

False Prophets and Lying Wonders

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:20–22; Jude 8–13

Code: B100111

Have you noticed that no matter how many times charismatic televangelists make outlandish false prophecies, they never lack for followers, and they don't stop claiming the Lord has spoken directly to them?

Benny Hinn, for example, made a series of celebrated prophetic utterances in December of 1989, none of which came true. He confidently told his congregation at the Orlando Christian Center that God had revealed to him Fidel Castro would die sometime in the 1990s; the homosexual community in America would be destroyed by fire before 1995; and a major earthquake would cause havoc on the east coast before the year 2000. He was wrong on all counts, of course.

That did not deter Hinn, who simply kept making bold new false prophecies. At the beginning of the new millennium, he announced to his television audience that a prophetess had informed him Jesus would soon appear physically in some of Hinn's healing meetings. Hinn said he was convinced the prophecy was authentic, and on his April 2, 2000, broadcast, he amplified it with a prophecy of his own: "*Now hear this, I am prophesying this!* Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is about to appear physically in some churches, and some meetings, and to many of His people, for one reason: to tell you He is about to show up! To wake up! Jesus is coming saints!"

Hinn's failed prophecies are more outlandish but nearly as memorable as the notorious claims Oral Roberts began making about three decades ago. In 1977 Roberts said he saw a vision of a 900-foot-tall Jesus, who instructed him to build the City of Faith, a 60-story hospital in south Tulsa. Roberts said God told him He would use the center to unite medical technology with faith healing, which would revolutionize health care and enable doctors to find a cure for cancer.

The building, completed in the early 1980s, was a colossal white elephant from the very start. When the City of Faith opened for business, all but two stories of the massive structure were completely vacant.

By January of 1987 the project was saddled with unmanageable debt, and Roberts announced that the Lord had said unless Roberts raised eight million dollars to pay the debt by March 1, he would die. Apparently not willing to test the death-threat prophecy, donors dutifully gave Roberts the needed funds in time (with the help of \$1.3 million donated at the last hour by a Florida dog-track owner).

But within two years, Roberts was forced to close the medical center anyway and sell the building in order to eliminate still-mounting debt. More than 80 percent of the building had never been occupied. The promised cure for cancer never materialized, either.

A list of similar failed charismatic prophecies could fill several volumes. And yet, amazingly, the "prophets" who make such fantastic claims now appear to have more influence than ever—even

among mainstream evangelicals. And the idea that God routinely speaks directly to His people has found more widespread acceptance today than at any time in the history of the church.

The charismatic movement began barely a hundred years ago, and its influence on evangelicalism can hardly be overstated. Its chief legacy has been an unprecedented interest in extrabiblical revelation. Millions influenced by charismatic doctrine are convinced that God speaks to them directly all the time. Indeed, many seem to believe direct revelation is the *main* means through which God communicates with His people. "The Lord told me . . ." has become a favorite cliché of experience-driven evangelicals.

Not all who believe God speaks to them make prophetic pronouncements as outlandish as those broadcast by charismatic televangelists, of course. But they still believe God gives them extrabiblical messages—either through an audible voice, a vision, a voice in their heads, or simply an internal impression. In most cases, their "prophecies" are comparatively trivial. But the difference between them and Benny Hinn's predictions is a difference only of scale, not of substance.

The notion that God is giving extrabiblical messages to Christians today has received support from some surprising sources. Wayne Grudem, popular author and professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary believes God regularly gives Christians prophetic messages by simply bringing spontaneous thoughts to mind. Such impressions should be reported as prophecy, he says.^[1]

Similar ideas have found sweeping acceptance even among non-charismatic Christians. Southern Baptists have eagerly devoured *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby and Claude King, which suggests that the main way the Holy Spirit leads believers is by speaking to them directly. According to Blackaby, when God gives an individual a message that pertains to the church, it should be shared with the whole body.^[2] As a result, extrabiblical "words from the Lord" are now commonplace even in some Southern Baptist circles.

Why do so many modern Christians seek revelation from God through means other than Scripture? Certainly not because it is a reliable way to discover truth. All sides admit that modern prophecies are *often* completely erroneous. In fact, the failure rate is astonishingly high. In my book *Charismatic Chaos* I quoted one leading "prophet" who was thrilled because he believed that two-thirds of his prophecies were accurate. "Well that's better than it's ever been up to now, you know. That's the highest level it's ever been."^[3]

In other words, modern prophecy is not a much more reliable way to discern truth than a Magic Eight-Ball or Tarot cards. And, I would add, it is equally superstitious. There is no warrant anywhere in Scripture for Christians to listen for fresh revelation from God beyond what He has already given us in His written Word. In fact, Scripture unsparingly condemns all who speak even one word falsely or presumptuously in the Lord's name (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). But such warnings are simply ignored these days by those who claim to have heard afresh from God.

And not surprisingly, wherever there is a preoccupation with "fresh" prophecy, there is invariably a corresponding neglect of the Scriptures. After all, why be concerned with an ancient Book if the Living God communicates directly with us on a daily basis? These fresh words of "revelation" naturally seem more relevant and more urgent than the familiar words of the Bible. Is it any wonder

that they draw people away from Scripture?

That is precisely why modern evangelicalism's infatuation with extrabiblical revelation is so dangerous. It is a return to medieval superstition and a departure from our fundamental conviction that the Bible is our sole, supreme, and sufficient authority for all of life. In other words, it represents a wholesale abandonment of the principle of *sola Scriptura*.

The absolute sufficiency of Scripture is summed up well in this section from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: *unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men* (1.6, emphasis added).

Historic Protestantism is grounded in the conviction that the canon is closed. No "new" revelation is necessary, because Scripture is complete and absolutely sufficient.

Scripture itself is clear that the day of God's speaking directly to His people through various prophetic words and visions is past. The truth God has revealed in Christ including the complete New Testament canon is His final word (Hebrews 1:1-2; cf. Jude 3; Revelation 22:18-19).

Scripture—the written Word of God—is perfectly sufficient, containing all the revelation we need. Notice 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Paul tells Timothy:

From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

That passage makes two very important statements that pertain to the issue we are looking at. *First*, "All Scripture is inspired by God." Scripture speaks with the authority of God Himself. It is certain; it is reliable; *it is true*. Jesus Himself prayed in John 17:17: "Your word is truth." Psalm 119:160 says, "The entirety of Your word is truth."

Those statements all set Scripture above every human opinion, every speculation, and every emotional sensation. Scripture alone stands as definitive truth. It speaks with an authority that transcends every other voice.

Second, The passage teaches that Scripture is utterly sufficient, "able to make you wise for salvation ... [and able to make you] complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." What clearer affirmation of the absolute sufficiency of Scripture could anyone ask for? Are extrabiblical messages from God necessary to equip us to glorify Him? Certainly not.

Those who seek fresh messages from God have in effect scorned the absolute certainty and absolute sufficiency of the written Word of God. And they have set in its place their own fallen and fallible imaginations.

If the church does not return to the principle of *sola Scriptura*, the only revival we will see is a revival of the superstition and darkness that characterized medieval religion.

Does this mean God has stopped speaking? Certainly not, but He speaks today through His Word.

Does the Spirit of God move our hearts and impress us with specific duties or callings? Certainly, but He works through the Word of God to do that. Such experiences are in no sense prophetic or authoritative. They are not *revelation*, but the effect of *illumination*, when the Holy Spirit applies the Word to our hearts and opens our spiritual eyes to its truth. We must guard carefully against allowing our experience and our own subjective thoughts and imaginations to eclipse the authority and the certainty of the more sure Word.

[1]. *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988).

[2]. (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 1990), 168.

[3]. *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 67.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).