

While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

(Matthew 9: 32-34)

False Prophet, Everyone?

In looking up more information about a preacher I recently saw on a TV program, I made the mistake of searching on the Internet. In the act of doing this, I discovered to my amazement that there are a lot of false prophets out there. You may have heard of some of them in your life: Martin Luther, John Wesley, Charles Stanley, Billy Graham...

Surprised? You can name just about any man of God who has acquired even the least amount of notoriety in the last 50 years or so, and you'll likely find some web site or other saying that person is a false prophet or false teacher for one reason or another.

Don't get me wrong – false prophets and teaching need to be researched and exposed for what they are in order to build up the Body of Christ to where God wants it to be. The Word even tells us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1) But to do that, we need to first determine what makes a false prophet or teacher. A criterion everyone can agree on is necessary, lest we simply engage in more of the finger-pointing and sniping that has hindered the spread of the Gospel since the Protestant Reformation.

Simply put, a false prophet (as defined by Deuteronomy 18:20) is one who either claims to speak in the name of the Lord something the Lord *did not* tell that person to say, or speaks in the name of other, false gods. How can you tell? Deuteronomy 18:21 gives us a very simple test:

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

A false teacher brings instruction that contradicts the Word; sometimes directly, but most often not. This is more difficult, as discernment is necessary in order to know the difference. The best way for a believer to know what is true and what is not is to be as familiar with the Scriptures as possible, so that when error comes along, the "red flag" will go up in the person's spirit. You've heard how tellers and other people who handle large amounts of cash in banks are trained to spot a counterfeit bill – by having them first handle only genuine currency for a long period of time. By growing familiar and accustomed to the real thing, a fake is easier to spot.

It is important to make this distinction because often, people will place a "false prophet" tag on people for odd reasons. For example, some web sites call Billy Graham a false prophet simply because he is well respected not only in the church, but also by the nation for the work he has done. The rationale behind such a conclusion is an interpretation of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount declaring a person blessed when people are hated, reviled and evil things are said because he or she is a believer, as the prophets were treated the same way (and warned when people say good things,

because people treated false prophets that way). In other words, if you're not being treated as badly as Jeremiah was, then you must be doing something wrong.

We must remember that Billy Graham was born in an America quite different from the one we inhabit today; one where faith in Jesus was respected and viewed – as the Founding Fathers did – as the essential quality for holding the nation together. Rev. Graham took careful steps in his ministry to avoid the appearances of wrongdoing that plagued so many before (and after); scrupulously honest with ministry funds, no male staff member being alone with a woman other than his wife under any circumstances, and working with churches before and after a crusade to assure them they were not trying to steal their members. I believe God respected Rev. Graham for taking such steps, and blessed his ministry greatly. Was he perfect? Did he never make mistakes? Certainly not, as I'm sure he himself would tell you if asked about it. And, yes, Jesus said believers would suffer persecution for His name's sake. But do mistakes – owned up to as soon as you learn about them – automatically negate all the work for the Lord a man does before? Does respect for a lifetime of “walking the walk,” as it were, necessarily make a man a *false prophet*? (After all, even Jeremiah had people who respected the office of prophet he held, and tried to help him.)

Another example is given with a prediction Martin Luther is supposed to have given a prediction that Jesus would return 300 years after his time. Since the great reformer died in 1546, obviously that prediction fell flat. But we have to ask, did Luther *intend* to pronounce, *Thus saith the Lord* or was he just stating his opinion? There is a huge difference between the two; in these pieces I write, I try to be very careful in making such a distinction because I do not wish to misrepresent my Lord. I think you'll find most Bible scholars today are the same way. Even those who study the End Times from the Jewish perspective and think they've got a handle on what season of the year Jesus will return still will be careful not to set a date, or will preface their remarks with something like, “the Scriptures point to _____.” (Frankly, I'm more concerned with Luther's deliberate writings in the last years of his life regarding the Jewish people than with any speculation on arrival dates.) You really want to watch using *Thus saith the Lord* unless you're absolutely certain that *Thus saith the Lord*.

Such are situations where knowledge of the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are absolutely necessary. Sometimes, He does not so much bring Jesus' words to our remembrance as He reminds us of some practical matters – like the fact that there's no one out there *editing* or *fact-checking* the Internet. For example, I could create a web page insisting that I'm the rightful heir to the throne of Scotland. I could provide a (partial) genealogy, Photoshop a few pictures and use my imagination to fill in the blanks. Not *everyone* would buy it (I wouldn't expect everyone to), but it's possible I could raise a band of people that did, and cause no end of trouble. I won't, of course, because it's not true... to my knowledge... and also because God has better things for me to do with my time on Earth.

I believe that if we live close enough to God to really want Him and His Kingdom, then God will not leave us in the dark as to the proper handling of His Word. This is one reason why I won't speculate as to the motives of people who create web sites that try to tear down just about every man of God; the other reason is that some of the people the sites focus on are not necessarily men or women of God, and I don't want to pull up the wheat along with the weeds, as it were. My task for now is to make sure what

I put forward is as flawless as I can make it, trusting God to guide and correct me as I go. I think if we as believers take such an attitude, then God will take care of the rest.

Which brings me to a final, related point. Careful as I try to be in this I am, after all, still human and quite imperfect. If you see something in these pieces that contradicts Scripture or where I've missed a big point along the way, please let me know. Use either e-mail or conventional mail; either is fine with me. Just give me the chance (under Matthew 18: 15-17) to see the passage and either let me explain my reasoning or say, *Oops! You're right – I'd better fix that. Good eye!* before such a web site is built for me.

For the Glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ
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