

RECOGNIZING FALSE PROPHETS

By Denver Cheddie

The abundance of false prophets prophesied in the last days makes it imperative that we learn how to identify them. False prophets fall into two categories – those outside the church, who are really no grave danger to believers; and those inside the church, wolves in sheep's clothing. Paul told the Ephesian elders that men would rise up from their own midst and draw men away with false doctrines (Acts 20:29,30). It of these angels of light the church must beware and be able to identify before they wreak unprecedented havoc. The Bible does give us guidelines for recognizing false prophets, apostles and teachers.*

By Their Predictions

In Duet. 18:21,22 we are told that if a prophet's prediction does not come to pass, that forever settles it that he is a false prophet and we are to never respect him as a true prophet. It does not matter how many of his predictions had previously come to pass, one strike and he's out. The penalty for that was death (vs. 20) under the old covenant. A true prophet always hears infallibly from God. That is the standard the OT set for those who would presume to speak in the name of the Lord. Perhaps it was trying to discourage false prophets, and we would be well advised to apply the same standard today in judging prophets (without killing them, of course).

What then of Jonah? He predicted the fall of Nineveh in 40 days (Jon. 3:4), which of course did not happen. Although Nineveh did eventually fall, it did not happen within the time frame prescribed by Jonah. Some prophecies are conditional and some are unconditional. Most of the Messianic prophecies were unconditional – did not depend on anyone other than God. Prophecies of judgment usually carried an implicit condition that if the people repented, judgment would be averted. This was precisely the case with Nineveh and Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1 cf. vs. 9). Isaiah initially prophesied that Hezekiah would not recover from his illness, but after the King repented, he God granted him recovery and 15 years extra life.

God Gave a Sign

Obviously this first criteria could not consistently be applied because the fulfillment of some prophecies were delayed for hundreds of years. People could not wait till then to determine whether the prophet was of God or not. What usually happened was that God authenticated his true prophets at the onset of their ministry after which they were forever labeled as His prophets. Then were they qualified to bring further prophecies. In 1 Kings 13:3-5, the man of God gave a sign that he was truly sent by God. His prophesy later came to pass under the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 23:16). God also gave Hezekiah a sign that Isaiah's word would come to pass (Isa. 38:8). The authenticity of Jeremiah was made clear early on when he correctly predicted the death of the false prophet Hananiah in 1 year (Jer. 28:16). Because God validated his prophets, there was no doubt in the minds of any remotely devout person of their authenticity (Dan. 9:2).

By Their Doctrine

In Duet. 13:1-5, we are given the possibility that even false prophets may make occasional correct prophesies. Even so if he leads the people away from God, he would be considered a false prophet. God said that he tested his people in this manner. He tests whether their allegiance is to Biblical truth or spiritual sensationalism. Unfortunately many today would stumble at this very hurdle because they have no concern for doctrinal integrity. In the days of the apostles, there were those teaching that Jesus was not of God (1 John 4:1-6). In verse 6, John laid down the rule of identification: *whoever listens to us is of God*. Many cults may quote this scripture to support their position, however they would be misinformed. What John was referring to was the apostles' teachings which was adhered to by the early church (Acts 2:14) – which for us was canonized in the NT. Anything that deviates from the teachings of the NT is false doctrine. A minister is an invalid who fails to point this out to his followers (1 Tim. 4:6).

Consistency of Revelation

The true prophet's message was a contrary one – one that robbed against the grain. The false prophet's message found sympathy with the worldly elements within and without the church (1 John 4:5). In the OT false prophets were people-friendly in their prophesying – they said what people wanted to hear (1 Kings 22:6-8; Jer. 5:31). The true prophet stood alone and was a bohemian figure.

Jeremiah 28 is particularly instructive. The prophet Hananiah predicted that God would free Israel from the hands of the Babylonians in 2 years. Jeremiah at first welcomed such a prophecy, but reminded him that since the prophecy of peace to Israel was contrary to what all the prophets of God had said before, they would have to wait to see if it was true. In other words consistency of revelation from God is a determining factor in judging prophesy. As it turned out Hananiah was wrong and he died the very same year because of his false prophecy. If all the prophets predicted judgment, how could God for no apparent reason change His message to peace? If the Bible says X how could you prophesy Y and still be correct?

By Their Fruit

In Matt. 7:20-23, Jesus taught that even if a prophet could do miracles, it meant nothing if his life did not bear the right fruit. Oftentimes Paul identifies false prophets by this condition (2 Tim 3:1-5). In Acts 20:29,30 false prophets were the ones who drew disciples to themselves. How the church today is inundated with such individuals! The prophets of old were not media celebrities who relentlessly pleaded with people for their financial offerings, payable directly to their bank accounts. False prophets were the ones greedy for filthy lucre (1 Tim. 6:3-7). They may even fabricate lies and false testimonies just to hoodwink to the gullible who cannot search truth for themselves (2 Pet. 2:3). In 1 Cor. 11, Paul cites his sacrificial life as evidence of authentic apostleship. As you read it, you'll realize that the sacrifice Paul talked about was not waking a few late nights or preaching 3 sermons a week. It is unlikely false prophets would sacrifice the very comfort of their lives because that would be counterproductive to their sole goal.

Prophets Today

There are many prophets today who go from church to church “prophesying over people”: ‘You will be a Pastor’, ‘Wilma will be married to Barney’ [*Yeah, tell Fred that*], ‘God will raise you up and work mightily through you’, ‘Somebody in the house is looking for a financial breakthrough’ [*as if anyone isn’t*].

Once upon a time, a prophet was invited by a Pastor to preach in his church. At the conclusion of his message the prophet went over to the piano and was inspired by music to prophesy to the woman in the front row with the green dress and 3 children at her side. “Thus sayeth the Lord [*to a melody he composed under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost*]. At this time next year God will bring Mr. Right into your life, and he will be a perfect husband to you and father to your children.” Perplexed by the reticence of the crowd, he just left it there. It was only when he went to the Pastor’s home, he saw the same three children playing in the living room and the same woman in the green dress, now wearing a brown one, in the kitchen preparing lunch. And at that precise moment, it dawned on him that maybe it wasn't really God who spoke through him.

These are not uncommon in charismatic circles. They make personal predictions concerning people’s lives and needless to say many of them do not come to pass. So what’s the prophet’s escape hatch? “Prophecy is conditional, and if you don’t co-operate with God, He cannot fulfill his

purpose in your life.” It is so convenient to presume to speak in the name of the Lord today. As long as there are dumb people in churches who cannot and will not search the scriptures for themselves, these wolves will always make a killing. Let us examine whether prophets can really make a disclaimer at this point.

If I were to say that it is God’s will for you to become a Pastor, I did not really make a prediction. I left it open, because it is possible for you to disobey God and never become a pastor. If on the other hand I had said, “You will become a pastor”, I effectively said two things: 1) it is God’s will for you to become a Pastor, and 2) you will cooperate with God and eventually fulfill that purpose. The person’s obedience or disobedience is incorporated in the prophesy.

This is precisely what transpired in Judges 13:5, when the prophesy concerning Samson was that he would “**begin** to deliver Israel” from the Philistines. It is my understanding that this clause provided subtle indication that Samson would not complete the job i.e. his eventual failure was foreseen. What sense does it make for God to predict that someone will be a pastor if He, in his foreknowledge, knows the person will be noncompliant? Judas was called to be an apostle and had treasures awaiting him in heaven (Matt. 19:28), but Jesus knew was not going to fulfill that purpose (John 6:71).

Unlike the OT, when prophets were God’s primary means of communication, and the early church, when the apostles filled that role, we have a

completed canon. Eph. 2:20 makes it clear that the office of a prophet was necessary for the foundation of the church, not its continued existence. However since there is no indication that the gift of prophecy (available to all believers) will cease ([see my article on the gifts of the Spirit](#)), and that since there was nothing foundational to the church about prophets like Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10), there is still the possibility of “second degree” prophets who predict future events at a local level. These prophets must be judged by the standards outlined in the Word of God. I reject all prophets who claim to bring doctrinal revelation to the church e.g. Jesus Christ will return in 2002.

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* I use the term *false prophet* to refer to all three of the above, ignoring the technical differences between them.