

False Prophets Can Be Identified

No segment of our society boasts more false prophets than politics. You hear them. Commonly called pundits and politicians, they abound. Every day these false prophets predict the rise and fall of people and policies that affect you and me.

The world of sports possesses nearly as many false prophets as politics. Sportswriters and sports' broadcasters, or false prophets, predict the winners, losers, and point differentials of every sport imaginable.

The news media garners its share of false prophets, too. Their predictions fill print publications, broadcasts, and the internet. They predict everything in our society by manipulating reports of events to their satisfaction in the attempt to dictate future events according to their agendas.

False prophets in almost every area of life gather followers who esteem them. It seems that the wilder these provocateurs' proclamations, often based upon nothing more than imagination, the more they enhance their popularity. Their presence has increased to significant numbers today.

False prophets within Christianity flourish, too. Their numbers swell to include pastors as well as denominational leaders. Even conservative groups, previously immune to such leadership errors, now boast of their "adaptation" to culture by implementing "trailblazers who will lead the Church into the new century."

Popular authors and speakers shape our doctrinal positions and ministry emphases more increasingly in line with cultural beliefs at the expense of Biblical truth. Apparently, the Bible does not sell.

Now, false prophets even preside over seminaries that train the next group of leaders. We have reached a sad day so that when you or your local congregation search for a leader from a professing Christian seminary, you take the risk of finding a false prophet.

The subtle yet significant spiritual decline of Christian congregations, perhaps even a description of your spiritual life, develops under the evil influences of false prophets.

The stories of religious false prophets pervade the pages of the Bible, too. During the time of God's anointed prophet, Jeremiah, Israel progressed deeply into sin, rejecting God's laws.

God called Jeremiah to ministry during the 13th year of the reign of King Josiah, the 14th King of Judah. (Jeremiah 1.2) Josiah's grandfather, King Manasseh, led Judah into great wickedness. The evil that he established exceeded the evil abominations of the nations that God drove from the Promised Land under Joshua. (2 Kings 21.2) The discovery of the Law of God in the Temple during Josiah's sovereignty did not occur until the 18th year of his rule. (2 Kings 22.3-8)

In chapter five of his book, Jeremiah recounts the injustice, hypocrisy, idolatry, and adultery present in Judah. These conditions, which began under the reign of King Manasseh, existed at the time Jeremiah began to prophesy.

At the close of Jeremiah 5, the prophet identified the underlying cause of the people's wicked condition:

"The prophets prophesy falsely..." (Jeremiah 5.31)

The false prophets and priests of Jeremiah's day fostered the spiritual decline of Israel. As Jeremiah bewailed the spiritual condition of Israel, he described the characteristics of the false prophets that furthered it.

Characteristics Of False Prophets

False prophets declared a false message.

When they said, "God said," they lied. They spoke their own messages. Further, when the priests failed to correct the prophets, the priests gained support from the prophets for their lavish, wicked lifestyles. Moreover, the people loved it that way. (Jeremiah 5.31)

False prophets derided God's word.

The shameful practices of Israel's leaders resulted in the people viewing God's word to them with derision. (Jeremiah 6.10) When God spoke to them through His prophets, the Israelites rebelled against Him and departed from His word without fear. Every level of society, rich and poor, defied God. His warnings fell on deaf ears and hard hearts.

They had no interest in God's word. They traded God's word for the messages of the false prophets and priests. Naturally, this brought about a dearth of the knowledge of God. Doubt and unbelief followed.

False prophets desired possessions.

Jeremiah 6.13 identifies another characteristic of the false prophets, the desire for possessions. The false prophets of Jeremiah's era loved money and sought positions of prominence. Their unbounded indulgences of the flesh drove them to dishonesty.

Their sin infected everyone, from the poorest to the richest, so that covetousness contaminated their whole society. No one denied his or her own selfish interests.

False prophets disregarded their duties.

False prophets in Jeremiah's day disregarded their duties. Verse 14 of Jeremiah 6 talks about healing the hurt of God's people slightly.

Imagine a physician treating someone with a broken bone piercing through flesh. Rather than taking the time and effort to set the bone straight, this doctor merely wraps it and puts a band-aid on the injury.

This is an appalling thought, isn't it? Instead of really fixing the hurt, he just patches it up and hopes it heals a little.

As inexcusable as this sounds, it describes how the false prophets in Jeremiah's era treated the spiritual ills of Israel. They made no attempt to apply God's word to the people, which would bring healing to the spiritually suffering. Instead, they pronounced false messages to them.

False prophets declared a false peace.

In addition, God accused the false prophets and priests of saying, "Peace, peace," when no peace existed. (Jeremiah 6.14) The priests and prophets attempted to cover up their failures by proclaiming that everything was good enough.

But God said that no peace existed despite the declarations of Israel's leaders. Their problems underwent only a slight repair.

Scripture records in other instances where God warned the leaders of Israel of their similar failures to address the true problems of His people.

- Jeremiah 23: God likened the false prophets and priests to shepherds who scatter and destroy their sheep.
- Ezekiel 34: God described them as shepherds who fed and cared for themselves but left the diseased and broken sheep without care.

The false prophets of Jeremiah's day declared peace when none existed.

False prophets defied God's ways.

When God chastised these false leaders, who had forsaken God's ways for their sinful acts, they responded with defiance. They experienced no shame for their sins. In fact, when their behavior failed to bring satisfactory results, they felt no disappointment or perplexity for their failures nor did any sense of humiliation lead them to repentance. They did not even blush. (Jeremiah 6.15)

False prophets denied God's ways.

The errant prophets and priests of Jeremiah's day showed their true colors by a denial of God's ways. In Jeremiah 6.16-17, God instructed them through Jeremiah to return to the old ways and walk in them, but they rejected His demands.

In addition, they refused to heed the warnings of the watchmen He sent to warn them. They refused to walk in God's way.

Why Did God Include This Story To The People Of Judah?

God sent Jeremiah to prophesy to Judah of their wickedness and danger of judgment. God had warned His chosen people that if they deserted His commands, He would punish them through their enemies who would enslave them. God said He would become their enemy, remove them from their land, and scatter them among the nations. (Leviticus 26.14-39)

But God also promised them that if they repented of their sins, He would remember His covenant with them in their favor. (Leviticus 26.40-45)

Through Jeremiah, God reminded them of His promise of judgment and His determination to judge them for their wickedness. (Jeremiah 6.18)

Correlation

Similarities abound between the times of Jeremiah and our present circumstances. False prophets within Christianity flourish, too. False prophets thrive with their deceitful messages. They permeate all levels of Christian communities:

- pastors;
- denominational leaders;
- authors;
- seminaries and “Christian” colleges and training schools;
- TV personalities; even
- Sunday School teachers.

They disseminate unbiblical theories that conform to the culture about us, not the Bible. They reject the authority and truths of the Bible, proclaiming false doctrines instead. Biblical truth is not popular. One preacher told me to avoid the Bible's negatives...preach a “positive” message.

These deceitful merchants of heresies “pastor” the largest churches, produce the most popular TV programs, and sell the most books.

Sadly, the subtle yet significant spiritual decline of Christian congregations, perhaps even a description of your spiritual life, develops under the evil influences of these false prophets.

False prophets declare a false message.

False prophets abound today with their deceitful messages. They void previously sacred, Biblical doctrines:

- doctrines of salvation;
- the sinfulness of humanity;
- the authority of the Scriptures; and
- the nature of God.

These represent only a short list of the doctrines they avoid in order to please people. Their disregard for truth has made their preaching a sham.

In similar fashion to Jeremiah’s day, pastors and Church leaders today defend their erroneous beliefs for financial gain. They gain authority by the influence of human effort. Like Jeremiah’s day, the Church seems to approve and applaud them.

Scores of people find satisfaction and security in these fallacies. Countless Church members cannot discern the difference between the true and the false.

Many who call themselves followers of Christ do not want to hear the truth. They would rather hear stories and problem-solving techniques than messages on sin and the great doctrinal truths of Scripture. They have an aversion to sermons on the Lord Jesus, the holiness of God, and His demands upon them.

To satisfy their desires they look for teachers who will make them feel good. These erroneous endorsements further encourage the deceptive prophets to continue their sinful ways. (2 Timothy 4.3-4)

False prophets deride God's word.

In our day, we reflect the same attitude as Jeremiah's day, but in a different fashion. We have replaced reliance upon God's word with cheap imitations to instruct and guide us in our lives:

- books;
- retreats; and
- seminars.

Without exception, when people consult me with problems in their lives, they ask me to recommend a good book that will help them. I do not reject books. I read them, but with caution. Persuasive false prophets urge us to buy their publications and attend their meetings, with glowing promises that offer solutions to all of life's problems.

A friend of mine shared this experience with me. As a young man, new to the realities of life in Christ, he went to the one whom God had used to introduce him to these truths and asked him for a good book to read.

After some deliberation, the man's teacher wisely replied, "I recommend a book that usually comes in a black leather cover entitled, 'The Holy Bible.'"

The mere writings of man cannot replace the Bible, God's self-revelation and His word to humanity. He provided all that we need for life and godliness in its pages. Further, His words are alive. The writings of Godly men and women can help us, but nothing can replace God's word.

God has not promised to authenticate man's writings, but He has given the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds to understand His word and its role in our lives.

As disciples of Christ, we must return to God's word and let the Holy Spirit instruct and edify us that we may grow in Christ.

False prophets desire possessions.

As in Jeremiah's day, this characteristic helps identify false prophets today. No doubt, you observe distinctive and well-known preachers on television and hear them on the radio. Have you noticed how many of them, almost without exception, urge you to prove your devotion to God by sending money to them?

It is interesting that they insist on money; no other demonstration of devotion to God will suffice, e.g., service or volunteer work. Further, these teachers entreat people to give money to *them*, not your local congregation, as proof of your devotion to God.

Then, they "prove" God's goodness to them with their lavish lifestyles, bought and paid for with your "gifts to God." Such practices have become common in the Church today.

False prophets disregard their duties.

A legitimate spiritual leader, or prophet of God, demonstrates to God's people how to cleanse their hearts, eradicate sin, and set straight their errors in order for the Church to be healthy and strong.

The spiritual ills of God's people require attention. No simple message or notice suffices. More often than not, pastors in our day view their "calling" or "ministry" only to preach, mostly one sermon a week. They relegate to others the attention that the hurting lambs in their congregation require, shirking their duties as pastors.

I remember the long hours that my father and father-in-law spent in their responsibilities. Both of them ministered to large congregations. But both of them:

- preached 3 times a week plus the study time necessary for preparation;
- taught a Sunday School Class;
- organized an evening calling night, working with members of their congregations on home visits to visitors and the unfaithful attenders;
- called on potential new visitors;
- visited the ill in the hospital; and

- counseled troubled members.

I know of one pastor presently who fulfills all of these responsibilities. One!

As inexcusable as this sounds, it describes how the false prophets in Jeremiah's era treated the spiritual ills of Israel.

They made no attempt to apply God's word to the people, which would bring healing to the spiritually suffering. Instead, they pronounced false messages to them.

This same, sad example repeats in our day.

False prophets declare a false peace.

Today, many pastors and teachers follow the same pattern. They proclaim the same message: "Peace, peace. Everything is successful. There are no problems here."

By avoiding the emphasis upon sound doctrine, God's people have become spiritually sick and malformed. Seldom do you hear a pastor, or preacher over television or radio point out sin and call for repentance and reformation of life in conformity to God's demands.

They heal the wounds of God's people only slightly, providing false help and hope. As in Jeremiah's day, this deceit fails to minister to the real hurts of God's people.

False prophets defy God's ways.

As in Jeremiah's day, this same characteristic helps to identify corrupt leadership today. They indulge their appetites for money and possessions as if they deserve them. They defend their practices by misusing Scripture.

When their sin finds them out, they make mournful excuses for their behavior and strike repentant poses while continuing their lifestyles. They reveal a disinterest in correction and repentance.

Many defend themselves with the mantra, "The ends justify the means," as if stated spiritual aims can justify evil practices. They can't and don't.

False prophets deny God's ways.

In our day, pastors, and popular television and radio teachers prefer the world's methods to God's ways. In their quest for crowds, they adopt worldly schemes that contradict God's word.

They teach that "our new times" demand conformity to the mores of our culture in order to reach the current populace. They reject the old ways of God and replace them with tactics from business and politics. Calls for reform from Godly leaders who preach a return to Biblical teaching go unheeded.

Some say, "That example from Jeremiah is Old Testament. That doesn't have anything to do with us." To a certain extent that is true. We are studying Old Testament Scripture where God dealt specifically with the sins of Israel and of Judah at the time.

He pointed out how the priests, prophets, and kings:

- failed to seek God;
- led the people astray; and
- set up idols to worship.

But God has not changed. He observes the same failures present today. The abundance of false prophets today and the masses who follow them describe the woeful spiritual condition of God's people.

We take God's mercy and longsuffering as approval, to our loss. God does not approve of our wickedness any more than He did in Jeremiah's day.

Implications

God will judge false prophets.

Although this prophecy pertains specifically to a time in the history of Israel, it gives us a glimpse into the heart and mind of God. He will judge the false prophets and Church leaders of our day just as He did then.

- He will not long endure the foolishness that is going on presently in the Church.
- He is not smiling and patting the heads of the pastors and teachers of our day who abuse the sheep.
- He is the same today as He was back then.

God will hold accountable the false teachers, pastors, and spiritual leaders of our day for their sins. They have led people astray and refused to repent of their sinful behavior. They have not healed the hurts of God's people, and He will judge them.

God will replace them.

As this story from Jeremiah unfolded, it describes the present condition of the Church of Jesus Christ, too. The Church today desperately needs spiritual revival.

A few years ago, I talked with a pastor of a large church who spoke casually about revival. He said, "I have read a couple of books on revival, isn't it interesting?" Then he asked me "Why do you think we do not see revival?"

I responded, "The pastors of our day do not want to make the sacrifices necessary for revival to come."

He turned his head a little bit and moved the discussion to another topic. It takes sacrifice to stand up for the truth.

The day will come when God will remove the false prophets from the Church. He will raise up shepherds who will feed the sheep and not themselves, who will fully heal the hurts of people. They will take care of believers and seek after the lost, too.

I yearn for the day when He will install true shepherds in their places. It will mark a day of revival.

Questions For Reflection And Application

01. What dangers arise from believing false prophets in the political or sports arenas?
02. What dangers arise from believing false prophets in the spiritual realm?
03. Why do false prophets fool professing believers so easily?
04. Review these signs of a false prophet, examining them against a current spiritual leader.
 - a) Does (s)he declare a false message? Can you find Biblical support for what (s)he says?
 - b) Does (s)he minimize the value of reading and studying the Word of God?
 - c) Does (s)he desire money and want to appear prosperous?
 - d) Does (s)he fail to fulfill expected duties of a spiritual leader?
 - e) Does (s)he seem to pretend that "everything is all right" when it clearly is not?
 - f) Does (s)he tolerate sin? Does (s)he skip God's demand for repentance?
 - g) Does (s)he practice worldly methods to accomplish God's purposes?

Dear Heavenly Father, we face a crisis in the Church today. Its believers follow in the footsteps of the false prophets of Jeremiah's day. I pray for mercy. I ask You to dethrone the false leaders and raise up those who seek after You and Your ways. I make these requests in the name of Your Son, Jesus.

Amen.