

God's Lightning Rod

Rick Joyner is known for his best-selling books about the future of the church. But this highly visible author—who is considered by many to be a New Testament prophet—has also sparked plenty of controversy.

With his serious pulpit manner, piercing eyes, full beard and shaggy, gray hair, Rick Joyner vaguely resembles John the Baptist—except for the fact that this modern-day prophet often carries a laptop computer when he stands before a crowd. Like his biblical predecessor, he has a sizeable following and claims to receive regular messages from God—which he has chronicled in best-selling books such as *The Harvest* and *The Final Quest*. A new book, *Shadows of Things to Come*, will be released this month by one of the nation's largest evangelical publishers.

Joyner has written 26 books available in 32 languages. Sales of his tapes, books, worship recordings and quarterly *Morning Star Journal* have made his North Carolina-based ministry a \$5 million-a-year operation. But like John the Baptist, Joyner has his detractors, including a few outspoken critics who say he lacks the kind of accountability that prophets require.

Joyner's devoted supporters say he is a sincere brother in Christ and a courageous champion of truth. Those who disagree have labeled him a false prophet, and some have gone so far as to challenge his integrity by posting an "open rebuke" on the Internet.

With Rick Joyner, there is no middle ground. His choleric personality and in-your-face delivery style won't allow ambiguity. People seem to either love him or hate him.

So who is this man? Is he a special mouthpiece for God who is carrying apocalyptic warnings for the end times? Is he simply an imaginative writer who is consumed with a passion to ignite a spiritual revival? Is he just an eccentric Christian entrepreneur who has built his support base with help from an Amway millionaire?

Like an Old Testament prophet, Joyner appeared out of nowhere during the mid-1980s. But ministry associates who know him best have heard his testimony: How he was raised in a troubled family in Richmond, Virginia, and how he dropped out of high school and never went to college—choosing instead to teach himself by reading encyclopedias. (He later earned his GED during a stint in the Navy.)

After experimenting with drugs in his early adult life, he found Christ during the Jesus Movement and then got involved in ministry after his aircraft business went bankrupt. He and his wife, Julie, have five children.

Joyner has influential friends today, and he has shared podiums at Christian conferences with popular charismatic speakers such as Ted Haggard, Mike Bickle, Cindy Jacobs, C. Peter Wagner and Francis Frangipane. Former NFL player Reggie White—a charismatic Christian—is involved in funding some of Joyner's ministry projects.

Country singer Ricky Skaggs is another big Joyner fan. Theologian Jack Deere and Florida pastor Paul Zink have served on his board. And for years Amway success guru Dexter Yeager leased him office and warehouse space. Former PTL founder Jim Bakker says Joyner helped restore him after he fell from grace.

“I consider Rick Joyner a significant voice that God has raised up to speak to many in the church today,” says Frangipane, who pastors a church in Iowa and has been closely associated with Joyner for 12 years. “Multitudes have become more like Jesus because of Rick and his writings.”

Bickle, director of the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, says that as a prophet, Joyner “has been accurate in discerning the key prophetic trends that the Holy Spirit is emphasizing.” But Bickle tempers his statement with the caution that all prophets can sometimes add their own opinions to their God-inspired visions and prophecies.

All who claim prophetic gifts, Bickle says, need to recognize their fallibility. “For this reason, we owe them the dignity of testing their words,” he adds.

Releasing the Prophets

Joyner’s presence can be intimidating. His bulky, 6-foot-1-inch frame can make him seem gruff and overpowering when he talks about cosmic-level spiritual trends to a Christian audience. Add to that his claims of special revelation, and Joyner can come across as if he’s some kind of elite, visionary apostle.

But Joyner says his message is not about elitism. It’s about humility.

“It’s easy to think if God uses you in a certain way it must be because of your righteousness,” he told Charisma. “I think that’s a terrible presumption. I really believe you see so much humility in my writings because I need so much of it. If

you want to know what God is saying almost to anybody, listen to their own messages. I've always considered myself so arrogant and proud that God has to keep hammering me with it."

Frangipane told Charisma that Joyner is not a lone ranger. "Is he accountable? Yes," Frangipane says. "Rick has an advisory board to whom he submits all major decisions concerning the ministry, and I am a part of that board. There have been times when we have disagreed on some doctrinal or prophetic issue, and I have found him not only eager to listen to my opposing perspective but capable of changing his mind."

The 51-year-old Joyner has also made it clear that he does not consider his visions and prophecies to be on the same level with Scripture. "I must state emphatically that I do not believe that any kind of prophetic revelation is for the purpose of establishing doctrine," he wrote in the introduction to *The Final Quest*. "Only the Scriptures deserve to be considered infallible."

Joyner's passion has always been not only to hear God accurately himself, but to teach others to hear Him. That's why he started Morning Star Fellowship, which has since spun off satellite congregations in two other North Carolina locations, Wilkesboro and Moravian Falls. His goal is to train Christians to use the gift of prophecy with accuracy, balance and proper order, according to 1 Corinthians 12-14.

"I think there are people who have definitely surpassed me in preaching and teaching gifts," he says. "I do get blessed by seeing people grow up. I believe the Lord has shown me the greatest evidence of a true ministry is other people growing in ministry around me."

In an effort to stir up the gift of prophecy among the saints, he typically calls a member of his church out of the audience and asks him to stand before the congregation. He then encourages other members to speak words the Lord has laid on their hearts concerning the individual. With wireless microphone in hand, Joyner ambles around the sanctuary, obliging those who volunteer to speak. At his church in Charlotte, North Carolina, prophets-in-training actually set up tables in the sanctuary where they meet with members and visitors to pray and offer personal prophecies.

“One of the mandates the Lord gave to us when we started work here was He wanted us to provide a place where people can come and make mistakes and not be condemned,” he explains.

“No one here claims to be infallible,” he adds. “We’re trying to create a place where people can step out and articulate what they feel God is showing them. But they have to be willing to take the correction. If they won’t take the correction, we won’t give them the platform.”

Mystical Visions

But Joyner has not always been eager to embrace that kind of correction from his boldest critics, including those who say he and his associates missed the mark by issuing public prophecies that didn’t come true. In an article titled “Prophetic Mandate: Levels of Integrity, Truthfulness and Responsibility” published by a committee of Christians from Europe and the United States, Joyner was called to task on several counts.

The most significant was Joyner’s support of a prophecy given

in late 1997 by a ministry colleague. It warned Christians that an earthquake and other disasters (including terrorist attacks) would ravage Southern California within nine months.

Joyner said at that time that Californians had “at least until November [1998]” before serious disasters would begin. He also urged Christians in the Los Angeles area to leave the region. But when the earthquakes and other disasters did not occur, Joyner announced that the message had been misinterpreted.

Joyner’s books also have created quite a sensation, especially *The Final Quest* (1997), which has sold more than 250,000 copies worldwide. *Quest* and its sequel, *The Call* (1999), are based primarily on personal prophetic experiences, which even Joyner admits are hard to describe. He says the visions he had were like vivid dreams that he had while he was awake.

“I guess that’s what Ezekiel experienced, and John in the book of Revelation,” he says.

These mystical experiences, Joyner admits, can be affected or distorted by an individual’s personal feelings and doctrinal background. He says that at best, prophetic experiences are merely tools God uses to illuminate Scripture, as in the case of Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9-16, which showed that God wanted the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles.

It is the awkward subjectivity of Joyner’s visions that have made his books so controversial. Several critics have questioned the validity of Joyner’s mystical experiences and his application of them in accordance with Scripture and Christian doctrine. After all, it’s never easy to question someone who claims they took direct dictation from God.

Chip Brogden of , a prophetic ministry based on the Internet, says Joyner's writings are too symbolic and mysterious, even bordering on gnosticism.

"My general criticism of the 'prophetic' as a whole is it is too sensational," Brogden says. "The testimony of Jesus Christ is the spirit of prophecy. That is to say, a prophetic gift is that which brings the body [of Christ] more into the revelation and full knowledge of Christ. Instead, what we have for the most part is prognostication, prediction, personal fortunetelling and political forecasting. Thus, it should not be labeled as 'prophetic.'"

Joyner's typical response to such criticism is to ignore it. "I'm not going to listen to people I think aren't legitimate leaders in the body of Christ," he says, noting that he is accountable to his board and to a larger "roundtable" of church leaders who meet annually.

He also has made it clear that he has little respect for Christian journalists. In a June 1999 article in his Morning Star Prophetic Bulletin, in response to accusations about his credibility, he wrote: "We feel that those who listen to the accusing ministries and journalists are the kind of people we don't want around anyway."

Similarly, Joyner has also distanced himself from those who have criticized him for his association with the Knights of Malta, a charitable organization that allegedly has its roots in medieval chivalry. Some who learned of Joyner's connection to the group began spreading rumors that he had become a Mason or that the Knights of Malta was a secret society with occult origins.

"We do not let paranoid people dictate what we do," Joyner wrote in the May/June 1999 issue of the Morning Star Prophetic Bulletin, adding: "I have never been a member of the Masons." He explained that he had been knighted by a "European order of chivalry" in the early 1990s and that the Knights are widely recognized as "a registry of nobility."

According to Joyner, the Knights of Malta—also known as the Order of St. John—has Christian roots and can be linked to the Hospitallers, who were credited with starting hospitals during the Middle Ages. The order conducts no secret ceremonies as does a Masonic lodge and actually has undergone a spiritual revival, Joyner says.

Joyner has even written a book about the Knights of Malta, *Courage That Changed the World*, which features a

photograph of the robed "grand master" of the order. In the book, Joyner compares the Knights to end-time Christians who will overcome the world's evils through faith in Christ.

What Joyner didn't realize when he wrote his book is that the group he joined has "no connection whatsoever with any legitimate order of chivalry of that name," according to Guy Sainty, historiographer of the priory in the United States of the Most Venerable Order of St. John.

In a letter of response to an inquiry about Joyner's group, Sainty said the order Joyner has joined is not the original Knights of Malta but "one of more than 20 similar bodies which misuse the name of St. John [to distribute] invented worthless knighthoods." Sainty added that individuals who join the legitimate

Knights of Malta group must be Roman Catholic and have a

bishop's recommendation.

Joyner's connection to the Knights of Malta has troubled some in the prophetic movement who can't reconcile their Christian faith with membership in a group they consider secretive or elitist. "I have a concern about it. It's a secret society," says one former Morning Star staff member who left in 1999 and requested anonymity when interviewed.

A student of military history, Joyner finds rich Christian symbolism in the Knights of Malta: Brave warriors, armed knights defending the Holy Land—and plenty of swords. On occasion he has given decorative medieval swords to his closest friends. The weapons—which are mentioned often in his books—symbolize the power of the prophetic Word of God.

But the imagery has troubled some of his supporters. Another close ministry associate who requested anonymity said he raised loud objections to the Knights of Malta when Joyner announced that he had joined the order. "I wouldn't touch that stuff. I absolutely came out strong against it," the man said.

Another former ministry staffer told Charisma that he got concerned when Joyner began urging friends to be knighted in an inner circle. "I never felt a peace about it," the former employee said. "It is an elitist club. People started vying for position so they could be knighted. The ones that were knighted had a special bond with Rick."

No Turning Back

Yet despite defections and criticism, Joyner has continued undaunted. Just last year his plan to build a ministry center

in Moravian Falls was stalled when local government officials denied Morning Star a property tax exemption—stating that the ministry's publishing operations are taxable. A judge dismissed Morning Star's court appeal in February 2000, but Joyner says he will continue to fight the ruling for the sake of all nonprofit churches and ministries that sell books and tapes.

Despite the Moravian Falls dilemma Joyner is actually on a roll. While he has self-published many of his books in the past, his newest work, *Shadows of Things to Come*, will most likely make the biggest splash of all. Joyner's prophecies and predictions will now find themselves in the mainstream, appearing on the shelves of Barnes & Noble and WaldenBooks outlets.

Surprisingly, Joyner says he doesn't want this latest book to sell that well.

"It's hard to believe I would say that, but I believe there are some volatile things that could be used for good or evil," he says of the book. "I think it could be used to bring some healing and reconciliation. I think some of the most volatile things I've ever said prophetically are going to be in this book. I hope only the most mature people read it."

Joyner says this latest work spans most of the 25 years he's been involved in ministry but that he has never shared most of these revelations publicly. Although he says he spent much time seasoning his words with grace, he expects there will be a strong reaction to his message.

What is Joyner saying in *Shadows of Things to Come* that will

provoke such a reaction? “There’s going to be some shocking things. Many Christians, especially charismatic Christians, tend to be ignorant of history. I just feel I was under compulsion and obedience to do this book,” he says.

Although he covers a vast number of themes in the new book, one central message is that the modern church must reject a pagan model of church hierarchy—which places emphasis on man’s power and ability. In order to experience genuine revival as the Holy Spirit intends, the church must stop depending on the flesh, Joyner says. He also takes prophetic jabs at the vices of modern religious culture.

“We can condemn the Catholic Church for selling indulgences,” Joyner writes, “but it is hard to turn on Christian television without seeing an evangelist who claims that if people will just give to his ministry they will receive special blessings from God. Is this not the same abomination of selling the grace of God?”

Joyner is not really worried about the public’s reaction to his harsh words. After all, he’s a John the Baptist kind of guy. He’s a voice crying from his North Carolina wilderness, and he calls it as he sees it. Like most prophets with his intensity level, he doesn’t seem to care if you agree with his message or not.

Like an Old Testament prophet, Joyner appeared out of nowhere in the mid-1980s.

When Prophets Miss the Mark

How should we respond when someone makes a prediction in the

name of the Lord—and it doesn't happen?

Rick Joyner faced serious criticism in 1998 after he and a ministry colleague predicted on New Year's Eve 1997 that a series of disasters would strike Southern California within nine months. Several warnings were given, including allusions to terrorist attacks at Los Angeles International Airport and an earthquake that would turn Death Valley into an inland sea. Joyner told his audience, "These things really are about to come to pass."

But nothing happened.

When Joyner was later challenged, he apologized for allowing the prophecy to be released publicly because in hindsight he felt that the warning had been misunderstood.

Meanwhile, fear swept through charismatic churches in Southern California. Joyner's fans across the nation urged friends to leave the state. Some intercessors began praying for God's mercy after Joyner said the disasters could be averted by repentance and prayer. A few ministry leaders considered moving their offices out of the region.

But there have been no major quakes in the Los Angeles area since the prophecy was given, nor have any nuclear bombs been detonated. Later Joyner said the timing of the cataclysm wasn't clear. He added: "I have told people to seek the Lord and leave [Southern California] only if He directs them to."

Does this mishandled disaster warning make Joyner a false prophet? Church leaders who talked with Charisma said it does not.

"The idea that a prophet should never make a mistake assumes that teachers, evangelists and pastors also never make mistakes," says author and pastor Francis Frangipane. "All are speaking for the Lord, yet who has not admitted that they either taught something wrong or at least publicly repeated wrong information?"

Mike Bickle, author of *Growing in the Prophetic*, agrees. "I do not think it is fair to the prophetic ministry to assume that they are infallible," he says. Both Bickle and Frangipane say a prophet should be removed from public ministry for a season if he or she habitually gives false words that spread confusion or unbiblical doctrines.

Los Angeles pastor Jack Hayford, who faced constant questions in 1998 amid the earthquake rumors, expressed stern pastoral concern over the issue of a prophet's accountability. Said Hayford: "His or her track record is crucial, his or her character must be proven, and his or her accountability to the body of Christ is absolutely determinative. Otherwise, we have no reason to take a prophetic word seriously."

Hayford does not discount prophetic ministry, but he says he sees a growing glibness in prophetic exercise unless such scriptural requirements are regarded.

Joyner himself emphasizes the importance of accountability. "Four of the most valuable words we could ever say are, 'This is from God,'" Joyner says. "I think we really want it to be from Him. We've got to be serious about judging prophecy if we want the real thing."

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