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Anatomy of a False Prophet

by Art Katz

We need to be jealous for the truth of the prophetic calling, for if the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, then we cannot be careful enough in the consideration of this subject. Do our present-day prophets speak out of their own hearts and spirits? Do they draw from each other, or do they come to us out of the secret place of God? Out of what formative relationships in the Body have these prophets come? Has there been an appropriate nurturing, not only of the gift, but of the character of the men before they were visited on the church? How long and how rightly have they been part of a local fellowship? Have they been sent out by the same in a sending that is more than a ceremonial thing? Do we even know what a true sending is? False prophets validate each other, where the one applauds, affirms and establishes the other, but it is not a fellowship that has validated them. They have not risen up out of the organic work of God itself, like the church in Antioch. Instead they pay tribute to each other and compliment each other, especially those who are flowing in much the same thing. What is the source of their prophetic speaking? Where does the prophet get his word? If it is not out of the council of God, the secret place, then how is it God's word? If men do claim to be commissioned, we have a right to look for evidence that they have indeed stood in that place.

God's Indictment of Israel's Prophets

In Jeremiah chapter 23, God gives us a powerful statement about true and false prophets. Talk about an indictment! It is one thing to have an indictment against Israel, but when you begin to indict the prophets of Israel, when the loftiest and the best and the noblest thing has become the most profane, then that must be a symbol or a statement of the low condition of a nation prior to its judgment.

In verse 9, it is Jeremiah himself speaking about himself in his own prophetic condition:

As for the prophets: My heart is broken within me, all my bones tremble; I have become like a drunken man, even like a man overcome with wine, because of the LORD and because of His holy words.

That is not a light word. That is a word that has churned the prophet up himself.

For the land is full of adulterers; for the land mourns because of the curse. The pastures of the wilderness have dried up. Their course also is evil, and their might is not right (v.10).

The word 'adulterer' does not only mean moral infidelity, where you have a sexual union with someone other than one's spouse, but when you adulterate something, you water it down or you mix it with something other than what it is in itself. You change, therefore, the quality, the character and the integrity of that thing. It probably is a gradual process, little by little, until finally what you have is colored water and it is no longer wine at all.

For both prophet and priest are polluted; even in My house I have found wickedness," declares the LORD (v.11).

There is a conjunction between prophet and priest:

The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! (Jer.5:31a).

It is remarkable how self-serving this reciprocal thing is between heads of movements or fellowships and the false prophets, and how comfortable they are with one another and how they affirm one another. The people are in an unspoken agreement with their ministers: "You present a biblical message. We will pay the bill and have a Sunday service that will leave our lives free from any kind of demand that would really touch our true vested interest and value. We don't want a message that is going to challenge where our heart really is. We want to be able to say, 'Amen' and 'We've been to church'" - and that kind of thing. As the priest, so also the people. As the pastor/preacher, so also the congregation. Into that

situation we have to come prophetically-and likely be stoned!

Therefore their way will be like slippery paths to them, they will be driven away into the gloom and fall in it; for I shall bring calamity upon them, the year of their punishment," declares the LORD (v. 12).

It implies that there is not an immediate judgment, but that there is an appointed time in which God judges those that profane His house-those who originally had authentic and holy callings. That may well be why the Lord is allowing to continue that which is presently being called prophetic and is so popular, but for them, as with the priests and prophets of old, there will be a year of visitation or a time when God calls a halt.

Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an offensive thing: they prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray (v.13).

There is a consequence for false prophecy. It will affect the entire nation and therefore the entire church by the same principle.

Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: the committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; and they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one has turned back from his wickedness. All of them have become to Me like Sodom, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah. (v. 14).

This verse deserves a lot of attention. Their view of the truth, of the word of God and of doctrine is corrupted by their sensual and ungodly living. Here also, the walking in lies and the committing adultery go hand-in-hand. If you are going to commit adultery, then there is a way in which you have to inwardly justify yourself, and you can only do that at the expense of the truth of God. There is also a consequence in that it strengthens also the hands of evildoers. There is nothing about their proclamation that causes repentance and return, but rather a condoning of those who are in a place opposed to God. It is something like judges today who cannot bring sentence upon transgressors. The modern court system is a calamity because of judges who cannot and will not judge. They cannot bring the severity of the law against the lawbreaker, because their own life personally is itself a transgression. You cannot bring the severity of the law to others when you yourself deserve it.

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, 'Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood and make them drink poisonous water, for from the prophets of Jerusalem pollution has gone forth into all the land.' Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you...' (vs. 15-16a).

Notice that God still calls them prophets. It is maybe because the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable. They still retain their official title, but what they are performing under that title is in God's sight an abomination. There is nothing more profane than when the sacred is no longer authentically sacred. When we take the sacred phrase, 'Thus says the Lord' and merely employ it as a device to win the attention of our hearers, then we are desecrating the sacred. We are making the sacred profane and once we have done that, what else can be hoped for? If we are not as a priestly people setting forth the distinction between the profane and the sacred, what can be hoped for in the world? The ramifications of what we are talking about are beyond any full grasp.

They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, 'You will have peace'; and as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart, they say, 'Calamity will not come upon you.' (v.16b-17).

This must be the very quintessence of what a false prophet is, namely, the giving of a false comfort and a false assurance of peace that does not regard the truth of the conditions that need to be faced. It is an unwillingness to bring a hard word. The things that are prophesied are normally flattering and encouraging to the flesh, rather than challenging or threatening. False prophets have historically prophesied peace when there is no peace. 'Calamity will not come upon you' is unhappily the kind of prophetic statement that is coming forth even today, especially in Israel. They are giving a false comfort to those who are not even properly aligned to God. Humanly speaking, we would not see these people as those who despise God. God sees them, however, as despising Him and we need to see it as He sees it. The false prophets are actually bringing a kind of encouragement to those people who are already out of right relationship with God and give them an assurance that their relationship with God is in order.

But who has stood in the council of the LORD, that he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened? (v.18).

Here is the key verse. You almost want to put that verse in a box, as if the Lord is saying, "Of all those who not only

profess to be prophets, but even those who have been called to be prophets, how many are speaking the word that can only be obtained in the council of the Lord?" Is it not remarkable how everything in God, in the last analysis, comes down to the issue of relationship? He will never give anything independent of relationship. When He called Moses up to the Mount to receive the tablets of the law in order that he might teach them, Moses was first to come up and be there. How dare we say, "Thus says the Lord", who have not stood in the council of the Lord and heard His word? I think it is impossible for a flamboyant, gainsaying, gain-seeking minister to even be in that place. To be in the council of the Lord requires a certain humility, a certain brokenness, a certain utter dependency upon God, a certain capacity to wait and a certain separation from self-interest, fame, fortune and recognition. Men attenuated to those things cannot be in the council of the Lord, and yet they are the first ones to so readily say, "Thus says the Lord."

The characteristic of modern day ministries worldwide is the separation of ministry from relationship. We have made ministry a thing in itself. It is not that we do not talk about worship and the Lord, but somehow we are able to perform it out of a virtuoso ability or maybe even out of the gift, but not out of the depth of relationship. Relationship is not only key to the bestowing of the gift or the tablets of the Law, but the ongoing ability to rightly teach them. Once you sever relationship from ministry, you are on exceedingly dangerous ground. The ministry flows out of the life and the life out of the relationships, and if we break that connection and have a ministry independent of that, then it is not going to be a ministry that God recognizes.

But who has stood in the council of the LORD...?

That phrase implies a closeness to God. How is it, then, that these prophets who were speaking prolifically and influencing the nation toward evil were not in this place? Why did they not get the word of the Lord out of His council and out of His presence? That there should even be a moment's hesitation about answering this question is a real statement about us! They were adulterers and walking in lies, and therefore, how can such men be in the council of God? This God is holy and you cannot come into that presence in that condition. You do not even desire to come into that place in that condition! That is why you get your words from others, or out of your own skull, because this requires a sanctification. This requires something about your own condition that permits that kind of relationship, particularly if it is an abiding.

We can even become utilitarian in this thing where we say in our minds, "Well, if that is what the Lord says, I guess I have to find my way into His council and into His presence in order to get the word". That is not the way it works. It is being in the council of God and being in the Presence of God that the word may come, but if you make the word and the attainment of it the condition for entering the presence, then you have already stepped off holy ground. You are coming in the spirit of utility and not in the spirit of devotion to God for His own sake. Moses was told to come up the Mount to God and be there, not for the benefit that was going to accrue to him for coming, even the ministerial benefit, but simply because God is God. He is the Creator and we are the creation. We are simply to be there, and if no word comes, then no word comes. If we come looking for a word in that expedient, utilitarian sense that we have, then it is no longer the holy ground. We are ruled by the spirit of utility much more than we know. It is the spirit of the world which has the underlying premise that one must do this in order to obtain that. We are paying for this if we can get that.

We simply do not know what it means 'to do' or 'to be' for its own sake. If we have never come to that place first with God, then how shall we come to it with men? There is, therefore, a warp in all that we do and say that does not have its true place out of the presence of God, which place cannot be entered in the spirit of utility.

Moses, who wrote the five books of Moses, could say of himself that he was the humblest man on the face of the earth. That is true humility, where we are devoid of any sense of spiritual self-consciousness. We can merely state the fact of something without any effect upon ourselves, because the humility is not a statement to our honor. Humility is not something that man can work up by himself on the earth and develop as a character trait. Humility is what God is in Himself, and the only one who will display and exhibit it, is that one who has been consistently in the presence of God. It is humbling to be there and that is why Moses could state it not as a credit to himself, but to God, out of whose presence that humility was established. God requires still that His prophetic men be in His presence.

I want to say that there is nothing more difficult for anyone than this requirement. Everything contends against it-the dinner bell, the faucet is dripping, the light bulb needs to be changed, the dogs need to be fed-a thousand things continually nipping at you that require attention. Even if that were not so, there is something about the pulse of the flesh itself that is inimical and opposed to seeking the Lord. Seeking the Lord is an extraordinarily difficult thing and few have sufficient incentive. It is a suffering, and in fact, just to be more ruthlessly honest, it is a dying. Living on the earth, in the flesh, in the world and in time, and to confide and to commune with God, is an extraordinary and ultimate attainment. If you attain it, then maintain it, because you do not want to have to do it all over again. Can you maintain it and still go to last night

's birthday party, and dancing, and hooting, and singing, and stomping and not lose it or be jarred from your sensitive spiritual place by what seems to be just a time of fun? We are talking about something very critical. I would not expect in the earth today many men who are in this place. What then shall we say for the whole rash of prophets that have arisen in recent years for there are many men professing to be prophets, but are we hearing the council of God? God's judgment about the failure to obtain His word in that place is severe:

Behold, the storm of the LORD has gone forth in wrath, even a whirling tempest; it will swirl down on the head of the wicked (v. 19).

The word 'wicked' is almost exclusively used for those who should know better. It is those who profess or should have every reason to know God and are yet, by intent, acting wrongly. That is wickedness.

The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart; in the last days you will clearly understand it (v. 20).

Notice that the judgment is deferred. It is not immediate, but it will come later for something now that is an offense to God, namely, the whole compromise of His prophets and the way it has affected the nation.

I did not send these prophets, but they ran; I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, then they would have announced My words to My people, and would have turned them back from their evil way and from the evil of their deeds (vs. 21-22).

We can know when the word is out of the council of God because it has this salutary effect. It will affect the nation or fellowship in turning it toward God, rather than away from Him and from their evil ways and their practices. I can remember a full gospel breakfast where the speaker was from Sweden, a leading evangelical personality, but it could have been anywhere. He was wearing a Gucci shirt and tie and a silk-type suit, and he began by saying, "The Lord has spoken to me this morning and given me a word for you." I leaned forward to catch every syllable that had come from the heart of God. As I heard it, however, there was nothing from God at all, but clichés, evangelical phrases and full gospel hogwash. The men who were hearing that word that morning, and nodding their heads, and "amening", applauding and affirming, need to know that there are consequences when we allow that kind of monumental lie to be expressed and not to be contradicted. It will deaden and dull our sensitivity so that the next time we will be an even greater candidate for deception for anything that comes down the pike.

There needed to be someone in that audience that morning to get up and say, "I am sorry for whatever pain and dislocation I am going to cause, but I cannot allow that phrase and that statement to be made in our hearing without being contested. That was not the word of God and we dare not allow that kind of terminology to be employed merely to sanctify or to give a kind of credibility to what is otherwise just an ordinary statement." How often is that being done and to what extent has our failure to do so had a negative effect on the church today? We have paid much for cheap, casual references to God, as if we could invoke Him at pleasure or say, "God gave", when He did not give.

I attended a conference where the theme was, 'How to invoke the presence of God by our worship.' We were told that if our song liturgy was of a sufficient kind and quality, then we could actually make manifest His presence. I did speak up that time and you can be assured that I have not been invited back since. I touched a holy cow. I said, "You would be doing far better to teach people how to continue in faithfulness with God without the sensing of His presence, which is more likely to be our end-time reality, than to think that we can calculate, engineer, or evoke God's presence at our will." It was a manipulation of God, as if He is going to give Himself to the devices of men.

Generally speaking, when men will invoke the phrase, "Thus says the Lord", it is almost a testimony to the fact that the Lord is not saying. If He is saying, then we do not have to embellish the statement by authorizing it. The statement itself will ring with the truth of God and the sense of God. Is it a rhema, a quickened statement of God of an original kind that we need to hear in the crisis place that we are, or is it just some kind of an embellishment to give a charismatic aura to our proceeding? It will have the effect of cheapening the whole integrity of the prophetic thing and make it a light kind of thing that anyone almost at will can offer. I would much prefer fewer such statements, but when they come you know that God has spoken.

When Israel's prophets said, "Thus says the Lord", then you know that what is following is going to be a judgment that is so horrific that God validates even the words that bear His resonance, because they are words of an ultimate kind of judgment. It must, therefore, be clear from the inception that this is not the prophet speaking out of himself. We have it

passed down to us as written prophecy of a kind that has affected the history of Israel, but in spoken prophecy we need to discern whether it is the Lord speaking by the weight of what is being said in terms of the anointing and the authority, rather than in having it labeled for us.

The same ones who will dismiss God rudely are the same ones who will invoke Him lightly. Prophets are called to come into that whole scenario, and bring the sword of the Lord, and bring the fear of the Lord, and the truth of the Lord to people who have been long spoiled by such cheap things as I am now describing, and as every one of us at one time or another, more than we would like, have experienced. This is why we have anguished and God is calling a halt.

That is why there are false prophets. That is why, if I can say it, the Charismatic and kindred movements themselves are kind of false movements, wanting the effulgence of the Spirit and the excitement and the activity, but evading the cross and the necessity for suffering out of which the Spirit of God is given as solace, comfort and power. We come back again and again to the cross. The false prophet speaks words of comfort when God would not have His people to be comforted, but to be agitated. True prophets can bear the reprisal, the rejection and the mortification of that word coming back into their own teeth. They can bear giving the word and then someone cueing the piano player to drown it out. Prophetic anguish is to bring the word of God and then to have it refused and come right back into your teeth. It is mortifying and the antithesis of the joy and the gratification that comes when the word of God flows out of you, and through, and into the people who are receiving it. That is like tonic for your soul. We have to be as willing for the one as the other, or we will not speak the other. The call to the prophet is the call to the cross. It is a frequent, if not continual form of suffering of an exquisite and ultimate kind. Can we say, "Thus says the Lord" without actually articulating those words or implying those words in your statement, except that your word has come through the cross? It is out of a death. It is not your own word, but His, which can only come from that cross-centered place. That was true for the prophets before the advent of the cross. Elijah preceded the cross, but he knew the death of it when he said, "...there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." Jesus knew the cross before He knew the cross. The cross only exemplified and made visible the thing to which His life was all along submitted.

'Can a man hide himself in hiding places, so I do not see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares the Lord. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!' (vs.24-25).

The heart of the offense in being false before God is that all of this takes place as if He is not seeing and does not understand and is not aware of what is being done. It is an enormous presumption that God takes note of, though we do not. It is a complete absence of the fear of God or the reverence for God as God. They really believe that they are hearing from God and what they are communicating is the council of God. They have reached such a place of deceit, that they have persuaded themselves that when they say, "Thus says the Lord", it is the Lord saying. We can come to that condition by a gradual erosion, a little day-by-day, slight kind of a thing, that when the process is finished, one is not only false, but one thinks that one is still true. There is a daily vigilance required over the issues of the heart in order that deception does not have its ultimate work, where the man deceived thinks that he is in the right and leading many to their doom. That is why God urges us to exhort one another daily while it is still day, because tomorrow is already too late.

...who intend to make My people forget My name by their dreams which they relate to one another...(v.27a).

That is to say, to communicate a sense of God that is not God and allow those listening to think that it is God because they have fastened the name of Jesus to it. False prophetic things and things that are deceitful will affect how people perceive and understand God, especially if they are affirmed in their shallowness, or if a certain lightness and frivolity is communicated. God cannot help but suffer loss. They are prophesying in the name of the Lord, but because it is false, the effect of it is to get people to forget His name, which is to say, to lose the sense of God as God, and the character of God intrinsic to His name.

How do we know that it is God's word and God's council? It is because it is likely to be the word that is expressed in verse 29:

'Is not My word like fire?' declares the LORD; 'and like a hammer which shatters a rock?'

In other words, "My word is not some soulless 'making nice'. My word breaks up the deeps; it demolishes and it burns." That is how you can tell whether it is a false word or a true word. If you want to distinguish between a prophetic word that is God's word and a prophetic word that is assumed by man, conjured out of his own mind and imagination and that is false, then here is the distinction: God's word is like a fire. His word burns and is like a hammer that breaks the rock in

pieces. It is devastating and brings an effect and contains a power that breaks in or burns through. It will never be some innocuous, syrupy thing that confirms us in what we are doing, especially when our lives are slovenly and slack. His word should burn in our heart and reveal the true condition of it and not as we thought it to be.

Every true word requires, and if we do not respond, then it means that we have not really heard. "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts (Heb. 4:7b)." If we have heard, then it should evoke a response in us. Not to respond is to harden. There is no such thing as neutrality. The word of God when it is the word of God has to have consequences for ill or good. We can never ignore it or allow it to pass and nod our heads by saying, "Yes, that was a good and interesting word. I enjoyed that." It requires or we harden, and that is why we find so many people in a hardened condition and then God's last appeals would be a prophetic cry, but it has got to be like a hammer upon a rock that breaks through until the necessary repentance and release.

A prophet has got to speak what is true. Men who are man-pleasers and will not risk the consequences are those who become false prophets. We will be continually searched and tested in this. It is not established for all time and you are the one or the other. There is always a continual tension of standing before men, and if there is anything that yet craves recognition, acceptance and approval, then we will likely find ourselves compromised and yielding to the enormous pressure of 'going along'.

"Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who steal My words from each other. Behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who use their tongues and declare, 'The LORD declares.' Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams," declares the LORD, "and related them, and led My people astray by their falsehoods and their reckless boasting ('and by their lightness'- King James Version); yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit," declares the LORD (vs. 30-32).

One thing that this text reveals is the lightness that is intrinsic to false prophets. There is a certain levity, a certain kind of air of casualness, that seems to prevail in conferences and sessions where men who have not been sent of God have had opportunity to speak as if they had been sent of God. I have observed that very same levity prevailing in the very place where the man who was introduced to the congregation was introduced as the 'oracle of God' and the 'prophet of God for the hour'; and yet not only was his own speaking disappointing, though biblical, there was a levity and a kind of lightness, a kind of a joking spirit, that even when it was over that same spirit prevailed in the audience.

The unhappy thing is that great numbers of Christians in the world have never heard a true prophetic word spoken in the authority of God, and all they have ever heard they assume is normative, and think that this is what the prophetic word is. They have no basis for comparison. To hear such a word once, however, is to be ruined forever for anything less. There is, therefore, a great cry and need for that word and that authority to come into the earth, that the church might be rightly ruined and made candidates for the truth.

False prophets steal God's words from each other and often speak the same kind of word. I have been around now over thirty years as a believer, and I have to say, that what I have seen is a succession of fads, panaceas, gimmicks and things that we latch onto. There is a way in which we can put our finger up: "Which way is the wind blowing? What is current? What is now popular? I know that if I speak on faith, the people will love it; or prayer, or worship, or church growth, or power evangelism." We seem to go through periods where certain themes have found a place of acceptance and then you just move in that, and you pick up what others are saying, and then you say it. You know you are going to find an acceptance because it has been proven.

There is a difference between speaking about, for example, the 'Mystery of Israel' because it is in vogue and because you can learn it as anyone else, as opposed to waiting for the revelation when it is given. The speaking will employ unavoidably very much the same words, and yet for the hearer, the hearing of the one and the hearing of the other is a profoundly different experience. One communicates information while the other communicates revelation and life, and in so doing it becomes an 'event'.

There is a place for simplicity of lifestyle and dependency upon God that has very much to do with integrity and the quality of the word that is issued. There is something about poverty that is more than accidental. I know that religiously we can perform at it and make a cheap kind of thing as Catholicism has done. I would suspect, however, that the men who are saying, "Peace, peace..." and are bringing comforting messages, are somehow not living in that poverty. In fact, the very popularity that comes with speaking messages that are approved and that men want to hear will assure you of response both in admiration, applause and in giving. I am not demeaning the motives of men to say they are choosing a wrong message in order that their lifestyles might be maintained and subscribed, but somewhere in the realm of the labyrinth

hine corridors of the soul, somewhere someone must know that to be accepted, to be popular and to be approved, is also to prosper. To speak a word that is unpleasant and contradictory is somehow to ensure that you are going to cut yourself off from the kinds of things that would have maintained a lifestyle that you would have thought appropriate.

God knows and sees through it all, and there is nothing that He will judge more severely than men who say, "Thus says the Lord", when God has not said. I wish that we could come to a place of real brokenheartedness over this, that somehow our travail over what has already so saturated the Body of Christ through cheap utterances and pseudo-prophecies could somehow be removed from the mind and the memory of God's people in order that they would be made virginal again; and that they would be brought to a place of appreciation, and expectation, and willingness to wait for a true word when it comes. For when it comes, that word alone brings life-changing power. There is a waiting that requires as much a dying in the church as the dying in the man who is sent. As I have said, to fight your way through to the secret council of God, and to be in His presence-not just on the hit-and-miss basis to obtain the word, but as a communing that is consistent, out of which the word will come when God chooses to give it-is so rare, so painful and so difficult, that the flesh shrinks from it. It is easier to hear the word from other men and to imitate and repeat that, knowing that it is already popular and has found approval. We desperately need to hear what is on God's heart now, and the only one who can communicate that is he who is close to His heart. Everything conspires against it, including your own flesh and the things that are legitimate-your family, the light bulbs, the dogs. There is a dying to find your way into the place of the secret council of God, but it is in that place that the word of the Lord will come-and no other.