

How to Identify a True Prophet

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" Dear Mr. Wilson:

My husband was recently transferred to another city and we have been attending various churches, looking for a place that "feels right." We have found a very friendly church, but the minister is called "a prophet." I have discussed this topic with some church members and they suggested that I read 1 Corinthians 12.

This is my first exposure to a church that has apostles and prophets, so I don't know what to think. Could the pastor really be a true prophet? Please help me sort this out.

Sincerely,
Sandy"

Hello Sandy:

You have asked a good question and I am happy to respond. To get started, you may be aware that the title "prophet" is frequently distorted. The Bible defines a prophet as an ordinary person who reveals information from God that is otherwise unknown. (Ezekiel 2 & 3, Jeremiah 29:19) With this simple definition in mind, please consider the following passages:

Jesus warned His followers, **"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. . . . Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.**

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not *prophecy* in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:15, 21-23, italics mine) **"For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time."** (Matthew 24:24,25)

These few verses tell us that false prophets can (a) be gifted and talented people who deceitfully use the name and gospel of Jesus for recognition, power, and/or money, (b) perform great signs and miracles because they are associated with demons, (c) have no affiliation with Christ and His gospel even though they may speak volumes about Jesus and salvation, and (d) will exist until the end of time. (In fact, the last "false prophet" mentioned in the Bible is the devil himself. Revelation 19:20)

Yes, God has true prophets! The Bible indicates that Jesus bestowed spiritual gifts on the early church. (The word "church" as it is used in this study should not be confused with a particular denomination.) Paul wrote, **"It was he [Jesus] who gave some [gifts to ordinary people so that**

they could serve as] **to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,** [so that all of these should work together] **to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."** (Ephesians 4:11-13, insertions mine)

These verses reveal that Jesus equips ordinary people with extraordinary gifts for the benefit of building up His church. Please notice that Paul identifies their order of importance: "**And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and [last] those speaking in different kinds of tongues."** (1 Corinthians 12:28, insertion mine)

The Bible is clear that genuine and false prophets will exist until the end. I believe the first step in identifying a true prophet is found in the book of Ezekiel: "**The word of the Lord came to me [Ezekiel]: Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying.**

Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: [They deceitfully say] **Hear the word of the Lord! [But,] This is what the Sovereign Lord says [to them]: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!**

Your prophets, O Israel, are like [noisy] jackals [roaming aimlessly] among ruins. You [claim to speak on My behalf, but you] have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel [that is, you have not turned My people away from their decadent sins] so that it [My house] will stand firm [in righteousness] in the battle on the day of the Lord.

Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, The Lord declares, when the Lord has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled. Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, The Lord declares, though I have not spoken? " (Ezekiel 13:1-7, insertions and italics mine)

As you can see, Sandy, false prophets are not a recent problem. In fact, it appears that every time God appointed a true prophet for Israel, many false prophets also sprang up! (See 1 Kings 18:19 and Jeremiah 28.) As you might expect, there are several issues involved in the process of identifying a true prophet. Here are five issues which I hope you will prayerfully consider:

1. - God foreknew that His people would have trouble identifying true and false prophets. To reduce this problem, God said to Israel, ". . . **Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.** " (Numbers 12:6)

This text reveals *how* God gives information to a prophet. When a prophet speaks, people do not know whether the prophet is lying (speaking out of his own imagination) or if the prophet has actually received a dream or a vision from God. God told Israel to listen to everyone who claims

to have received a vision from Him because such persons must either be exonerated or destroyed! "

But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death. You may say to yourselves, How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? 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 [or his lies, so put him to death]." (Deuteronomy 18:20-22, insertion mine)

2. - Jesus said that false prophets can perform great signs and miracles, so we know that displays or manifestations of supernatural power do not necessarily mean that God has sent a prophet. In fact, the book of Revelation reveals that a time is coming when the devil himself will call fire down out of the sky to prove that he is God, and this overwhelming miracle will deceive most of the inhabitants of Earth.

"And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. . . ." (Revelation 13:13,14) So, the ability to perform miracles does not prove that a prophet is sent from God.

3. - The Bible also indicates that a prophet cannot validate himself. In other words, no person becomes a prophet because he decides to be a prophet and neither can men appoint a prophet. God Himself decides who will speak for Him and that person may prophesy once during his entire life or he may prophesy many times. (1 Samuel 19)

Paul wrote, **"All these [gifts, including the gift of prophecy] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he [the Spirit] gives them to each one, just as he determines."** (1 Corinthians 12:11, insertions and emphasis mine) Jesus said, **"If I testify about myself [claiming that I am the Messiah], my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth [that I am the Messiah]." (John 5:31-33, insertions mine)**

If a person is "gifted" with visions from God, this gift will become evident over time. Spiritually mature people will test and validate the gift and of course, time will prove whether the prophet spoke for God or out of his own imagination. True prophets are not popular during their lifetime because Almighty God does not trifle with man nor does God send trivial messages through His prophets.

When God sends a message, His words cut like a double-edged sword. God condemns sin and exposes error. So, the message of a true prophet is usually hated, and historically, the life span of a true prophet is short and painful. Jesus acknowledged Israel's customary treatment of the prophets saying, **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."** (Matthew 23:37)

4. - During the early days of the Christian church, the Spirit of prophecy was actively working through the apostles because Jesus used the gifts of the Spirit to separate fact from fiction. The early Christian church became filled with self-appointed prophets (liars) and false teachers with disastrous results. Consider the contrast between these two texts: **"So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there [in Iconium], speaking boldly for the Lord, who *confirmed* the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders."** (Acts 14:3, italics and insertion mine)

On the other hand, the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira soon fell into apostasy because false prophets and teachers had infiltrated them. Jesus said to the church at Pergamum, **"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore!**

Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." (Revelation 2:14-16) Jesus also said to the church at Thyatira, **"Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.**

I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling." (Revelation 2:20, 21) True prophets (a) will promote ideals and doctrines that conform to God's Word, and (b) can do miracles as God deems necessary to affirm *the validity of their testimony*.

5. - Sandy, since this is a brief response to a rather large subject, please pay close attention to these closing remarks. In terms of authority, the Bible is a closed book. When the apostolic age ended, the Bible was completed. God has not given subsequent prophets any information that extends Scripture.

Everything that God wanted said in the Bible has been said in the Bible and the Canon was closed. This means that all prophetic utterances since the apostolic age must be tested by Scripture. The words of prophets today are not authoritative (that is, their words are not to be regarded as an extension to Scripture).

True prophets *always* direct people to the Bible because every true prophet knows that *the Bible is man's sole authority in matters pertaining to God*. Yes, we should consider the claims of people who say that God has told them something, but we have to test their claims by the Bible.

Paul wrote, **"Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."** (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 22) Those claiming to receive dreams or visions from God are not to be revered, quoted as an authority, or worshiped. Instead their words are to be thoroughly challenged by the Word of God and if they bear up after close investigation, the Word of God is to be exalted not the prophet! The lives of prophets should also be examined. Speaking of prophets, Jesus said, **"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."** (Matthew 7:19, 20arti)

In closing, true prophets are ordinary people having an extraordinary (and usually, an unpleasant) job to do. Each time a prophet claims to reveal something from God, that claim has to be verified. If the claim is found to be in harmony with Scripture, then a clearer understanding of Scripture will unfold and the body of Christ will be blessed! Otherwise, I hope you will have nothing to do with the subtle lies of a false prophet! (For further study on this topic, please read my [article on the end-time appearance of 144,000 prophets.](#))

I hope this helps,

Larry Wilson