

E books: True or false prophets? Part 1

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A pastor came to me recently with this story. His African Church was having its Sunday worship, when a member stood up and said “Someone is going to die this week in this assembly.” Everyone was frightened, and the whole week was very disturbed and uneasy. No one died. But the Pastor was in a terrible state of confusion. His people were all upset, yet the word had not come to pass. He asked me what to do. My first remark was one which I must have repeated about a million times in the last ten years:- “You should have tested the word before you received it.” Then I spent some time helping him understand how prophetic words should be tested. He went back and taught this to his people. I heard from him afterwards that everyone was very happy with the testing process, and any prophetic words given in that Assembly were now being tested.

But at the same time, I think he should have considered the possibility that this was false prophecy - however well intentioned. Not all prophetic words are from God. The Bible tells us: “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4 v 1). I have written extensively on testing and receiving, and I teach this everywhere I go. But God’s people need to know more than just how to test and receive prophecy. We need to know the marks of false prophecy. Jesus warned us that false prophets would come, to deceive us if they can.

How can we resist their deception if we do not know how they operate, and what are the marks of their falseness? Satan will try to imitate all the good things of God, and he can be a lying spirit in the mouth of anyone. We must be careful, and equipped to discern and silence the false prophet, while at the same time remaining open to receiving and responding to the true prophet.

So how do we recognise false prophecy. What are its distinguishing marks, and how should we deal with it? I have based this book on Ezekiel chapter 13, which gives a good insight into the marks of false prophecy.

The marks of false prophecy.

1. “Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit.”

A true prophet speaks from an obedient and humble heart. He has built his life on these words “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up the cross and follow me.” As he embraces these words more and more, his message flows in humility and power. He gains nothing from his message, except the assurance that he is being obedient to the God who sent him. False prophets prophesy from their own selfish hearts, saying and sharing what they feel to be right. Their ministry is built on their own needs -

for power, for position, for support and love, for feeling a vital part of God's work. The message they bring often sounds good and encouraging, but it lacks the one essential ingredient - it does not flow from the heart of God. The false prophet is, as Ezekiel says "following his own spirit." But how can we tell when a prophet is prophesying from his own spirit? It's not so difficult as it may appear at first. There is a testing process, which relies on God's people, and especially God's leaders being willing to make the necessary effort. Here is a simple outline of the testing process.

1. Test the man.

A prophet must be known by his own fellowship and his own Pastor. The quality of his life, his willingness to worship, to serve and to order his life by the Bible will be known to his Pastor. If the prophetic voice comes to your fellowship through a regular member, you will know his heart. If the prophetic voice comes from a member of another fellowship, the Pastor of that fellowship will know the man. Test the man - for from the quality of his life and obedience his message will flow. Remember a prophet is not speaking in a trance, but the message which comes from God is clothed in the personality of the man. We can all be misled, but the prophet's fellowship will have many opportunities to recognise the quality of the man who speaks. Test the man. Test the man. Test the man! I should write this a hundred times. In testing the man, much that is false will be removed from us. In fact, if every prophet or prophetic voice knew that his life was going to be examined as part of the measure of his word, false prophets wouldn't dare to stand up in our assemblies. Test the man Pastors. Test the man, for by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 7:16)

2. Listen and test his word.

The testing process is critical to discerning and rejecting false prophecy. When a word is delivered, it should be recorded, and then key questions be asked about it, before any response is made. We do not have to respond at once to a prophetic word. Indeed, if God expects us to test the spirits, how can we respond at once? It takes time and prayer to discern the spirits. The message must be tested against the Bible, and prayed about for quite a few weeks. This process will begin to reveal the true origin of the message. A simple set of questions like this will guard us against all but the most deceitful false prophecy:-

Is this word biblically correct?

Does it encourage, direct, rebuke, build up?

Does it ring true in my heart? (The same Holy Spirit brings conviction to the hearers as brought the word in the first place.)

Does the word suggest a clear course of action?

Is there something which needs investigating?

Is there somewhere to go, or someone to see?

Do we need a new area of teaching?

Is there a new area of service?

In the end, we are trying to discern what God might be saying to us, and asking ourselves, by using the Bible, prayer and the Holy Spirit “Would the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ say these things to us, and if he would, what would he expect us to do?”

3. The voice of prophecy is the spirit of Jesus.

By careful and thorough testing, and by time spent in the presence of God, the spirit of Jesus will begin to emerge through the true prophetic word. If He is not in the word, then the spirit of falsehood will begin to make itself clear in our hearts and minds. In my experience, if we take time to test and weigh, and are not rushed into a decision - which many are - this falsehood is easily revealed. Nothing is gained by a hasty and unconsidered response. This opens the door for the possibility of false prophecy

2. “You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall, to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord.”

A true prophet loves the Church almost more than anything else. Of him it might be said as it was of Jesus that “Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her, to make her holy..” (Eph 5:25) Everything a prophet does and says is focused on trying to help the Church be a pure bride, a holy people, a royal priesthood, a people worthy of God. Even when a prophet speaks a hard message, it is out of a heart of love, longing that the bride may be more worthy of the husband. This is a very powerful motivation in the heart of the prophet, and shows itself very clearly in what he says and how he says it. It also effects the way in which he relates to the Church, and to it’s leadership.

False prophets do not love the Church. They may pretend to, but they cannot hide their basic nature. Their lack of love and concern will show itself in a number of ways:-

1. An unwillingness to be committed to one local fellowship.

Those who are not true in their prophesying will move from place to place, and will be unable to offer a recommendation from their own local fellowship. It is in our commitment to our own local Church, with all it’s good and bad points, that our true nature can be seen. False prophets don’t want this, so they float around from Church to Church.

2. An unwillingness to be involved with the everyday life of the church.

Those who do not have the servant heart - so essential to prophesy - are often unwilling to do the menial tasks, because they have no glamour, and give no position. It is in our willingness to do these ordinary jobs that our true servant hearts are revealed. False prophets do not want their true selves revealed. They are often looking for status and position. Sweeping the floor, or visiting a sick person does not attract any status. So they

are often unwilling to do these things. Strangely enough, God often speaks to prophets when they are doing the ordinary things which make up the life of the Church.

3. Speaking words which are sweet and easy to receive, but which have no substance to them.

A prophecy which contains only things we want to hear is often to be suspected. Prophecy has to have a “bite” in it, to make it effective. Yet these comforting prophecies bring credit and thanks to those who give them. False prophets are looking for the praise of men, not the commendation of God. So they deliver an unending stream of “God is pleased with you” and “God is going to bless you” words. We need these words of course, but I have noticed that true prophecy tends to contain more hard things than easy ones. God knows our human natures do not respond to constant nice things. We need the discipline to be truly God’s people.

4. Speaking harsh, condemnatory and judgmental words to the Church, which lack any sign of encouragement, blessing or hope.

However hard a word God brings, there must always be a love in the prophet’s heart. He is a member of the very body he is judging, and so he should feel compassion for the people. However harsh a word may be, there is always some sign of hope. God only judges to bless. If there is no hope in the prophetic word of returning and blessing if we repent, we must consider the word suspect. False prophets often thunder out these judgmental words to show their supposed power. Men stand in awe of these thunderbolts and the men who deliver them. But men would do better to test the men who bring them, and much more to consider the content of what they say. When are we, as the people of God, going to stop admiring the messenger, and start listening to the message?

5 A true prophet is unpopular.

The true prophet is fearless in what he says. He does not make the message more appealing, or less appealing. He tries to speak as he has been spoken to. His word comes after much prayer and personal struggle. It comes from a humble but brave heart, regardless of the consequences. This often makes him unpopular, and in a strange way, this strengthens our conviction in his genuineness. He is clearly not seeking the approval of men - if he wanted that he would not speak as he does. The true prophet remembers the word of Jesus - “Beware when all men speak well of you, for that is how your fathers treated the false prophets.”

3. “Their visions are false and their divinations a lie.”

If a prophet does not love the Church, then he soon loses the focus of his spirituality. For a lack of love for the Church reflects a lack of love for Jesus. It's only a short journey from this dangerous position to straying into occult practices. Ezekiel warns "their visions are false and their divinations a lie."

Visions come both as dreams, and as actual visionary experiences. I had this dream - I was on a boat, approaching a large city. The guide on the boat announced "This is Hong Kong." Then I woke up. I was convinced that God either wanted me to go to Hong Kong, or He wanted to speak to me about Hong Kong. I had this vision - I was praying for Africa. Suddenly, I saw in a vision a dove, and I heard the words "This dove is looking for a place to settle." I knew that God was planning to speak more to me on this subject. But this vision prepared my heart to receive more. I have a very simple way of dealing with all these more unusual methods of prophetic communication.

1. I leave them at the throne of God, and do my best to push them away from me. If, after a period, the dream or vision still forces its way into my mind then I begin to believe that God was trying to speak to me.

2. I pray. Many prophetic voices lack the discipline of prayer. "But Jim" they say "God has spoken, and I must speak." No - that is bad discipline. If God speaks to me, my first reaction must be to pray, and wait on God for confirmation and clarification. If I speak before I pray, I will only be a clanging cymbal (1 Cor 13: 1) Much that is false has its origin in this lack of prayer. If the enemy knows that we will speak before we pray, he will try all he can to put a false spirit into our mouths.

3. Test it against the Bible. Dreams and visions are no different to any other form of prophetic communication - they need testing. They need to be examined against the Bible, and always the question in our minds must be "Does the God of the Bible agree with the things I have seen or heard in vision or dream?" Sometimes people put this question the wrong way round - "How can the God of the Bible be made to agree with my dream or vision?" This will not do.

I value dreams and visions, but much more, I value the prophetic word which comes to me through the Bible, and which can be tested against the Bible. One of the dangers of dreams and visions is that, because they have a "super natural" feel to them, people value them too highly, do not test them thoroughly enough, or are easily led astray by them into the occult. That's why testing is so vital in this area of experience. When I hear a prophet, or someone with a prophetic gift say "I have a dream" and repeat it many times, without giving me good clear biblical prophecy, I begin to get alarmed.

False prophets are often very unwilling to have their visions questioned. This arrogance is a warning sign to us. For the prophet must not forget his humanity and vulnerability to error. I have often found that the prophet who is willing to be tested, and longs for it with all his heart is much less likely to be false in his prophesying.

4. Wait for an opportunity, and share it if necessary. Not all dreams and visions have to be shared. Some are for the prophet alone. Nor must the prophet hurry to share dreams and visions. God will make the appropriate moment. Often we are not prepared to wait God's time, but rush out and share. This can do more harm than good. Prophetic ministries have to learn patience.

We must be very very careful with divination, because this has always been the mark of occult practices. It has been used by mediums, occultists and fortune tellers to mislead and trap the people of God. I know that in the Old Testament, the Urim and Thummim touch on the area of divination, but in the new covenant, we have left this form of God's leading behind us. I think that this is for the best, because it's so hard to test divination, and to disentangle it from the occult.

4. "They say "Peace" when there is no peace"

A prophetic ministry is a hard ministry. The prophet is consumed with the holiness of God, and when he sees that the people of God are falling short of that which God wants for them, he cannot hold back, and usually what he says is not complimentary. Saying hard things is very hard for the prophet - he has a sensitive spirit, and he loves the Church above all things. So saying hard things is never easy. But I must say that from my experience, it is usually the normal experience.

False prophets always tell us what we want to hear. Their words are always comfortable, encouraging and friendly. The reason for this is simple - false prophets want to be thought of as nice people. This way they get the adulation and respect which they so desperately desire. Hard words disturb, and cause rejection. They never want this. Jesus makes it clear what he thinks about this attitude "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for this is how your fathers treated the false prophets." (Luke 6:26)

Beware of the man who speaks nothing but nice things. But also beware of the man who says nothing but judgmental and hard things. This also is as false as the man who speaks only good things. By studying the ministry of the prophets of the Bible it soon becomes apparent that as a general rule, every prophecy begins with some sort of encouragement, and ends with a blessing, or an indication that if we change our ways, God will bless us. Prophecy which is all damning or all praising is outside of the norm.

How can we guard against this lie? We must learn to listen with our hearts and our minds at the same time. For the man of God who is familiar with the Bible, this is not a difficult thing to do. When someone starts prophesying, we must let our heart speak to us - for the word is coming from the heart of God. But we must also test and check each word of the prophecy against what we know of the Bible.

5. "Flimsy wall"

The true prophetic word warns of danger ahead, and helps the people of God avoid it. The true prophetic word strengthens the people of God for all that is to come. The true prophetic word cleanses the people of God, so that the Spirit of God can work more fully in them. The false prophets are the complete opposite to this. They fail to point out weaknesses, imperfections and lack of righteousness, and as a consequence they weaken and spoil the people of God. This is not always apparent at first. But when trouble comes, those who have depended on false prophecy will be revealed - and they will be washed away. What good is it then to say "If only we had known..!"

As I have said many times already, the true prophet is an uncomfortable person to have around. Awkward and inconvenient, his message often disturbs the flow of God's people - but we need this so much. We easily settle down to comfort and ease. We like those who don't point out our "flimsy walls" and who don't disturb us. But these prophets deceive us, weaken us, and make us much more vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. Beware of the prophecy that comes and always makes us feel comfortable. It is a lie - and we know it - which will destroy us.

6. "Magic Charms.."

Perhaps when you began to study this material, you expected me to go straight to a discussion of occult practices. But Satan has a better strategy to destroy the Church - all that I have mentioned above. To infiltrate false prophets into the Church, and to blind the people of God to what these people are doing is his great triumph. Not only does he mislead the Church, he also destroys the value of true prophecy. True prophecy is hard, tough and challenging. If Satan can lead people away from this by the comforting whisper of the false prophets, he has achieved a double triumph. For he fears true prophecy - he knows that he cannot hide from the penetrating light of that ministry. So we have first to look to the things already mentioned, before we turn to look at specific occult practices, but now we must turn to overt occult practice. What are we looking for when we examine prophecy and the occult?

1. Strange behaviour.

Prophets have a long record of unusual behaviour. Ezekiel himself used many unusual tactics to get his message across. But we have to be aware that when prophecy is accompanied by strange rituals, we could be heading in an occult direction. The occult is full of strange rituals.

2. Strange voices.

Prophecy comes through our natural personalities. Prophets may shout, or adopt an unusual tone when speaking, especially if they are excited by their message. But always we should be able to recognise the person we know in that voice. Anything else could be the manifestation of a demonic spirit.

3. Unusual manifestations

Prophecy can be accompanied by unusual events and happenings - this is clear from the biblical prophets. But there is a big difference between this and the physical or spiritual manifestation of an evil force or presence. This we cannot allow. The Bible is quite clear on this - the prophet Samuel making the clearest statement in 1 Samuel 28.

4. The use of “equipment”

Prophets do use items - a staff for example - to help emphasize their message. But mostly they stand and speak. Any other equipment has to be viewed with great caution. The occult use equipment - amulets, charms, potions, writings, stones - to practice their arts. We must be sure that none of this is coming into our worship. It never will? At Ephesus, (Acts 19) the believers had to burn their occult books and artefacts. Please note carefully that it was the believers who had to do this. It's so easy for these things to creep into our assemblies in pockets and purses.

5. The presence in the home of any occult equipment

Even if the things are not in our fellowships, they can often be found in our homes. There must be no trace of occult equipment in our fellowships or our homes. I suspect that many fellowships could do with an Ephesian repentance and burning.

6. The presence in the prophetic life of past occult involvement.

It's vital for those who exercise prophetic ministry to cut off any involvement with the occult in the past. Otherwise there is always the possibility that something unwelcome could come into the ministry. This is why it is vital that Pastors know those who minister prophetically, and keep a careful spiritual watch over them.

7. Trances

The prophetic word comes through the personality of the prophet. There is no trance state involved. It's always tempting to prophets who work in cultures where there is a great amount of occult involvement to succumb to trances - after all its easy to think, in such an environment, that this will gain attention and add power to the word. Nothing could be more wrong. There is no room for trance states in prophecy. In fact, the more normal and the more ordinary the better for the prophet and for the hearers. The defence against all these is simple:-

Know the man, his fellowship and his Pastor.

Test his ministry against the Bible

Check his word against the Bible

I know you have already read these things in this material - but there is no other way to protect ourselves than to test and check over and over again. It's always possible to be misled by a false prophet, but if we test and check, the likelihood of this happening is very much smaller than if we accept everything.

I want to finish this section with some verses from 2 Peter 2 verse 17: “These men (the false prophets) are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom while they themselves are slaves of depravity - for a man is slave to whatever has mastered him.”

Sobering words for any leader who has the responsibility of testing and checking prophecy. We cannot afford to make mistakes in this area.

Signs of true prophecy

Measuring the false is a negative and difficult experience. It demands a lot of prayer and study, and a lot of insight and courage. Additional help comes to us by knowing the signs of true prophecy. Here are some of those signs, and I would suggest that you write these on a card and keep them with you, or learn them. They will always come to the aid of any Pastor, faced with a difficult decision in an excited assembly of God’s people:-

1. True prophecy puts Jesus first. (Rev 19:10)
2. The true prophet loves the body of Christ. (Eph 5:25)
3. A true prophet has, or is trying to live a pure life.
(Ps 24: v 3-4)
4. A true prophet loves and uses the Bible for his ministry.
(Ps 119: 105)
5. A true prophet respects the leadership.(1 Thess 5:12)
6. A true prophet has a humble heart. (Phil 2: 5-11)
7. A true prophet wants the testing of the Church.
(1 Thess 5:21)
8. A true prophet is willing to serve. (Mark 10: 45)
9. A true prophet wants to belong to the body. (Heb 10:25)

Praise God for these true signs. This is what we are looking for in the prophetic word, and by the grace of God we are seeing them more and more. Let us concentrate on letting the Spirit of God develop this good and wholesome ministry among us, to his glory.

How to treat those we think are false.

One thing I have noticed over the years is that the Church is not very good at dealing with those it thinks are in error. The usual response is to apply strict discipline, or put them out of the Church. While sometimes this may be necessary, on very many more occasions a more thoughtful and considered response will bring a much better result.

Be sure of your heart

The leadership who deal with the matters must be sure of their own hearts. It's easy to pick on some error, and use it to hurt or destroy someone who you personally dislike.

It's easy for leaderships to use some error to display their own power or position, or to strengthen that power or position in the Church

It's easy for leaderships to use error as an excuse to throw someone out of the Church, and so deal with a situation which is hard to handle. When the one in error has gone, the problem, so leaderships think, has gone as well.

So I encourage all those in leadership positions to examine their own hearts before God, and to walk humbly in these difficult areas.

Public or private?

Sometimes it may be necessary to challenge a false prophecy in the open assembly, and I encourage Pastors to have the courage to this when necessary. A simple statement like "I order you to stop speaking. Please be seated." should be quite enough. But the public platform is not the place to deal with the issue. I strongly advise the Pastor to seek out the person who he thinks is in error, and discuss the matter privately, and in love. This is the right first step. May be the situation can be resolved at this point, and this maintains the harmony of the body.

If it has to go further, discussions with the leaderships will have to be held. Ultimately, the ones in error, if they will not submit to the leadership, will have to leave the assembly. But I underline that this is the last resort. Sometimes it may happen. But let us not be quick to be putting each other out of the fellowships. There is an alternative - the person concerned leaves their present fellowship, and joins another for a while. This has to be carried through with the agreement of both Pastors. But it can sometimes give situations a chance to cool down.