

How Martin Luther Confronted False Prophets—And Why We Need to Follow Suit Today

The Reformation opened the door to all sorts of wild theories about the church, the end of the world and the kingdom of God and how it would be established. Some said the kingdom of God would be established by God's people taking up the sword, slaying the wicked and establishing righteousness by force. Other said it would be established by a "second commissioning" of apostles and prophets who would go forth with such power, signs and wonders that no one would be able to resist them.

The Prophets of Zwickau

It was within this milieu of religious fervor and expectation that Luther had his notorious run-in with the "Prophets of Zwickau." While he was hiding in the Castle of Wartburg, after his condemnation at the Diet of Worms, three men from Zwickau came to Luther's hometown of Wittenberg, which was the center of the Reformation. Led by a weaver named Nicholas Storch, they claimed divine visions, dreams and visits from the angel Gabriel.

Storch and his two friends wowed the people with their revelations and began taking the reform movement in Wittenberg in a radical direction that was not compatible with Luther's desire or with Scripture. Luther was for gradual change as a result of the people's hearts being changed by the preaching of the Word.

These new prophets, however, demanded instant and radical changes in the church services and the long-held traditions and practices of the people. They began smashing statues, images and paintings. Their basis of authority was not Scripture, but the visions and angelic visitations that they

claimed.

Although many, including some of Luther's colleagues, were won over by the sensational claims of these men, their presence and message caused unrest in the city, prompting Melanchthon to send a message to Luther about what was happening.

Luther Returns

When Luther read the message, he put his life at risk, left the Castle at Wartburg, and returned to Wittenberg. He preached eight sermons on eight consecutive days, challenging with Scripture the visions and dreams of the prophets from Zwickau. Schaff says,

"The ruling ideas of these eight discourses are: Christian freedom and Christian charity; freedom from the tyranny of radicalism which would force the conscience against forms, as the tyranny of popery forces the conscience in the opposite direction. In plain, clear, strong, scriptural language, he refuted the errors without naming the errorists."

In his encounter with these "prophets," Luther coined the word *schwarmer*, which means "enthusiast." Luther used it as a derogatory designation for these individuals whom he considered to be irrational spiritualists led astray by the thoughts and feelings of their own heart.

My Personal Encounter with a *Schwarmer*

This reminds me of how, during the midst of a series of meetings, I received a phone call from one of the participants. The voice on the other end of the line said, "I was lying by the pool meditating, and God spoke to me and said, 'Call Eddie Hyatt and tell him to start a church and call it "The Gateway to Heaven."'"

I did not need a special revelation from heaven to know that the message was not from God. I also knew he was not a false

prophet, just a mistaken one who had not learned to distinguish the voice of the Spirit of God from his own thoughts, feelings and over-active imagination. He was a *schwarmer*, but an honest one who was willing receive correction.

A Reminder to Test the Spirits

The *schwarmer* in Wittenberg, however, were unwilling to receive correction. It soon became obvious to the people that the men were in error and the prophets, realizing they had lost their influence, departed Wittenberg. One of Luther's colleagues wrote to the elector of that region,

Oh, what joy has Dr. Martin's return spread among us. His words, through divine mercy, are bringing back every day misguided people into the way of truth. It is as clear as the sun, that the Spirit of God is in him, and that he returned to Wittenberg by His special providence.

Luther's experience serves as a reminder of the importance of following the admonition of 1 John 4:1 to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." We do not want to be *schwarmer*. We want to embrace and flow in the real supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and at the same time, have the confidence to confront the false when it crosses our path. {eo}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, *The Charismatic Luther*, with the subtitle, *Healings, Miracles & Spiritual Gifts in the Life of the Great Reformer*, now available from Amazon in Kindle, and soon to be available in paperback. Check out his website at .