apostasy, as the priests. They are both classed together. But the prophets appear to have been more actively engaged in helping forward the apostasy, and therefore to be more frequently addressed by the real prophets of the Lord. This testimony of the Lord against the prophets increased as the apostasy set in. The nearer the ruin approached (such is the way of His grace), the more testimony He raised concerning it. But in proportion as God multiplied His witnesses, we find the prophets of the people multiplied also.

We have a remarkable early instance of the influence which these prophets exercised, recorded in 1 Kings 22. We find Jehoshaphat in league with Ahab, and persuaded to go against Ramoth-Gilead. "And Jehoshaphat said unto the king of Israel, Enquire, I pray thee, at the word of the Lord today. Then 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 into the hand of the king. And Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him? And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, 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." So Micaiah "came to the king, and the king said unto him, Micaiah, shall we go up against Ramoth-Gilead to battle or shall we forbear?" Thus was the case of Israel according to the prophet — "a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord: which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits " (Isa. 30: 9, 10).

But it is more especially in the prophets contemporary with the apostasy, that we find the powerful influence exercised by these prophets: Jeremiah at Jerusalem, and Ezekiel at Chebar, each found in them the greatest hindrance to the effectual reception of the word of the Lord. In Jeremiah we have three distinct features, — first, God's testimony against the prophets. "And the priests shall be astonished, and the prophets shall wonder." (Jer. 4: 9). "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule b.) their means; and My people love to have it so " (Jer. 5: 30, 31). "And from the prophet even unto the priest, every one dealeth falsely" (Jer. 6: 13). "Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold the prophets say unto them, Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place. Then the Lord said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in My name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that prophesy in My name, and I sent them not; yet they say, sword and famine shall not be in this land; by sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed " (Jer. 14: 13-15). "I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem a horrible thing for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land" (Jer. 23: 14, 15).

A second feature was the influence that these prophets exerted among the people. "The priests ruled by their means." "Then said they, Come, let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words" (Jer. 18: 18). "Hananiah, the son of Azur the prophet, which was of Gibeon, spake unto me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying, I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years will I bring again into this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place, and carried them to Babylon: and I will bring again to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, with all the captives of Judah, that went into Babylon, saith the Lord; for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Then the prophet Jeremiah said unto the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests, and in the presence of all the people that stood in the house of the Lord, even the prophet Jeremiah said, Amen: the Lord do so: the Lord perform thy words which thou hast prophesied. Nevertheless hear thou now this word that I speak. in thine ears, and in the ears of all the people; the prophets that have been before me and before thee of old prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath

truly sent him" (Jer. 28: 1-9). These prophets prophesied of peace and present establishment, according to the word in Micah 2: 11, "If a man walking in the spirit and falsehood do lie, saying, I will prophesy unto thee of wine and of strong drink, he shall even be the prophet of this people."

It was thus that man's own institution became a snare unto him, for God taketh the wise in their own craftiness. The very means they had taken of perpetuating a blessing among them became, by their own wilfulness, the means of blinding them; as in a subsequent period, the scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the law, in man's estimate so many supports of religion, were the great means of hindering the people confessing Jesus as the Christ.

As a third feature, we notice the virulent opposition of the prophets to God's prophets. "Then spake the priests and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears" (Jer. 26: 11, compare Acts 6) "Why hast thou not reproved Jeremiah of Anathoth which maketh himself a prophet to you"? (Jeremiah 29: 27)

The whole of Ezekiel 13 applies to the point in question, but is too long to be quoted. It is painful but profitable to trace the progress of religious corruption; it arises not from without, but from within. No means of outward temptation could apparently have brought the people of Judah to rebel with so bold a front, as corrupt prophets and a corrupt priesthood. It was the blinding power of holding certain ordinances of God, not in the power of God, but in the form which human wisdom had substituted for them, that made the people reply, "Then all the men which knew that their wives had burned incense unto other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying, As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink-offerings unto her, as we have done, we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: for then had we plenty of victuals, and were well, and saw no evil " (Jer. 44: 15-17).

Now these things are recorded for our admonition, and we have the most substantial authority for asserting, that the declension and apostasy of the church would arise from those who are accredited as teachers within the church.

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction" (2 Peter 2: 1). They very early showed themselves, as in the church of Corinth. "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11: 13). And at Galatia, "I would they were even cut off which trouble you" (Gal. 5: 12). St. John alludes to them, "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2: 19). "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not Jesus Christ come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (2 John 7).

This early attempt of Satan to undermine the church from within, was that which the apostles were constantly guarding against, and formed a considerable portion of the afflictions of the gospel. Trying indeed must it have been to the soul of the apostle, to find all in Asia turned away from him to listen perhaps to those who would set before them doctrines more suited to their tastes. It was thus too at Corinth, where although they had ten thousand instructors, yet not many fathers.

Here was the germ of the evil: why not a class of men or a profession of men to be accredited as instructors and teachers, the same as prevailed in their schools of philosophy? This was the readiest

way in man's thought to provide for the instruction of the church; to heap to themselves teachers. And it was thus early in the church that we see its ruin provided for, and the dawning of that season which is not yet fully matured, when they would not endure sound doctrine. The secret is, that we can never be taught except in obedience. "He that hath an ear, let him hear." Now a recognised class of teachers, as such, relieves from the responsibility laid upon us by the Lord. "Take heed how ye hear." Men hear what they like to hear — hear after their own lusts, instead of proving what they hear, and holding fast that which is good. Instruction to the church never assumes the ground of ignorance, but that of competent understanding. "I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it" . . . "and ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things" (1 John 2: 20, 21). And the Second and Third Epistles throw the responsibility on christians, not of receiving teachers as teachers, — let them bear what name they might — but of testing their doctrine. In St. Paul's discourse to the elders of Ephesus the Spirit leads him to point out the corruption of the church as arising from within. "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them " (Acts 20: 29, 30). And the solemn charge of the apostle to Timothy, points out the result of that which he had noticed to the elders of Ephesus. "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom, preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry " (2 Tim. 4: 15).

Now in all these instances, there was no guard against these teachers by having recourse to another authorised and accredited class — for the teachers marked as characterising the apostasy, would be authorised and accredited in the eyes of men; but the only way to meet the difficulty and escape the snare, would be individual faithfulness. He alone in Israel who followed Jehovah fully, would have had moral ability to discern between the wheat and chaff — the prophet of the Lord and the prophet of his own heart. Even so at this present time, a single eye to Jesus, subjection to the word of His grace, and regard to the unction — the common possession of the church, will enable us to discern between the teacher, the gift of the ascended Jesus, and the teacher of man's institution. The provision the Lord has made for the church, are the abiding presence of the Comforter, and the word of His grace, and ministry. He presents Himself to the church not only as having the seven Spirits of God, the fulness of all spiritual life, but as holding in His hand the seven stars, the perfectness of all ministry. Now the error of the church has been analogous to the sin of Israel. She has not denied to the Lord the possession of all spiritual power; but ministry as distinctly flowing from Him (Eph. 4), and therefore, only exercised responsibly unto Him as the Lord ("there are diversities of ministries, but the same Lord"), was very early set aside by human institutions; arising doubtless from real piety, and from the desire originally to perpetuate teachers in the church.

As in the case of the prophets, Jehovah had His servants among those brought up in the schools of the prophets; so surely the Holy Ghost, as the sovereign dispenser of gifts of ministry, has raised up many from universities and academics to bear witness to Jesus; but always with the grand characteristic of His teaching, the setting aside, and in the background, of all advantages derived from such sources, on account of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, which He teaches. We may smile at the disputations and subtleties of the schoolmen of a former day, but the principle is the same. It is not whether better instruction is afforded in the schools now, but whether the schools themselves are not institutions of man, for the provision of that which the Lord Jesus most jealously keeps in His own

hand. It is not to the purpose to say that many of the most faithful ministers have been raised up out, of these schools; this is not denied: because the Holy Spirit will not allow human arrangements to interfere with His own sovereignty. But if these schools furnish a supply of men accredited as ministers, they must necessarily exert a powerful human influence, much more so than perhaps we are disposed to allow. We have seen the Lord raising up prophets, and men having prophets of their own; and the prophet of the Lord brought into instant collision with the prophets of the people. Jesus, as ascended, gives teachers to the church, and men have provided for teachers in the church. May we not, then most reasonably expect that the teachers the Lord has given will find the greatest hindrance from those whom man has provided for himself?

The prophet was not an integral part of the former dispensation, but only came in on the failure of the priesthood; but ministry is the very power of this dispensation (Eph. 4); "pastors, teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." Now if God has provided this in one way, even by distinct gift of the Spirit, and man has substituted another way, we see what necessarily must be the result, even the most fearful form of apostasy. "The beast and the false prophet" go together, the former could not prevail without the help of the other. Professing christians could not easily be persuaded to tell a lie, unless they had found those who would teach them after human tradition, instead of the plain word of God. And, nothing could be devised more effectually to stifle enquiry and to lull the conscience, than a humanly accredited ministry, teaching things only which the hearers expect to hear. When this is the case, the solemn responsibility of speaking and hearing are alike forgotten. And the very means provided for blessing is by Satan's craft turned into a hindrance.

We hear constantly of a young man intending to go into the ministry. Now fully granting the honesty of the intention, the very expression shows the popular feeling in the matter. Let such a well-intentioned young man be sent to a university, or academy, or institution, and after a few years becomes forth as an accredited minister. Now all this appears a direct taking of ministry out of the hands of the Lord Jesus into our own hands. We should see the folly of a pious Israelite sending his son to be educated for a prophet, as if God needed human preparation for the instrument he would use. And surely to educate for the ministry is equally or more preposterous in a dispensation in which the Holy Spirit, as sovereign divider of His own gifts, is especially manifested.

We read of Samuel being "established as a prophet of the Lord," but all his education under the aged and indulgent Eli could never have furnished him with what he was commissioned to reveal. We find Paul thanking the Lord for "putting him into the ministry," and unto this his education under Gamaliel profited not. It is not whether one whom the Lord has put into the ministry, may use the aids within his reach to enable him more efficiently to work, for we find Paul not only exhorting Timothy to stir up the gift he had received, but likewise telling him "till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine;" but, whether the most vigilant and wise training can make a minister of Christ.

If it be allowed that the various ministries in the church are distinct gifts, then the recognition of the gift must precede the education, if indeed that be needed. And it would be no longer saying, "I think of entering into the ministry," but, "woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel!" The very worst evil of human institutions for supplying ministers, is the effect they have of weakening the sense of responsibility to the Lord in the exercise of ministry. And if ministry be not exercised responsibly unto Him, it is not received in responsibility to Him. "Take heed how ye hear." And the result is, that instead of ministry being regarded as that which is for the health of the church, ministers are regarded for their own sake. And trivial as it may be, the practical difference between regarding ministers or ministry is

very great. We have seen in two former instances, the accredited organs of religious instruction — the prophets before the captivity, and the scribes and lawyers during the time of our Lord's ministry, all arrayed against the truth. We have solemn warning as to the parallel to be exhibited at the close of this dispensation. And surely it is not too much to say, that the virtual rejection of the Lordship of Jesus and of the sovereignty of the Spirit in the gift of ministry, has prepared the way for a most unhealthy state of mind in the great majority of christians, who are prepared to receive no more truth, than that which human institutions have thought fit to supply. And it may be safely affirmed, that ignorance of scripture does very generally prevail, and so much insubjection of mind to the word of God, that a plain declaration of scripture is set aside by its supposed contrariety to some received dogma.

The priesthood of Israel stood in order, and we find an early departure from the present order in Nadab and Abihu — awaiting the completeness of its corruption in the sons of Eli. But prophecy stood in power — holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and the corruption was the attempt to establish it in form. Now the whole character of this dispensation is power; we have a priest constituted after the power of an endless life — the word of God is powerful — we have received not the spirit of fear but of love, and of power, and of a sound mind. And the preaching of the apostle was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. The apostasy then is characterised as having the form, but denying the power of godliness. Formal ministry or humanly accredited ministers, must necessarily therefore be the greatest hindrance to the truth. The minds even of professing christians are not in a moment prepared to believe a lie, and a certain previous training by being taught those things which they ought not, must necessarily bring about that result so fearfully marked in the scriptures: — "with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in those that perish, because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved; and for this cause God shall send them strong delusion that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure to unrighteousness."

The apostasy of natural religion was, reasoning about God, and therefore He "gave them up to their own hearts' lusts" (Rom. 1: 19-26). But now it is the departure from the truth by means of human teaching. The real question is often effectually obscured in disputes about office and order — it is, where is the power of either? Can man's institution at all provide for the presence of the Holy Ghost? Does He still abide according to the Lord's promise, in the church? Let it be granted that human arrangement had secured the exact apostolic order, and that every office in the church was arranged after the apostolic model — what then? there might be the form without the power still. Now spiritual wisdom has ever been exercised in the discernment of where God is present in the midst of man's corruptions. There were holy priests after Eli — there were true prophets amidst Israel's prophets. There are many most valued ministers among those who are accredited by human institutions, but true wisdom will be to acknowledge that which is of God, and to discern that which is of man. Many are not content to be acknowledged as ministers of Christ — they rest on something besides that "grace given to them according to the measure of the gift of Christ," and demand to be received on credentials simply human. Now the recognizing this would be the same as to recognize Israel's prophets. And would lead us, which is in fact the apostasy of the dispensation; to recognize human credentials, where the Spirit of God was not. It is a much readier way to come authenticated by man, than to make "full proof of our ministry." And nothing is more unhealthy, than for a believer to be seeking the authentication of his ministry, and demanding to be received as a minister, because he has been educated for the ministry. The receiving any is on infinitely higher grounds than any gift of ministry, and that is, as "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling," — "heirs of God and jointheirs with Christ." Our highest privileges are our common privileges, and no ministry not even that of an apostle could ever put one so high as the fact of being a child has already put him. It is indeed a most blessed

thing to minister to the body of Christ, but a more blessed thing to be of the body. And wherever we see the tendency to exalt ministers into a privileged class or order, of nearer access to God than others, instead of recognizing them as those having a distinct gift of the Spirit, we are in danger of having ministers in name, and not in the "sufficiency of God" in the church (2 Cor. 3: 5).

Let the solemn warning in the case of Israel's prophets be looked to by us, and while we seek to honour the Holy Ghost in the thankful acknowledgement of any of His gifts, may we be kept from the sin of acknowledging any office in the church where He is not. "Having then gifts, differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth on teaching, or he that exhorteth on exhortation; he that giveth let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth with diligence; he that showeth mercy with cheerfulness." May the Spirit be manifested in the church in all His varied gifts for its present need, and in all His manifold grace, that the name of the Lord may be magnified! Amen.