

The Modern-Day False Prophet

There is a children's book entitled, *I Know Something You Don't Know*, that teaches kids not to judge based on appearances. It features a series of pictures that portray situations not as they truly are. For example, the last picture in the book shows a kindly gray-haired grandpa and a bedraggled hobo. Both wear a smile. Both have a hand behind their back. When the truth is revealed, we see that the elderly man is holding a big club and the hobo has a lovely bouquet of flowers. Moral of the story: appearances can be deceiving. That's why the Bible cautions us that there will be those who disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:15) and there will be false teachers who will secretly bring in false heresies (2 Peter 2:1). Beware of these false prophets, warns Jesus, who come in sheep's clothing but really are ravenous wolves on the inside (Matthew 7:15). Paul also told believers to watch out for those who were presenting a different gospel message (Galatians 1). The New Testament is chock full of this kind of instruction and correction on false teaching—in fact, the books of Galatians, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and Jude were written specifically to address these problems.

What is troubling concerning false prophets, teachers, and teachings is that they most often come from “among you,” meaning that they are *inside* the church. The greatest threat to our Christian faith isn't the false religions of the world; it's false teaching from those *among* the church. The average believer isn't lured away by the tenets of Islam, Hinduism, or Mormonism; she is led astray by distortions of the gospel, sadly, by one who is called our “brother” (Galatians 2:4).

Who are the modern-day false prophets, the ones who include themselves among the ranks of the evangelical, but beckon us to the wider path? They are the ones who come to us in a pretty package of feel-good faith, feisty blogs, and growing celebrity. They inch us *toward* cultural concessions and *away from* the core beliefs of Christianity, casting aside two thousand years of creeds and doctrine in the process. Of course, there are faith practices within evangelicalism where individuals and denominations can agree to disagree—for example, how to baptize, how often to take communion, when we think Jesus is coming back—but these are not core beliefs of the faith. **The modern-day false prophet is the one who distorts the gospel, dismisses the gospel, and denies the authority of the Scriptures.** Let's examine a few of these modern-day false teachings that are, in reality, just recycled heresy with a modern-day dressing.

Distorting the Gospel

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Galatia that no one has the right to preach a different gospel. In fact, he says, let the one who changes it, the one who distorts it, be accursed (Galatians 1). One such distortion is the prosperity gospel, which teaches that God promises material wealth and other forms of abundance if only the believer will believe it and receive it. One promoter of this teaching shockingly says, “As the righteousness of God, your inheritance of wealth and riches is included in the ‘spiritual blessings’ (or spiritual things) the apostle Paul spoke of in Ephesians 1:3. Based on Psalm 112:3, righteousness, wealth and riches go hand in hand. You have every right to possess material wealth—clothes, jewelry, houses, cars and money—in abundance.”¹ Another well-known prosperity pundit states in his best-selling book, “It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt. It's God's will for you to live in health and not in sickness all the days of your life.”² Tens of thousands are flocking to these feel-good churches and millions are buying these books on positive thinking sprinkled with Christian terminology. One problem with the prosperity gospel is that it distorts the gospel by elevating material riches over spiritual riches. It

assigns a shade of blame when a loved one is sick or dying. **Its gospel is about the strength of your faith and what you can get from it, not the redemptive message of Christ's body, broken for you.** The Bible never promises financial prosperity or even perfect health; it instead assures us that in the coming ages he will show us the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:7).

Dismissing the Gospel

The gospel is often dismissed when we, as humans, can't quite get our minds wrapped around its truth. Some like to accommodate this lack of comfort with absolute truth by using labels. For example, *exclusivism* is the biblical teaching of salvation only in Jesus—that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life. *Inclusivism* teaches that knowing about Christ and believing in the gospel is not necessary for salvation. Jesus is still *how* they are saved, but they need not believe in him. And our last *ism*, *universalism*, is the belief that everyone is going to heaven. The questions are understandable that lead to these false teachings because most of us, deep down, want a good and happy ending to our stories. We hope for the best. One popular Christian blogger has expressed her doubts that Jesus is the only way for salvation—she muses, “my most instinctive and visceral sense of right and wrong tells me that a good and loving God would not torture Anne Frank for eternity.”³ This struggle is cloaked in emotion and the limited nature of our human understanding. The argument really isn't about Anne Frank. It's not really about our favorite Uncle John or the tribesman on another continent who might not have heard about Jesus. It's a direct challenge to God. **It's elevating our own sense of truth and reason above his.** Gratefully, we have a high priest, Jesus, who sympathizes with our weaknesses and the frailties of our human understanding (Hebrews 4:15). Amazingly, we have a God who desires that all be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). But the God of the universe—the all powerful, all knowing, supremely loving and perfectly just Creator—will not be wrongly characterized or dismissed at the whims of his created. These re-definitions of salvation reject the indescribable love and sacrifice of Jesus. And the way that most people fall into this type of belief leads us to our last look at another popular false teaching.

Denying the Authority of the Scriptures

It's the most dangerous and perhaps the most prevalent false teaching. It's the one that serves as the foundation and springboard for the others; there are many destructive tenets under its banner. Listen in today's Christian culture for these red flag catch phrases: the Word of God is *evolving*. Revelation is *progressive*. We can't really know what the Bible means. The words of Jesus hold more weight than Paul's. Inspired? Inerrant? Infallible? No way. A pastor/writer who *Time* magazine has named one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America writes, “Scripture faithfully reveals the evolution of our ancestors' best attempts to communicate their successive best understandings of God. As human capacity grows to conceive of a higher and wiser view of God, each new vision is faithfully preserved in Scripture like fossils in layers of sediment.”⁴ **This teacher, and sadly many others within Christian circles today, are standing authoritatively over the Word of God instead of under its authority.** When biblical truth clashes with modern societal norms or when it rubs against our sensibilities of right and wrong, the trend is to denounce the Bible's authority and relevance. But the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It's breathed out by God and it can't be set aside or broken; the word of our God will stand forever.⁵

How Should We Respond?

While we aren't supposed to be heresy hunters, we do need to be discerning. God's Word tells us how we should go about responding to these troubling shifts that are happening within the

church today. First of all, we need to be like the Bereans. The Bereans were a people who Paul encountered on one of his missionary journeys. You can read about them in Acts 17. As they heard different teachings, they “examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (verse 11). They tested what they heard against God’s Word to make sure it matched up. Secondly, we need to heed Paul’s advice to Timothy, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14). This is a call to faithfully preserve and intentionally keep the gospel. And while we are to be diligent to discern, we can rest in our soul, knowing that God is in complete control. He is not surprised or unaware; the Bible gives warnings of such false teaching that is to come within the last days. But we can be assured that the purpose of the Lord will stand (Proverbs 19:21).