

Restoration
November/December 1985

How to Recognise a False Prophet
A Wolf in Prophet's Clothing
Tony Ling

To the young Christian on holiday in the area there was something special about this man, who seemed more of a prophet than a pastor to his happy people.

It's true that his interpretation of the end-times was rather un-orthodox. But at least he based it on the Bible - or, more correctly, on a few chapters in Matthew.

'The tribulation is coming soon,' he would say at mealtimes, 'and we're actively preparing for it. We've learnt to grow all these vegetables naturally, organically. And we've stored large supplies of various grains in milk churns hidden in our homes.

'We've bought waterproofs and the best walking boots for every member of our families. Each summer for our holidays we load our hand-carts and practice fleeing to the hills as Jesus said we would need to at that time.

'We've learnt how to hunt and fish and live off the wild plants of the land. When the great tribulation comes, we're going to make it through.'

The visitor had to admit that the vegetables and barbecued fish tasted superb and that there was something really exciting about backwoodsman-ship. If this man was a prophet, he knew how to make the Christian life sound like one big adventure. If only the Bible was a bit clearer on the subject....

Back at home the Christian was fired with enthusiasm about trekking over hills, buying old milk churns and digging up the lawn. Then he talked to one of his church leaders. As they spoke together, suddenly he realised that he had stifled the voice of God to his heart.

Now he knew the truth. The man he had met, sincere though he seemed, was an imposter, a self-deceived attention seeker - *a false prophet*.

1. A Chequered History

False prophets have been in contention with the word of God since Cain attempted to demonstrate that the approval of the Lord could be gained by human endeavour (Genesis 4:1-16); and every progressive step in redemption history has been withstood, opposed and denied by those claiming to be the very spokesmen of God.

When God was fashioning for himself a prophetic people, having redeemed them from Egyptian slavery, he gave them two tests by which to prove the legitimacy of a prophetic word.

a. Does It Witness?

'If a prophet... gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet.... You shall follow the Lord your God and fear him... keep his commandments, listen to his voice, serve him, and cling to him. But that prophet... shall be put

to death' (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

Whatever comes, be it ever so powerfully and miraculously accompanied, if it is contrary to the clearly revealed person and purpose of God it is to be ruthlessly rejected.

b. Does It Work?

'The prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in my name which I have not commanded him to speak . . . that prophet shall die. And you may say in your heart, "How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" ... If the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken' (Deuteronomy 18: 20-22).

This second type of false prophecy is much more difficult to cope with than the first as it often requires time before it is exposed - and who is to say how long? Then, of course, one is often confronted by super-spiritual people with the idea that it *has* come about 'in the spirit' or 'in the heavenlies'!

The above scriptures also describe the two main *types* of false prophecy. *Perversion* ('Let us go after other gods') is easy to recognise. *Presumption* ('speak a word presumptuously'), however, probably presents the greatest difficulty in discernment for the people of God.

No Challenge

It's a sad fact that a people who lack faith and obedience will produce from among themselves, and for themselves, prophets devoid of the Word of God.

'This is a rebellious people,' complained Isaiah, 'false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, "You must not see visions," and to the prophets, "You must not prophesy what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel" ' (Isaiah 30:9-11).

Such prophets are considered safe because they neither threaten the status quo nor make demands that are costly in terms of radical re-appraisal and adjustment. Their prophesying actually *encourages sin*, because iniquity ceases to be exposed and is therefore not forsaken (Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 2:14). Instead they take the white-wash brush to cover the blemishes, cracks and faulty structures of sub-standard living (Ezekiel 13:10-14; 22:28).

At such times, however, today's ease proves to be a forerunner of tomorrow's disaster. 'An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely... and my people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?' Jeremiah 5:30-31).

Often supported by multitudes of the redeemed community, the false prophets of Old Covenant history invariably surfaced at times of national crisis - standing against the voice of the man of God who called for repentance, change and unconditional obedience to the will of God.

It's so easy for us, with hindsight, to recognise the real heroes of faith and stalwarts of truth. But I wonder how some of us would have reacted to an Elijah or a Jeremiah had we lived in their times and been influenced by the prevailing attitudes and standards of contemporary religion and society?

2. A Problem for Today

The Word of God tells us that false prophets are not merely of passing historic interest, but pose a real and growing problem in these end-times (Matthew 24:11). We should not be surprised, then, that as the Holy Spirit sheds more light on our path, and the clear prophetic voice calls us to prepare the way, those posing as messengers of light and claiming to carry the word of the Lord will arise, seeking to confuse God's people.

Both the gospels and the epistles warn us to be on our guard against them, for they represent the most insidious danger confronting the church. Such danger doesn't come so much from the blatant false prophets of contemporary pseudo-Christian cults, or from the growing numbers of militant adherents to the anti-Christian rituals and mysteries of eastern religions; even a most basic understanding of the ways of God guards us against their errors.

Looks

Much more subtle and more potentially destructive is the man who in every respect appears to be unquestionably orthodox, but in whose mouth is a lie. Remember, the ultimate false prophet of the book of Revelation *looks* like a lamb but *speaks* like a dragon (Revelation 13:11)! The first important lesson to learn right here is that appearances are deceptive.

Jesus himself warned of those who come in *sheep's clothing* but inwardly are *ravenous wolves* (Matthew 7:15). There is no way that you can recognise false prophets by mere externals. Indeed, if there were a current 'fashion wear for prophets' (which there isn't), false prophets would excel in wearing it; Zechariah 13:4 speaks of those who 'put on a hairy robe in order to deceive'.

Words

Nor can we always immediately distinguish a false prophet by his religious confession. Jesus said: 'Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven...' (Matthew 7:21).

Persistence in falsehood, however, cannot help but ultimately expose error of heart. This may be a glaring 'denying the Master who bought them' (2 Peter 2:1) or a rejection of the fundamental truth of the physical incarnation, resurrection and coming again of Jesus (1 John 4:1-3). On the other hand, it may be one of the equally destructive and demonically inspired heresies of declaring that celibacy or refusing to eat certain foods - or even storing grain in milk churns for the tribulation - is a vital part of the gospel (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

Works

Furthermore, as we have seen in Deuteronomy 13, 'works' do not furnish irrefutable proof of a man's acceptance with God. John the Baptist was described by Jesus as 'one who is more than a prophet' (Matthew 11:9) and yet it is recorded that 'John performed no sign' (John 10:41).

By contrast, end-time deceivers and false prophets will perform 'great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect' (Matthew 24:24). They will cast out demons and perform many miracles *in the very name of Jesus* (Matthew 7:22). But the Lord has rejected them!

3. Recognising False Prophets

How then are we to recognise these dealers in deception and prophesiers of perversion? Jesus said, 'You will know them by their *fruits*' (Matthew 7:20).

The apostle Paul provides us with a key verse in Romans which sheds light on how men get into error: 'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (Romans 1:25).

When a man gives himself to serve the creature - in other words, when his whole ministry is earth-orientated and man-centered - the truth of God is inevitably exchanged for a lie, and the fruits of his error will become apparent in his *character, attitudes and actions*. The false prophet is first and foremost a *self-seeker* who has 'turned to his own way' (Isaiah 53:6), which means that he is also, when occasion demands, a *man-pleaser*.

Here, then, are some warning signs that cry 'Beware!' when they repeatedly emerge in the life of one claiming to be a prophet of God:

a. Beware of the Man Motivated by His Own Ego

He is a seeker of popularity - the most rare attribute of a true prophet - rather than the approval of God. 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets' (Luke 6:26). This 'celebrity' of the church is actually a ravenous wolf seeking to feed his ego on the admiration of the people. To those who are for him he cries, 'Peace.' But on those who are not, he declares 'holy war' (Micah 3:5).

He draws disciples after him at the expense of their relationship with Jesus (Acts 20:29-30), promising freedom while he himself, with all other false prophets, are 'slaves of corruption' (2 Peter 2:19). The true prophetic voice cries, simply, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' (John 1:29).

b. Beware of the Man Motivated by Financial Gain

'Her prophets divine for money' (Micah 3:11). It is impossible to serve God and money. The servant of God must learn contentment when he has none, and how to handle it righteously when he has plenty. Abraham and David were exceedingly wealthy and yet were both prophets. A prophet is not disqualified from possessing wealth but is on perilous ground when wealth *possesses him*.

There are still those who follow the way of Balaam, 'who loved the wages of unrighteousness' (2 Peter 2:15). In Balaam's case, although he was aware of what God was doing in the earth, he was motivated by the love of money when he actively counseled the enemies of God's purpose to lead God's people astray (Numbers 22). The true prophet is secure in the knowledge that God will provide all his needs (Philippians 4:19).

c. Beware of the Man Motivated by Sensuality

'They have acted foolishly in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken words in my name falsely' (Jeremiah 29:23). How many weak and foolish believers have ruined their lives and families, and sometimes shipwrecked their faith, by being caught up by sensuality, often disguised by those who propound it as some new spiritual revelation or the next progressive outworking

of our 'love for one another!

Jesus himself rebuked the church at Thyatira because: 'You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads my bondservants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols' (Revelation 2:20). The true prophetic message is 'flee immorality' (1 Corinthians 6:18), 'flee from idolatry' (10:14).

Selfish Ambition

James dramatically compares earthly wisdom and godly wisdom, the main features of which clearly apply to true and false prophets as well as to Christians in general. Note the characteristics of each kind.

'If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which

comes down from above, but it is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

'But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace' (James 3:14-18).

The one who lies against the truth, James assures us, is an arrogant and selfish man. Motivated by ambition, he reviles godly order but makes room for all kinds of evil. He is angry, unreasonable, constantly changing his position and at home with hypocrisy. Such wisdom as he does possess is not from God. Instead, because he is man-centred ('earthly, natural'), he has given way to demonic deception. Beware of him!

Imagined Words

As well as these more obviously wrong motives, the Word of God gives clear warning about other sources of a so-called prophetic word.

'They are prophesying to you a false vision... and the deception of *their own minds*' (Jeremiah 14:14).

'They speak a vision of *their own imagination*' (Jeremiah 23:16).

'The prophets of Israel who prophesy . . . from *their own inspiration*' (Ezekiel 13:2).

A prophet has a spiritual ministry and his prophesying should be a spiritual operation. He falls into error when he speaks from his own intellect, his own imagination or his own inspiration.

The prophet is not sent to propagate theology or doctrine, but to minister the 'now' word of God. Of course, his word will never contradict sound doctrine but beware of the man who is forever prophesying his own intellectual preferences and persuasions. Reject such words as: "*Thus says the Lord, "I want you to know I am a premillennialist."*

God is able to do 'exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think' (Ephesians 3:20), but that doesn't mean that he will do what we think or imagine! Because a man thinks it would be good if God arranged affairs so as to reduce the price of petrol, that doesn't give him the right to prophesy: 'Thus says the Lord, "I will reduce the price of petrol." '

God is a good God, and his goodness exceeds human understanding. A man proph-

esies from his own inspiration when he thinks within himself, 'If I were God, I would do this. Therefore that is what God will do...', "Thus says the Lord

Beware!

We are privileged to live in days when the voice of the prophets is being heard, but we must also realise that just as Joshua and Caleb brought back the good report of the provision of God and the confident declaration of imminent victory, there were 10 other men who contradicted them (Numbers 13:1-16, 14:1-10).

Down through God's dealings with his people the prophet's ministry has almost always been 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (Matthew 3:3). But that voice in our generation is making a more and more certain sound. *Don't allow the discords of unbelief and the clanging of self-interest to deafen you to the clarion call of the Holy Spirit.*

Picking up the Pieces

It is one thing to recognise a false prophet but it is an entirely different matter to be on the spot, sifting through the wreckage, after a deceiver has been exposed.

Here are some guidelines for Christians and churches in such a position:

1. The false prophet, once exposed, needs to seek forgiveness from God and any individuals concerned for everything that is wrong. Strong and well-established leaders should take the man in hand and deal with the root issues.

If the man is released full-time to the Lord's work, he should immediately look for a job and learn to live a normal working life.

2. Any prophecies which have proved empty, false or misleading should simply be rejected and forgotten. Those over which there remains a question mark should be submitted to other prophets of proven character for confirmation or otherwise.

Prophecy in the New Testament was usually brought in a corporate setting anyway, where other prophets could weigh it carefully (1 Corinthians 14:29). Indeed, the whole congregation should weigh such prophecies and not be so gullible as to receive everything without question (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

3. Recognise any good that the man has done in his ministry. Most so-called false prophets are not *altogether* false, especially if, at root level, they have a heart for God

Balaam was a mixed prophet, to say the least, but God used him on occasions (Numbers 22-24). Saul was clearly given prophetic gifts by the Lord (1 Samuel 10:9-11). Yet we read in 1 Samuel 18:10-11 (NIV) of him prophesying one minute and trying to murder David the next.

Paul tells us : 'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29). Once the gifts are given, they remain operative even though a person might go downhill in character and veer into deception.

We should learn to reject words from men and women of questionable character, even though their contribution might appear to be of God.