

Beware of False Prophets

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“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing ... You will know them by their fruits.”

Matthew 7:15a, 16a

The Bible is full of warnings against false prophets and false teachers. As Christians, we are vulnerable to deception and therefore must be on our guard. The church should never fool itself by thinking that false prophets were only a problem to previous generations. Historically, those who have sought to maintain the purity of the gospel have been met with opposition from the beginning, and much of that opposition has come from false prophets and teachers.

Peter said, ***“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words”*** (2 Peter 2:1-3a).

John said, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world”*** (1 John 4:1). Finally, Jude said, ***“Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ”*** (Jude 3b-4).

What is a false prophet? A false prophet is a person (or an organization) that claims to be the representative or spokesman for God, yet denies, contradicts, or disobeys the Word of God revealed in the Scriptures. False prophets will appear to be Christians—they will come to you “in sheep’s clothing.” They will disguise themselves, seeking to look and sound as much like you, a believer

in Jesus Christ. They have Bibles, they quote Scriptures, they claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, but they are deceivers.

In order to recognize a false prophet, we need to know the characteristics of a true prophet or a true servant of God. First, they will be sound doctrinally, hold fast to biblical authority, and revere the Word of God. The second characteristic to look for is holiness. As Paul said to Timothy, ***“But you, O man of God ... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness”*** (1 Timothy 6:11). Finally, the third mark of a true servant of God is humility. They will desire to glorify God rather than themselves. As Paul stated to the Corinthians, ***“For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake”*** (2 Corinthians 4:5).

So how do we recognize those who are false? First and foremost, a false prophet will handle the Word of God dishonestly and irreverently. This irreverence will lead them to corrupt the Scriptures, deny the authenticity and authority of the Bible, and put in its place the teachings of men. They will deny or distort the great doctrines of the Christian faith—the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His miracles, His atoning death, His bodily resurrection and ascension, and His second coming.

The second mark of a false prophet is that they are proud and all they do is for self-glorification. Jesus said the false prophets of His day did their religious activity ***“to be seen by men”*** (Matthew 23:5). Paul warned that from within the church, men would rise up, seeking to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:30).

Third, false prophets live ungodly lives. Peter described them, saying, ***“They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their***

own deceptions ... having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. ... For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption” (2 Peter 2:13b-14b, 18-19b).

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One other characteristic that is common to false prophets and teachers is the love of money. Luke tells us that the Pharisees ***“were lovers of money”*** (Luke 16:14), and they represented the false teachers of that day. Paul, in writing to Titus, said that the false teachers taught ***“things which they ought not”*** for dishonest gain (Titus 1:11). They did it for money. Finally, Peter says that the false teachers would ***“by covetousness ... exploit you with deceptive words”*** (2 Peter 2:3). ***“Make merchandise of you”*** is another way it’s translated.

So, these are some of the marks of the false prophets. Unfortunately, false prophets and teachers are alive and well and with us today. But not all of them will manifest the same exact errors. In the next issue, I will describe the beliefs and practices of a group that I believe to be one of the most dangerous false prophets of our day: the Emergent Movement. ☞