

“The Dark Side of Church History”

March 13, 2016

Amos 7:1-8:3

SCRIPTURE INTRO:

We're almost done with Amos, just today and two more Sundays.

I've said several times that Amos will never be your favorite book of the Bible.

You'll never turn to it for comfort or direction like you do the Psalms or John.

Except, maybe the end of chapter 9.

But it's a book we need to know and occasionally read to keep

our Christian minds sharp and attuned to the reality of God's moral universe.

You might say that Amos is a book that gives us a view from 30,000 feet.

It shows us how spiritual forces of belief and unbelief, faith and rebellion work themselves out over time, even over generations, in societies and in churches.

In fact, that's the focus of the book—the church—

the Lord's indictment of the church,

and his threats of judgment against the church—not the world—the church!

So you don't turn to the book of Amos for lessons in daily living.

You come to Amos to get this great big biblical view of history

and to develop a Christian mind and perspective.

But having that grand biblical perspective certainly does filter down

and help you understand and sort through more immediate concerns.

We'll read all of chapter 7 and three verses of chapter 8.

This passage consists of three visions of judgment against Jacob (Israel),

then an interlude in the form of a conversation,

then one more vision of judgment against Jacob.

INTRO: In Star Wars Episode V, The Empire Strikes Back, released 1980

This dialogue takes place.

Yoda says to Luke:

A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side. Anger, fear, aggression; the dark side of the Force are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice.

Luke says:

Vader . . .

Then he asks:

Is the dark side stronger?

And Yoda replies:

No, no, no. Quicker, easier, more seductive.

You Star Wars fans, enjoy this moment.

I've never opened a sermon with a Star Wars illustration . . .
and I doubt I ever will again.

But I couldn't resist this time, because I want us to consider this morning
the dark side of church history.

There is a dark side, and it's depicted here in Amos.

It's the main point of this passage.

Yoda's right, No, no, no—it's not stronger.

But it certainly is quicker, easier, more seductive.

So what is it? What is the dark side of church history?

And why do we need to know about it? Why is this important?

Well, rather than tell you at the beginning, I want to show you.

I think that will be more interesting.

And then, after we get our minds around it, we'll talk about application.

So for you note-takers, three headings.

1. The bright side of church history
2. The dark side of church history
3. Why we need to know these things.

Want to give credit where credit is due.

Sermon on this passage by Dr. Robert Rayburn, I'll be using extensively.

Before you can understand the dark side, you need to see . . .

MP#1 The bright side of church history

In the Old Testament, there were two classes of ministers of the Word.

There were priests and there were prophets.

The priests were worship leaders in tabernacle and temple.

But as Moses says in Deut. 33, one of their duties was to teach the people the law of God when they came to worship.

There are examples in the Old Testament of priests and Levites reading the Word then preaching and teaching the people. Nehemiah is one example.

Old Testament worship was a lot more like our worship at this point than realize.

The word was read and expounded by the priests.

The other class of minister of the Word were prophets.

We think of prophets as predictors of the future, and they sometimes did that.

But primarily, Old Testament prophets were preachers.

Even told that there were schools of the prophets, theological seminaries.

In 1 Kings a school of prophets with 100 students is mentioned.

The prophets carried on preaching and teaching ministry throughout Israel,

but were not connected with particular places of worship, temple or tabernacle.

So it's consistent with the Old Testament picture to say that priests were like our modern day pastors, who oversee worship, read word and preach to worshippers.

And prophets are like our modern day itinerant preachers or evangelists, or perhaps like missionaries or seminary professors or theologians

Those called to the teaching ministry of the Word, but not connected to or supported by a particular worshipping assembly or church.

So in this Old Testament terminology I'm a priest.

John Hunt, who preached here last week, is a prophet.

Amos was a prophet. And he explains here that he didn't start out as one.

Started out as a shepherd and trimmer of sycamore fig trees—

but God called him to preach, so he left his farm work and became a prophet.

He got his messages more directly from the Lord than most preachers.

He had visions and so forth, but in other respects, he was a typical preacher.

Now, here's the point I want to make.

If you read a book about church history—whether it is a text book that covers the whole sweep of last 2,000 years or a book that just focuses on a particular era of church history or an important movement.

In either case you will find that church history is the story of the church's greatest priests and prophets.

It is the great ministers of the Word who dominate the key events of church history and who inspire the important movements.

Either pastors who were connected to a particular church where they preached and taught and led worship

Or missionaries, evangelists, and theologians.

Now, let's do a quick survey, and you'll see what I mean.

I'll mention lots of names, some you will recognize, others you won't.

Starting with the New Testament era

It's primarily the story of the ministries of two men—Peter and Paul.

There were lots of others, we know a few names.

But the story of the foundation of Christian church centers on these two ministers.

Look at the next era, the church fathers, early Christianity.

It's also a story that cannot be told apart from biographies of several great ministers.

Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Ambrose, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Augustine.

The same with Medieval Christianity, some of the influential ministers of the Word

Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Anselm, Aquinas.

In the pre reformation centuries the ministry of Wycliff, John Hus, Savonarola.

And then the Reformation itself, which cannot be told apart from preaching and teaching of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox.

The Great Awakening is the story of preachers—Wesley brothers, John & Charles George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards.

The Modern Missionary movement is the story of William Carey, Robert Morrison, David Livingston, Adoniram Judson and many more.

And even closer to our day, the story of 20th century Christianity cannot be told apart from Christian thinkers and preachers and evangelists like

CS Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott, Billy Graham.

So that, in a nutshell is the bright side.

In every era of the church, the Lord raises up these greater ministers of the Word.

Great priests and prophets, great pastors, preachers, evangelists, missionaries, and theologians to proclaim and expound the Gospel.

And these great men represent and inspire the thousands and thousands of lesser ministers of the Word who are mostly forgotten, but were faithful in their time. But now let's look at . . .

MP#2 The dark side of church history

There is another company of well-known preachers and teachers of the Word who have had a dark and evil influence on the church through the ages.

These men are false prophets and corrupt priests.

Basically, their approach is to put their finger in the air, see where the winds are blowing, and then preach or teach a message that conforms to the culture. They distort the Word of God in a way that makes them popular and successful.

Here in this passage is a prime example.

It's this man Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who opposed the prophet Amos.

Amaziah was a minister. He would have called himself a priest of Yahweh.

You have to remember what Bethel was.

It was an alternative to Jerusalem as a place of worship.

The Israelites had set up some images there, golden calves and said that these represented Yahweh. We're Israelites, we're worshipping the Lord here.

They followed enough of the Mosaic worship ritual to make it feel like Jerusalem.

They had priests and sacrifices and used the language of Scripture, sang Psalms. But it was all false worship and theology of their own devising.

They did not really follow the Word of the living God as revealed on Sinai.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel preached sermons that conformed to ideas of the day.

He had a version of the Word of God compatible with paganism.

He was a respectable man. Well-paid, comfortable. Influential.

Look at the scorn he poured out on Amos.

Get out of here you seer, you prophet. Go back to Judah.

Go back south you hick. Go earn your money down there, I'm the pastor here.

We don't want your hellfire and brimstone preaching.

We don't want your narrow-minded negativity.

We don't want to hear that God's going to measure us with a plumb line and send Israel into exile if she doesn't repent.

That's not our God. That's not the Yahweh we know.

And notice how he didn't hesitate to use the government's help to deport Amos.

Amaziah is a type. There have been many Amaziah's throughout church history. Churchmen of influence, pastors, theologians who not only proclaim a false Gospel, but who are a thorn in the flesh of the true priests and prophets. Jeremiah was opposed by false prophet Hananiah. Micaiah was opposed by the false prophet Zedekiah.

Jesus Christ himself was opposed by the High Priest Caiaphas. Peter and Paul were opposed by the Jewish rabbis who rejected the Gospel and did everything in their power to oppose its preaching. The church fathers like Augustine and Athanasius and Chrysostom faced the powerfully influential false teachers Pelagius and Arius who were able to inflict considerable damage. During the Reformation Luther was opposed by Pope Leo and Johan Tetzal. Calvin was opposed by false teachers like Socinius.

During the Great Awakening, the Wesleys and Whitefield faced the fiercest resistance from the Church of England establishment. A great many fellow Anglican ministers, socially-connected, unbelieving pastors did everything they could to keep these evangelists out of church pulpits. In 1801 John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace* wrote these words: "I am told there are about 10,000 parishes in England; I believe more than nine thousand of these are destitute of the Gospel." In other words, for 9 out of 10 Anglican ministers in his day, it was just a job. They were not saved men. Their sermonizing was just moralism or politics.

That was England. The church in Germany for the past 200 years has been dominated by the influence of several theologians and seminary professors: Friederich Schliermacher, Adolf von Harnack, and Rudolph Bultmann. They advocated a method of interpretation called higher criticism that completely eroded any confidence in the historical reliability of the Bible. It has done untold damage to the church and to the faith of many.

In the American church there have been ministers like the Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Presbyterian Henry Sloane Coffin, and the Episcopalian John Shelby Spong, all men of powerful, negative influence. They led the charge in discarding any biblical teachings that were out of step with the spirit of the age—whether getting rid of the miracles of Bible, the need for

exclusive faith in Christ, or biblical sex ethics.

Now you might not have heard of many of these names I've mentioned.

But trust me, over the course of church history they have done untold damage. Just like Amaziah, they have cloaked themselves in the terminology and trappings of biblical religion; they have assumed the mantle of pastors and preachers and teachers and theologians, taken tithes and offerings, but preached falsehood.

MP#3 Why we need to know these things

Why is this in the Bible? And what does the Lord want us to do with it? Look again at the structure of this passage.

Amos receives three visions in a row of God's coming judgment. First a locust plague, that strips the land and leaves people starving.

Amos cries out: Sovereign Lord, forgive, stop, Jacob is so small. And the Lord listens and says: I will relent. This won't happen.

Then he had another vision of fire drying up the land—a terrible drought.

And the same thing happens. Amos intercedes for Israel, Lord relents. So let me ask you a question:

Who is Amos foreshadowing in his intercession for Israel?

He's foreshadowing Jesus Christ. He's the intercessor, he's the mediator. He's saying: Father, forgive them. And God extends mercy and patience. He's not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance.

So then Amos has a third vision. It's the vision of a wall and a plumb line.

Measuring the straightness and soundness of the wall.

God says, Israel has failed to measure up, I'm going to destroy them now. And right when you would expect Amos to plead with the Lord again, and intercede, and right when you expect God's mercy to be extended yet again on behalf of his faithful prophet who is foreshadowing Christ.

Who jumps in at that moment and interrupts?

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel.

He says: Get out of here you prophet. Go back to Judah.

We don't want your negative message of God's judgment. And that's that. There is no more intercession.

The next vision about Israel is the basket of ripe fruit and the Lord says—it's time, I won't wait any longer.

And the focus of his judgment is their sanctuary, their temple, where they

gather for their false worship—this is going to be a place of death.
Where they used to have such great music and singing and feel so good about
themselves—there is just going to be corpses and silence.
That came true literally a few years later when the Assyrian army sacked the place.

So do you see what Amaziah the priest of Bethel accomplished with his teaching?
He deprived the people in his congregation of their last chance to receive
God's mercy and forgiveness and grace. He cut them off from Christ.
They're in hell with Amaziah now, the pastor and his congregation are in hell.
That's the dark side of church history.

Ministers paving the way for people to go to hell through the church.
And that explains why Amaziah receives such a ferocious judgment.

His wife will become a prostitute to survive, his children killed,
his property plundered, and he himself carted off to die in exile.
God sees this as a terrible sin.

A bad president might wreck the economy,
a bad physician might wreck your health,
but a bad minister might wreck your soul, and the souls of your children.

I've told you many times about my friend Charlie Baldini.

He was called to a history church on Staten Island.
When he got to that church, he discovered that in the whole congregation,
there were perhaps two people who appeared to be born again.

The rest all called themselves Christians but were clueless.
Looking through church archives and discovered a document from the 1950s.
It was a doctrinal statement.

And when he read it, he was floored because it was a biblically sound,
Christ-centered, God-glorifying, Great-Commission approving document.
So he wondered, what happened to this church?

He began to dig deeper, and he found sermons and writings of previous pastors.
Then it all clicked. Charlie said it was clear what had happened.
Fifty years of false preaching, in this case theological modernism/liberalism
had killed the church and almost every soul in it.

So I haven't really answered the question: What are we to do with this?
The biggest reason I think this is in the Bible is just so we know.

So we aren't surprised by unbelief in the church and unbelieving ministers.

So we're warned and forearmed. I'm sure, practical ways that works out.
And the other big reason is that we would be challenged, as believers,
as a church to choose the truth, to hold on to the warning of God's coming
judgment and the Good News of his mercy and grace through Jesus Christ alone.
No matter how unpopular or how unsophisticated that seems.
No matter how countercultural, no matter how costly, we must hold on to
the Gospel and the old time religion of faith in the Lord Jesus.
When that's hard, remember this story: God vindicated Amos and his message,
But Amaziah and his congregation were swept away.