

Beware of Fraudulent 'Facebook Prophets'

Prophecy is a powerful and much-needed spiritual gift. The apostle Paul told us that prophecy provides edification, exhortation and comfort. In First Corinthians 14:1, he also told believers to desire this gift above all others. Prophecy strengthens us, confirms God's plans, reminds us of His love and care, warns us of dangers and propels us into our callings.

When I was a young man just out of college, a humble minister from Mississippi prayed over me and shared a prophetic word that got my attention. He told me: "You will not hide behind your pen, but you will preach the gospel to nations." At the time I was very timid; I was content to pursue my journalism career. But by the Holy Spirit, this man's prophetic word confirmed that I would eventually step out of my comfort zone.

Years later, I sensed it might be time for me to enter full-time ministry. But because the decision was overwhelming, I asked the Lord to confirm His direction. I then met a prophetic minister from Canada during a mission trip. He knew nothing about my situation, but under the inspiration of the Spirit he told me: "The Lord says that as Elisha burned his plow and followed Elijah, the time has come for the transition. It's time to burn your plow."

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I know prophecy is a valid and priceless gift because of the way it has blessed and encouraged me. But I also know that it can be abused and misused. Satan has a counterfeit for every good gift. Since New Testament times, charlatans and shysters

have deceived and manipulated people by pretending to prophesy in the name of the Lord. I have seen tragic examples of this during my years of ministry:

– In the 1990s, ABC News exposed Texas-based evangelist W.V. Grant for spiritual fraud. Before church services, Grant's staff members would mill around in the congregation asking for information about prayer requests, health problems or wayward children. The staff members would then inform Grant of the situations through a small earphone, and from the stage he pretended to know the information by the Spirit. The crowd was quite impressed—until he went to jail in 1996 for income tax evasion.

– I watched charismatic prophet Paul Cain manipulate an audience in Texas in 1989. In front of 5,000 people, he pretended to know the street addresses of several individuals. I was familiar with the ministry that hosted the conference, and I owned a phone list that contained names and addresses of all the pastors in the group. I got a sick feeling in my gut as I realized that Cain was using this phone list to make his declarations. I was shocked that a man who was considered a powerful man of the Spirit would stoop this low to make people think he got information from God.

The saddest part was that Cain's "prophetic words" were bogus. He called out one man I knew named "Larry," and he said the number "4001"—which was the street number of Larry's church. Cain declared: "There will be great revival in that place." But within less than a year, the church at 4001 Newberry Road was closed, and Larry ended up in spiritual disaster. Not only was the "prophecy" false, but Cain fraudulently got the number by looking at a ministry directory. I pray this next generation of Spirit-filled leaders will never get so desperate for attention that they use such deceptive tactics.

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– Today, some so-called prophets use social media to get background information on people who attend their conferences. Then, after collecting birthdates, spouses' and children's names or life events, they announce that they have a word from God for specific people. The gullible audience is mesmerized as these charlatans pretend the Holy Spirit giving them information about people's spiritual callings or future plans.

I'm not sure what is more tragic—that a minister of the gospel would fake a spiritual gift to get attention, or that Spirit-filled believers would be so devoid of discernment that they don't sense immediately that the huckster is faking it. This must stop!

When Simon the sorcerer tried to buy the Holy Spirit's power during the revival in Samaria, he claimed to be from God—but Peter confronted him because he knew he was a fake. I describe this scene in Acts 8 as “the clash of two Simons.” Simon Peter rebuked Simon the sorcerer, and the false prophet's witchcraft didn't infect the new believers. Today, because we lack the Simon Peters who are brave enough to challenge this madness, many Christians are hoodwinked.

We need the real gift of prophecy, not fakes and imitations. True prophets are not manipulators, nor are they celebrity preachers who charge \$1,000 to impart their “gift.” Authentic prophets are humble, approachable servants who would never dare exploit God's people for personal gain. Let's buckle our seatbelts and prepare for a Holy Ghost housecleaning.

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