

5 Warning Signs That Prophetic Ministry Has Gone Awry

Prophetic ministry has great potential for blessing and building up the people of God. But when abused and misused, it has the same potential to trouble and destroy. In order to derive the greatest benefit from prophetic ministry, we need both the guidelines of Scripture and the lessons from history to point the way.

The following information is drawn from a document written around 1560 by Obe Philips, a leader in the 16th-century Anabaptist movement that sought the restoration of New Testament Christianity. Philips was commissioned as an “apostle” in this movement, and he commissioned others to this “office.” The document, entitled “Confessions,” describes events in Europe in the 1530s. From this document I have delineated five warning signs from their experience that can help us avoid the tragic mistakes that produced such great suffering and distress for them.

Warning Sign #1

When prophecy is used to enhance the status of a movement and its leaders

1517-1537 was a very exciting time for many Christians in Europe. A great spiritual reformation was under way and many believed that God was restoring the church to its original purity and power. Many believed that out of this restoration would come a great revival and harvest that would usher in the coming of the Lord and the end of the age.

In the midst of this end-time, revival atmosphere, individuals began to arise proclaiming themselves to be special end-time

apostles and prophets endowed by God with miraculous power to usher in His kingdom upon the Earth.

One of the most prominent of these “apostles” was Melchoir Hoffman, a powerful preacher and teacher who gained a large following. His status was further enhanced when a prophetess saw in a vision a large white swan, larger and more beautiful than all the others, swimming in a beautiful river. She claimed it was revealed to her that the swan was Hoffman and that he represented the fulfillment of God’s promise in Mal. 4:5 to send Elijah before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

Biblical Insight: We must remember the words given to John by the creature at his side in Revelation 19:10. Overwhelmed at the sight of a vast heavenly host worshipping and praising God, John fell at the feet of his heavenly escort to worship him, who immediately stopped him and said, *See that you do not do that. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus.* And in John 16:13 Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit would come, *He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is mine and declare it to you.* Beware of anyone who uses prophecy to promote themselves, their ministry or their teaching. The Holy Spirit has come lift up Jesus and draw all humanity unto Him.

Warning Sign #2

When prophecy becomes the primary means for determining the will of God

Another individual prophesied that Hoffman would be imprisoned for six months in the city of Strasbourg and, after that, his ministry would spread over the whole world. Based on the prophecy, Hoffman moved to Strasbourg where he began to preach and teach throughout that city.

The first part of the prophecy was fulfilled when the Strasbourg authorities arrested Hoffman and had him

imprisoned. Philips says that he entered the prison “willingly, cheerfully, and well comforted,” convinced that the latter part of the prophecy would now soon come to pass.

While in prison, Hoffman wrote many letters which Philips says came every day describing “how his actions, his visions and revelations affected him.” One individual prophesied that at the end of his six month imprisonment, Hoffman would depart Strasbourg with 144,000 true apostles endowed with such miraculous power that no one would be able to resist them. Elated with such prophetic predictions, Hoffman vowed that he would take no food other than bread and water until the time of his deliverance.

Six months passed, however, and he was not released. More time elapsed and he found it necessary to break his fast. Hoffman eventually died in prison, a very disillusioned man. Philips says;

Everything that he so boldly professed from the prophets and prophetesses, he, in the end, found it all falsehood and deception, in fact and in truth; and he was so deceived with all their visions, prophecies, commission, dreams, and Elijah role that my heart today feels pity for his on account of this distress of his soul.

Biblical Insight: It is clear from Scripture that personal prophecy is not for giving direction in life. There is not a single example of such in the New Testament. The only example of a personal prophecy giving direction is in Acts 21:4 where certain disciples, *by the Spirit*, told Paul, who was on his way to Jerusalem, *not to go up to Jerusalem*. What did Paul do? He ignored what they said and continued on to Jerusalem. Prophecy must confirm what we already know in our heart and Paul had already *purposed in the Spirit* to go to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21).

Warning Sign #3

When prophecy is preoccupied with images, numbers and symbols

Prophetic dreams and visions flourished in this movement. These dreams and visions predicted many remarkable things related to the establishing of God's kingdom and the destruction of the wicked. Much of this information was given in symbolic form which had to be interpreted by those who were "spiritual." Philips says,

One came dragging a wagon without wheels, another wagon had three wheels, one wagon had no shaft, some no horses, some no recognizable driver, some had but one leg, some were lepers and beggars, some wore a tunic or a cloak with a lapet of fur. All this they could interpret for the brethren in a spiritual sense

These prophecies, dreams and visions predicted remarkable successes for the people of God, including a super-empowerment of the Spirit by which they would be enabled to overcome the wicked and establish the kingdom of God in the earth. In his very moving account of these matters, Philips says,

Now when these teachings and consolation with all the fantasies, dreams, revelations and visions daily occurred among the brethren, there was no little joy and expectation among us, hoping all would be true and fulfilled, for we were all unsuspecting, innocent, simple, without guile or cunning, and were not aware of any false visions, prophets, and revelations.

Biblical Insight: In the New Testament God communicates very clearly and precisely to His people. When He spoke to Ananias in a vision about going and praying for Paul, God gave him precise instructions (Acts 9:10-12). He told Ananias the name of the man he was to pray for, the name of the man in whose house Paul was staying and the precise street address. When God does speak in a symbol or image, it is for the purpose of communicating a more clear and vivid message. It is never done

as a riddle that must be searched out and solved. God wants to communicate clearly with His children.

Warning Sign #4

When those prophesying are not open to testing and/or correction

During this time, two new apostles arrived in Philips' home town of Leeuwarden. They declared that they had been commissioned to the apostolic office with such signs, miracles and workings of the Spirit that words failed them to describe it. They also declared that, "In a short time God would rid the earth of all shedders of blood and all tyrants and the godless" (Philips, 216).

Philips says that they frightened the people so that no one dared speak against them for fear they would be speaking against the commission and ordination of God. "For we were all guileless children and had no idea that our own brethren would betray us."

Biblical Insight: False prophets are unteachable and unwilling for their prophecies to be evaluated and tested, as Scripture commands. Virtually every time New Testament Scriptures speak of prophecy, they also speak of evaluating and testing the prophecy, which is the responsibility of every believer. I Thessalonians 5:19-21, for example, says, *Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is God.* I Corinthians 14:29 says, *Let two or three prophets speak and let the others judge.* And in this same vein of thought, I John 4:1 says, *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

Sign #5

When prophecy becomes a replacement for the Scriptures and common sense

The tragic end of this prophetic movement came when, based on dreams, visions, prophecies, and supposed angelic visitations, a number of these visionaries claimed that God had designated the city of Munster as the *New Jerusalem* and from there the kingdom of God would spread through all the earth. Philips says, "Some had spoken with God, others with angels—until they got a new trek under way to Munster." Based on the prophecies and supposed visions, they went to Munster and took the city by force from the Catholics who controlled it and renamed it *New Jerusalem*.

The Catholics, however, quickly regrouped and regained control of the city. They wasted no time in inflicting a terrible slaughter on those apostles, prophets and their followers who believed they were setting up the kingdom of God on the earth.

This whole fiasco resulted in widespread persecution of all Anabaptists who were hunted down, imprisoned, hanged, burned, and drowned. Philips later lamented his role in the extremes of this movement. He wrote,

It is this which is utter grief to my heart and which I will lament before my God as long as I live, before all my companions, as often as I think of them. At the time that I took leave of those brethren, I had warned Menno and Dietrich and declared my [apostolic] commission unlawful and that I was therein deceived. I thank the gracious and merciful God who opened my eyes, humbled my soul, transformed my heart, captured my spirit, and who gave me to know my sins. And when I still think of the resigned suffering which occurred among the brethren, my soul is troubled and terrified before it.

Biblical Insight: In Psalm 119:105 David said, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness to doubt His identity, He responded to each temptation with, *It is written*, and then quoted the appropriate passage of Scripture. John Wesley, who saw many unusual spiritual manifestations as the leader of the 18th-

century Methodist revival, said, "Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it."

Conclusion

This 16th-century prophetic movement highlights the need to "test the spirits" and to "judge" prophetic utterances according to the Scriptures. For the most part, these were sincere, seeking people who suffered much pain, grief and even death because they neglected this Biblical admonition. May we learn from their example and not repeat their mistakes.

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