

Who or What Is a False Prophet?

As I have been addressing the failed Trump prophecies, some Christian leaders have challenged me, saying I am not going far enough. Instead, they believe, to be scripturally accurate, I must brand anyone who prophesies falsely a “false prophet.”

To quote the words of one pastoral couple who graciously challenged me, “We would respectfully ask that Dr. Brown repent of his defense of these false prophets and false teachers, adding fanciful ideas to the Word of God in the process—and publicly call for the removal of the false prophets from their pulpits, the same as we would expect him to do if these popular teachers were engaged in adultery, sexual immorality or other grievous sin. False teachers are said to be ‘deceived and being deceived’ at the same time (2 Tim. 3:13).”

But that’s the thing. I have not defended those who prophesied falsely. I have called for accountability, and I have done so in very clear, strong terms.

That being said, the error of those who inadvertently prophesied falsely is not equivalent to “adultery, sexual immorality or other grievous sin,” as I’ll explain.

As for my so-called “fanciful ideas,” apparently this couple is referring to my belief that there is a difference between a true Christian prophesying falsely (or, a true Christian falsely claiming to be a prophet) and a “false prophet.”

I base this on the words of Jesus, who said, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or

figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matt. 7:15-18, NIV).

These people are not sincere believers who mistakenly claim inspiration for their words. They are deceivers and liars, bad trees bearing bad fruit.

Jesus also described them as deceivers, even miracles workers, who would lead people astray, putting them in the same class as false messiahs (see Matt. 24:11, 24).

This is in keeping with the character of false prophets in the Old Testament. They either led Israel into idolatry, prophesying in the name of false gods. Or they led Israel into sin and disobedience, prophesying falsely in the name of the true God.

As the Lord said through Jeremiah, "Among the prophets of Samaria I saw this repulsive thing: They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that not one of them turns from their wickedness. They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah" (Jer. 23:13-15).

False prophets are sinful people, not godly people who make a mistake.

Are we then to brand someone a false prophet because, in sincerity of heart and after much prayer, they wrongly prophesied Trump's reelection? Are we to put them in the class of wolves in sheep's clothing? Are we to compare them to leaders who "strengthen the hands of evildoers" or who prophesy in the name of false gods? Certainly not. To do so would border on spiritual abuse.

Think about it for a moment.

There are people who claim to be pastors and who even serve as pastors, but they are really not called by God to be pastors, as sincere and devoted as they might be. Do we denounce them as counterfeit shepherds?

Hardly. Instead, we say, "You're really not a pastor, and you should find another area of service."

In contrast, if that person was a charlatan, an outright deceiver posing as a pastor, we would not hesitate to brand him a counterfeit shepherd.

And what about the countless thousands of pastors who made sincere mistakes when trying to help their people, ultimately hurting them in the end? Do we brand them counterfeit shepherds?

What about those who claim to be teachers of the Word but do not really have that spiritual gifting? Or those who claim to be teachers, yet they are weak in their understanding of the *charismata* (spiritual gifts) or they hold to an end-time view we reject? Do we brand them false teachers?

Peter wrote, "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute" (2 Pet. 2:1-2).

Peter, then, answers this question for us. A false teacher is not a true believer who teaches something erroneous. A false teacher is a heretic, someone who introduces damnable doctrines into the church, someone who is hell-bound as well.

Note also that Peter compares these false teachers to false prophets. Neither term can be applied to true believers.

In the same way, Paul speaks of false apostles as servants of Satan (see 2 Cor. 11:13-15). This is different than someone today who believes in what is called fivefold ministry (see Eph. 4:8-16) and wrongly calls himself an apostle.

Perhaps he is called to be a pastor and is a gifted, godly leader. The fact that he wrongly calls himself “apostle” doesn’t mean that he is a false apostle and thereby a servant of Satan.

That’s why I will never call another believer a false prophet (or false teacher or false apostle). I will call out their error, when applicable. I will call for repentance, when appropriate. And I will urge them to stop calling themselves a pastor or teacher or prophet or apostle if, in fact, that is not their calling in God. And I will urge them to step down from ministry if they are not worthy of serving in the ministry.

But unless they are clearly not part of the body of Christ, I will not use the “false” term to describe them. Put another way, I will only call a false believer a false prophet.

What about the Old Testament test for prophecy? According to Deuteronomy 18:15-22, if a purported prophet (speaking in particular of a national prophet) spoke in the name of a false god or presumptuously spoke falsely on the Lord’s behalf, because of which their word did not come to pass, that prophet was to die.

Interestingly, however, the term “false prophet” does not even occur in this context, even though it would be applicable. More importantly, this is not the test for New Testament prophecy.

As I have explained elsewhere, since everyone can potentially prophesy in New Testament times, every prophetic word must be tested by others. The good is to be embraced; the bad is to be rejected (see 1 Cor. 14:29-31; 1 Thess. 5:19-21).

In the case of the failed Trump prophecies, I have consistently called for accountability (see [here](#) and [here](#) for recent examples). And I believe much damage has been done because of these very public words.

I have also warned that some leaders are going off into real delusion. And on my radio show, I have played clips by so-called prophets and have said plainly that these people are not prophets at all.

But, to repeat, unless I know these people are outside the flock, either denying fundamentals of the faith or living in persistent and willful disobedience to the Lord, I will not call them false prophets.

That is because I take the Lord and His Word very seriously. I will not go beyond what is written. {eo}

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