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MODERN PROPHETIC PREACHING<sup>1</sup>

The problem of classification of men and functions grows increasingly difficult. How shall Charles D. Williams be fitted into the conventional office of bishop of Michigan; how shall William Ralph Inge be jammed into the prescribed limits of dean of St. Paul's? Such reflections come to one fresh from the reading of *The Prophetic Ministry for Today* and *Outspoken Essays*.

Bishop Williams treats his subject in eight chapters, four of which may roughly be regarded as dealing with "functions" and four with the personal qualities involved in their discharge. After a composite view of the "Modern Minister," he considers the prophetic succession, inheritance, message, and program. Then follow three chapters in which the composite conception is studied under the detailed heads of critic, reformer, priest, and prophet.

The outstanding impression that abides is the superb common sense of Bishop Williams, coupled with his downright honesty and humanity. He is a churchman throughout; but he is always spilling over the bounds of his established churchmanship. We would not have him be anything else; but we are glad that he is something more than a bishop. Hear him on "apostolic succession":

Over-stressed, magically interpreted, it becomes an absurdity of superstition, the alleged conveyor of manual or digital grace. Underestimated, it becomes the matter of superficial and often senseless jibes and jests. Duly estimated and rationally interpreted, as a principle applied habitually everywhere else in human affairs, it has its large values, I believe, as an assurance of the regularity of the authoritative commission of the ministry and the continuity of the historic church.

But there is another succession, vastly more important. It is the only assurance of the reality of the mission of God in our ministry. It is the one secret and source of all spiritual vitality, power and efficiency in that ministry. And that is the "prophetic succession" [p. 26].

The hot point of contact between these two ideas is not touched, however. If the prophetic succession does not inevitably depend upon the apostolic; if the apostolic does not guarantee the prophetic; then there is something more to be said before one's mind is quite at rest.

Bishop Williams handles the content of the prophetic message with a firm hand. Note this paragraph:

The prophetic message then is always and everywhere a social message. It deals with society rather than with the individual. Religion is construed

<sup>1</sup> *The Prophetic Ministry for Today*. By Charles D. Williams. New York: Macmillan Co., 1921. 183 pages.

as essentially a community concern, first of the family, then of the tribe, then of the nation, and finally of the nations. The sin it condemns and the righteousness it commends are social sin and social righteousness. Its final and supreme vision and goal are the Kingdom of God in this present world wherein the will of God shall be done on earth as it is in heaven [p. 50].

This is a conception in sharp contrast with the individualistic and apocalyptic program that is abroad today in the form of fundamentalism and pre-millenarianism. It interprets the function and the message of the prophet truly instead of making him the clairvoyant and wizard, promulgating a blueprint of the future.

We spoke of the human quality in these lectures. The passage is too long for quotation, but as an example of the way in which a man can see himself accurately and appreciate the humor of the vision, we commend the description that Bishop Williams gives of himself as a single-taxer. We have come nearer being made a disciple of Henry George by this alluring section (pp. 124 ff.) than by all the forensics in defense of the cause to which we ever have listened.

We were not so happy after reading pages 148 ff., in which Bishop Williams tells how he uses the words of the creed, especially in respect to the "resurrection of the body," with what he calls "liberty of interpretation." Why not find new words that will truly represent the thought of the modern man in religion as well as in science? Bishop Williams knows that his ancient brother believed in the resurrection of "this flesh" as well as in the continuity of personality; when he uses the ancient brother's language with only half the historic content, is it quite honest and fully fair? It surely is for Bishop Williams, and we honor his frankness; but there are many young men who will not be satisfied with the position, and something more must be said on the point. Does not this same train lead to Rome? Why get off at Canterbury? or Detroit?

By the way, there is a slip on page 148, where "imminent" is printed for "immanent." Also the book should have been provided with an index.