

Washington Busts 'False Prophet' in Pay-for-Prayer Scam

Lately, I've been writing about false prophets rising in the church. Some of them peer over the shoulders of victims to catch a glance at the name and address on their offering envelope so they can later prove their prophetic prowess. Others are bringing credit card machines to the altar and won't prophesy until you ante up.

Now, the issue has gone more public.

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson has busted Benjamin Rogovy, a Seattle-based man who used deceptive practices to wring about \$ million out of the desperate hands of 165,000 customers seeking God's divine intervention in their circumstances.

Rogovy's Christian Prayer Center, a for-profit company, created fake religious leaders and posted false testimonials to tempt customers to fork over greenbacks in exchange for anointed prayers, according to the Attorney General. His gimmick broke two laws: one that forbids businesses from making false claims and another that prohibits churches and charities from using misleading or deceptive statements in any charitable solicitation.

"I believe in the power of prayer," says Ferguson. "What I do not believe in and what I will not tolerate is unlawful businesses that prey upon people—taking advantage of their faith or their need for help—in order to make a quick buck."

Amen, brother. I wonder how many other ministries would be shut down if Ferguson investigated a little deeper. Selah.

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Here's how the scam worked: Christian Prayer Center sold intercession for between \$9 to \$35 for each petition via a website that is now shut down. The CPC claimed that "Pastor John Carlson" ran the sites. This false minister sent weekly inspirational emails to consumers, and even went to the trouble to create a phony LinkedIn profile that described himself as "Senior Pastor, Christian Prayer Center, January 2009 – present." CPC also used the name "Pastor Eric Johnston" to sign consumer correspondence. Both people are fake.

CPC also stated, "One of our pastors ... is also happy to assist with any religious ceremonies," giving the false impression CPC had several pastors who regularly consulted on religious matters. Instead, the websites had multiple employees and independent contractors working to deceive people.

That wasn't the end of the deception. The websites used stock photos showing satisfied customers who received miracles, like healing from HIV and cancer, lottery winnings and more. And if that doesn't take the cake, the website tricked consumers into making recurring monthly payments with a purposely confusing webpage offering the option to receive "continued blessings."

Shameful. And yet the site closed 400,000 transactions to 160,000 people, many of whom likely were Christians. That means some of these victims paid for prayer more than once. What does that say about the church?

Last week, I wrote an article called When Believers Can't Tell the Difference Between Prophets and Psychics. The week before that, I opined about 'Clairvoyant Christians' and the Trouble With Some 'Prophetic Ministries.' I'm so disturbed by the rise of spiritual schiesters but the lack of discernment in the church absolutely alarms me. Jesus told us false prophets would rise to deceive many. We should be watching and praying.

Like I said last week, the Bible warns us over and over and over again not to be deceived. We're told the test the spirits (1 John 4:1). We must obey the Word and not automatically believe any and every prophecy we hear. Let me add in that we shouldn't have to pay for prayer or prophecies. We must exercise the gift of discernment and know the Word of God, lest we fall prey to false prophets. I pray that the Lord would stir in the heart of every believer a hunger for His Word, for fellowship with His Spirit and for growth in discernment, in Jesus' name!