

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Evan A. Fry, Radio Director
Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter Day Saints
Independence, Mo.

Sunday, November 14, 1943
10:00 p.m. KMBC, 980 KC
Kansas City, Mo.
All Rights Reserved

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath already been of old time, which was before us.

King Solomon, usually reputed to be the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, had everything the most wistful heart could desire to promote happiness, but even with all his gold and silver, his palaces, his horses, his servants, his rich foods, and his wives and concubines, I suspect that he sometimes got very much bored and "fed up" with life. The note of pessimism which runs through Ecclesiastes seems to come from a man who has tried every thrill in life and found it not half so good as he had supposed. But be that as it may, one of his statements, which we have selected for a text this evening, will repay some thought and analysis -- "there is no new thing under the sun."

There may be some exceptions to this rule, but if so, none come to mind by way of illustration at the moment. The progress of the world has not occurred because men searched in a brand new field, and suddenly came upon a great, basic new truth which men had never seen before even dimly. Progress always occurs when men take what they know, study it, re-adapt and reinterpret it, reaching new conclusions, and eventually finding new truth, which nonetheless is only an extension of the old. Wise men tell us that one of the basic inventions of all time was the wheel, which makes possible all our modern machinery. But the wheel was merely an adaptation of the round trunk of a tree which would roll along the ground. (Using the term loosely, we have said that the automobile and the airplane were NEW inventions. But the first automobile was only a buggy with the shafts removed and a gasoline engine installed; and the first airplane was a combination of that gasoline engine and the wings of a bird.)

In the realm of pure thought, or ethics, or morals, or religion, you will find the same thing true. Men do not suddenly reach up into nowhere and pluck down a brand new idea. They build on the ideas they already have; they make new emphasis, they re-interpret, they adapt; they add a little new truth to an old idea, advancing the "growing edge" of truth and of knowledge little by little rather than by leaps and bounds.

At the very beginning of Creation, God had foreseen all the possibilities. (He knew that man might sin and fall from grace; he knew that he might need a Redeemer.) In his mind there existed even then all the rules and principles of living which have been discovered and enunciated by all the prophets since the beginning of time. Some of the prophets saw the truth only partially ordimly, because the people whom they served were not capable of following any faster. But eventually there came another prophet and added a little truth to that which had already been revealed, reinterpreting it in the light of new needs and new conditions, and advancing the front of truth and knowledge as far as the people were capable of understanding and using that truth.

If we persist in regarding a prophet as a person who reveals nothing but brand new truth, straight from the throne of God -- truth of which no man ever had any inkling before, we are faced with some peculiar historical problems which we must solve and explain. History teaches us quite unassailably that many of the ten commandments which were written by the finger of God on the tablets at Mt. Sinai, were written in the code of Hammurabi many years before Moses ever presented them to the children of Israel. Some people when they have learned this fact, jump to the conclusion that Moses was no prophet, and the whole story of the ten commandments a fraud. But if you accept the view that a prophet's function is to re-interpret, re-emphasize, and re-establish old truth to people who have forgotten it, or misapplied it, or completely neglected it, then Moses is no less a prophet for having been anticipated several centuries by an Egyptian king.

Study the prophets of the Old Testament, and you will find that most of their ideas are new only to the people to whom they are speaking. The new truth which they utter is based on ancient but forgotten truth. The prophets echo each other and repeat each other time and time again throughout the old testament. But that does not prove that they are not prophets. It proves that they are, when all of them can speak of the same thing in a way that is new and fresh and needed by the people of their day, yet not forsaking the fundamental and basic truths which have been perceived by men for thousands of centuries.

Jesus himself has been disparaged by some critics because some of his teachings are only echoes of what had gone before. Even the golden rule, which most people imagine originated with Christ, had been written by Confucius several centuries before Christ's birth. Does that prove that Christ was not inspired, not a prophet, not the Son of God? It does no such thing, if you understand what Christ came to teach and to do. Confucius worded his golden rule negatively -- "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you." That is true, and a good principle as far as it goes. Whether Jesus ever heard of Confucius or not is doubtful, but he took that same old truth and re-interpreted it in a new way to make it positive -- "Do unto others as ye would have them do unto you." The re-statement of the golden rule is a fine example of the thing which Jesus did most frequently in his ministry -- re-interpreting the old, the tried, and the true; bringing out new concepts of truth, changing old ideas to bring them once again in line with old truth.

Of course, Jesus DID many new things, which had never been done before, and have never been done since. He died for the sins of the world, and redeemed mankind. He conquered death, and hell, and the grave. He became the fleshly incarnation of God. He ushered in a new dispensation -- the fulness of the gospel which had been hindered and restricted by the Mosaic law. But study his teachings, and it is extremely doubtful whether you can find any teaching that has not been foreshadowed in the Old Testament prophets. He said himself that he came not to destroy the law -- that is, not to supplant it with something totally strange and new and different -- but to fulfill the law by carrying it on further than it had ever gone before. He came to call men back to the spirit of the law, which had been lost in the rigid adherence to the letter of the law. He went beyond the law and completed its previously unexpressed and unrealized implications.

We do not believe that it is any disparagement of Jesus to say that he taught nothing new, but that he did teach old things in totally new ways. That is always the function of the prophet -- perhaps not the only function, but at least one of the most important. The prophet nearly always re-interprets old law, old ideas, old ideals which have become traditionalized, petrified, stilted, dead. They call people back from apostasy and error, and show them new viewpoints on the old truth which they know.

Not a one of the 95 theses posted by Luther on the Cathedral door was brand new. Every one of them was in a sense prophetic, but the whole document was a re-affirmation of ancient fundamental truth, of which people had lost sight for ages. The Wesleyan movement in England began not as a brand new thing, but as a calling of the people back to an old and a genuine devotional worship, instead of what the Wesleys believed to be a cold, unemotional formalism in the church. Fox, the founder of the Quakers, brought a new emphasis to the truth about the "inner light" of the Spirit of God, but the truth had been there all the time --ever since the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the waters of the newly created earth. The Puritans were not teaching anything new when they stressed freedom of conscience and of religion, but it was a new application of the truth about freedom which was springing up all over Europe. And it was not long before the Puritans needed a prophet to re-interpret their own teaching to them, for they denied religious freedom to everyone else except themselves.

Men and nations and churches tend to grow into a mold --to harden their thinking into one narrow channel of emphasis in which they ignore or forget the truth they once espoused, or fail to follow it out to its final implications. No man, and no church is immune from this danger. No period of history has been without its hide-bound traditionalism, its entrenched apostasy from established truth, its stodgy, unyielding authoritarianism which declares "We have the truth; there is no more." In every age of the world, then, there has been a need for prophets to call people back to the truth they have buried or forgotten, to lead people in their explorations for light that will re-interpret old truth in terms of modern needs and conditions. Under such prophetic ministry, we find many times that what we have been taught as truth is not truth at all. Do you remember the comment with which science dismissed Edison's experiments with the incandescent bulb? Science said that the only way to produce light was by burning something; that the combustion in an incandescent bulb would destroy the filament instantly; therefore there would be no light, and there could be no bulb. Edison denied none of this old truth, but he did find new ways of applying it, that made an incandescent bulb, and made it work.

Joseph Smith, the founder of this church, was a modern prophet. He brought no totally or basically new truth to earth, but he did bring some radically new concepts about old truth. The teachings of Jesus had been formalized and traditionalized and erroneously formulated in creeds and dogmas, just as the teachings of the old prophets had been institutionalized and legalized in Jesus' day until the truth in them was almost completely obscured. Someone was needed to call men back to some basic, fundamental, yet withal simple truths, disabusing men's minds of the erroneous traditions which had grown up around those truths. This was Joseph Smith's mission, to RESTORE that which was lost, to re-interpret old truth in the light of modern needs, to advance the growing edge of religious truth a little further.

We shall always have need of that kind of prophet, for every age tries to wrap the truth in fine linen, embalm it, and lay it away in a tomb to be venerated, but not lived. Periodically we need a prophet to come and call the old truth forth and show it to men in such a way that they will see that it is still new, still fresh, still true. (Other prophets will rise in the years that lie ahead, as we need reinterpretations of truth in the light of a rapidly changing world. Watch for them; pay heed to them when they come.) For although there is nothing new under the sun, we shall always need new interpretations of old truth if we are to live as God would have us live in a modern and an ever-changing world.