

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 35: Beware of False Prophets

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Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Mt. 7:15-20).

After our Lord's strong warning about the need to enter the narrow gate and walk on the narrow path, He proceeds to tell the disciples to be on guard against false prophets. These verses are obviously an application of verses 13 and 14. Jesus is telling us about one of the central dangers that can lead men away from the narrow gate and the difficult way. Listening to false teachers places the people of God in great danger and their message can be spiritually fatal to people in the visible church. This section reveals Christ's great concern for His people. He is the good Shepherd who takes great care to warn the flock of savage wolves that disguise themselves as true preachers. He not only commands us to "beware of false prophets" (the word "beware" [*prosechete*] is a present imperative and indicates a continuous watching), but He also tells us how to discern the difference between true and false teachers. Their fruit must be examined. To emphasize the importance of this teaching, He reiterates the reality of judgment. If we desire to persevere on the narrow road, then we must prepare ourselves to avoid the snares of Satan. This is part of the challenge and struggle of being a disciple.

Warning and Description

Jesus begins with a distinctive warning against false prophets that includes a description of how they appear and what they really are (v. 15). We need to carefully examine this verse and define terms before we proceed to our Lord's instructions regarding how to identify them. There are a number of things to consider.

First, we need to define the term "prophet" so we can then understand what is a "false prophet." The word prophet occurs over 300 times in the Old Testament and over 100 times in the New Testament. A prophet is someone who acts as mouthpiece for Jehovah. He would receive direct revelation from God and then would give fully authoritative pronouncements to God's people. A prophetic exhortation that came by way of divine inspiration is not just sanctified advice; it is not just the exposition of texts from the Bible. It has the same authority as Scripture; it is a "Thus-saith-the-Lord" exhortation. In Amos 3:8 we read, "The LORD God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Whatever I command you, you shall speak.... Arise, and speak to them all that I command you" (1:7, 17). In Ezekiel 3:4 we read, "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them'" (Ezek. 3:4). Scripture often refers to a particular prophet as a "man of God." Unlike a

king or priest, a prophet could not inherit his title from his family or even through majority vote. He had to be chosen by God and given a revelation by Him.

Prophets not only gave inspired predictions about future events or revealed mysteries, they were also preachers. For example, John the Baptist was a prophet who went about preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 3:2). In Deuteronomy, a false prophet was one who performed signs and then *taught* the people to serve other gods (Dt. 13:2). In 2 Peter 2:1, the apostle compares false teachers of the New Covenant era to the false prophets of old. The emphasis is not so much on false prophets as predictors, but rather as pseudo-teachers. Similarly, in 1 John 4:1 and following, the beloved apostle begins a section on the marks of false teachers by saying “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). Consequently, we do not want to restrict the expression “false prophets” in this context merely to people in the church who give false prophecies or who purport to give a direct revelation from God. It also applies to false teachers which have always been a major problem among the churches of Christ. Any *false* religious teacher who claims to teach with a divine authority behind him is a false prophet. Given the fact that the Bible teaches that direct revelation ceased with the death of the apostles (Eph. 2:20; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4; Ac. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 15:7-8) and the close of the New Testament canon (e.g., see 1 Cor. 13:8-12; Eph. 2:19-22; Rev. 22:18), our primary concern as Christians will be to identify and avoid false preachers and teachers.

The Greek word translated “false prophets,” *pseudo-propheton*, (cf. Mt. 24:11, 24; Mk. 13:22; Lk. 6:26; Ac. 13:6; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Jn. 4:1; Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) refers to a sham, counterfeit, spurious or false teacher. The word *pseudo* comes from the Greek verb *pseudein* which means “to deceive.” A false prophet is a person who is pretending (either deliberately or through self-deception) to be something he is not (i.e. a true teacher from God). “In formulation it is similar to *pseudo-brothers* (II Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4), *pseudo-apostles* (2 Cor. 11:13), *pseudo-teachers* (II Peter 2:1), *pseudo-speakers* (liars, I Tim. 4:2), *pseudo-witnesses* (Matt. 26:60; I Cor. 15:15), and *pseudo-Christ*s (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22).”¹ Every time *pseudo* is used it means the person described is phony or false.

Second, like many sections in the Sermon on the Mount, this passage begins with an imperative and then is followed by an explanation. The command, “beware” (*prosechete*), in the original language means literally, “keep holding your minds away from” false prophets. The English word “beware” means to be on guard against. Thus it is used to warn people against great dangers: “beware of falling rocks,” “beware of downed power lines,” “beware of cliff ahead,” “beware of dangerous undertow,” “beware of sharks,” etc.. The word always implies great danger. Jesus orders His followers to be aware that savage wolves will come among the flock.

Third, our Lord gives the reason why we are to beware: the false prophets “come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” These false teachers pretend to be the very opposite of what they truly are. The phrase “coming to you” indicates that they seek out the church in order to represent themselves as on the same side. The expression “sheep’s clothing” has been interpreted in two different ways. Many believe that “garments of sheep” simply points out that these false teachers present themselves as part of the people of God or members of Christ’s flock. The idea conveyed is that of a wolf disguised as a sheep in order to infiltrate the flock.

Another view is that the wearing of sheepskin is an allusion to the peculiar dress worn by Old Testament prophets. Elijah, for example, had a hairy mantle (1 Kgs. 19:13, 19) described as

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 372.

a hairy cloak (2 Kgs. 1:8). The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) calls Elijah's covering a sheepskin mantle (*he melote*). One can deduce from the Scriptures that, with at least some of the prophets, a hairy coat became like a uniform. When the prophet Zechariah prophesies about a coming time of great revival he predicts that when the false prophets repent, "they will no longer wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive" (Zech. 13:4). John the baptizer who came in the spirit and power of Elijah was "clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" (Mt. 3:4). Such rugged apparel was symbolic of the prophetic office. Interestingly, the great false prophet of the book of Revelation is described as a lamb having two horns who spoke like a dragon (i.e. like Satan; Rev. 13:11). If we accept this interpretation, then we do not have a deceiver who merely attempts to blend into the flock and appear as a true Christian; we also have a person who comes to the church and presents himself as a true preacher sent from God.

In either case, the idea of deceit and great treachery is conveyed. The person comes to the church and appears totally harmless. On the outside he seems like a sincere Christian or a caring teacher, but in reality he is a ravening wolf on the inside. A wolf is the natural enemy of sheep and a ravening wolf is a very hungry, fierce animal on the prowl for food. These false teachers seek to devour and destroy the flock. They want to tear the church in pieces. False prophets, if undetected, will destroy the church from the inside. They appear as messengers of light, but they are really agents of the devil. All of this indicates great craftiness and subtlety. Many believe that such teachers are great men of God and excellent examples of piety. But, in reality, they are leading many people to hell. Paul spoke of those "who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins" (2 Tim. 3:6). Peter warned of false teachers "who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...they will exploit you with deceptive words" (2 Pet. 2:1, 3). Jude wrote of "certain men [who] have crept in unnoticed, who turn the grace of God into lewdness" (v. 4). Paul warned the Ephesian elders saying, "I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Ac. 20:29-30). The apostle even had to warn the Corinthians of counterfeit apostles: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). None of this was new, for the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel saying, "The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst" (Ezek. 22:25).

The Scriptures abound with warnings against false teachers because the fact that they can work secretly and craftily on the inside means that they can do much greater damage to the church than external enemies. Persecutions come and go, but heresies can ruin a church forever. Think, for example, of the damnable heresies of Roman Catholicism, many of which are over one thousand years old. The false teaching of Romanist theologians crafted throughout the middle ages and beyond holds millions of poor souls in the chains of darkness and satanic bondage. The false teaching of higher critics and modernists in the late nineteenth centuries and early twentieth centuries still holds sway over millions of deluded souls in the mainline denominations. The great corruptions of Arminius and John Wesley have essentially destroyed what is called modern evangelicalism. The great doctrine of salvation has been merged with a perverted humanism. Also, anyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that false prophets played a major role in the apostasy and destruction of Israel. "An astonishing and horrible thing

has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:30-31).

False teachers were a dangerous problem even while the apostles were still alive. The apostle John had to warn the churches saying, “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” (1 Jn. 4:1). They have continued to plague the church ever since. In fact, the history of the church has been marked by one battle after another against false teachers. There are multitudes of people who apparently will believe almost anything if it is presented by someone who is an ordained teacher, or seminary professor, or popular conference speaker in the church. They have forgotten our Lord’s warning about wolves in sheep’s clothing. They have neglected to carefully examine their teachings under the light of holy Scripture. Pastors and teachers are only to be followed and believed if their doctrine agrees with Scripture and their lives are consistent with God’s Word.

The identification of false teachers as wolves who sneak into the flock to seize, snatch, tear, kill and devour the sheep ought to make us take note of the great destructive effect of false preaching. This drastic imagery ought to make churches keenly aware of the importance of biblical teaching, correct doctrine and balanced preaching (i.e. preaching the whole counsel of God) in the churches. Yet, in our day, precision in doctrine, biblical content and theological orthodoxy are not considered very important at all. In fact, we could say that doctrinally orthodox preaching is at an all-time low for Protestant churches. The emphasis in our day is church growth at the expense of solid doctrinal preaching. The slogan “doctrine divides” has turned churches toward entertainment and programs and away from the rich biblical theology produced by the Reformers and Puritans. Today, in most evangelical circles, deviations from orthodoxy are considered quite harmless. The really important thing in many of today’s churches is not the truth, but the outward appearance of success. Jesus, however, tells us to view false teachers as savage, hungry wolves whose doctrine (or lack of it) will devour our flesh. His imagery is severe because He does not want us to go down the broad path that leads to destruction.

This sober observation raises the question as to why this warning is so often disregarded in our day. The answer lies in man’s corrupt nature, which is naturally attracted to false doctrine and antinomian ethics. In chapter thirty of Isaiah we read of the rebellious people of Judah who refused to hear God’s law: “Who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits’” (v. 10). The people did not want to hear God’s voice. They were not interested in hearing about their sinfulness and unworthiness before God. They wanted preachers who would lie to them and make them feel comfortable. They wanted “deceit” so they would feel good about themselves. They wanted sermons that catered to their own unrepentant character. Consequently, the popular prophets were false prophets. Hard hearts always want soft preaching.

Jeremiah encountered the same problem: “The prophets prophesy falsely...and My people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:31). “The prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place...’ The prophets prophesy lies in My name” (Jer. 14:13, 14). “Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness.... They continually say to those who despise Me, ‘The LORD has said, “You shall have peace”’; and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, “No evil shall come upon you”’ (Jer. 23:14, 17). False prophets come and try God’s people (cf. Dt. 13:3). Those who do not really love God or His law

cling to false teachers. People in the visible church who are truly regenerate will be preserved by the Holy Spirit and will be led away from such deceivers.

If Jesus Christ had been willing to tell the Jewish people what they wanted to hear, they would have gladly received him. But he said to them, "Because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me" (Jn. 8:45). What a tragic commentary on fallen human nature. Most church goers today are not at all interested in learning about the gospel, or the atonement, or sanctification. No, they would rather hear about self-esteem, prosperity, angels, love and heaven. They will buy sensational books on prophecy (that are more fiction than truth) by the millions, but want nothing that challenges them to holiness. People have "itching ears" for what is new, exciting and spiritually worthless. Jeremiah said, "They make you worthless" (23:16) because their message comes from their own heart. Many modern preachers by "smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple" (Rom. 16:18). Thus, we see the importance of this imperative: "Beware of false prophets." There will always be counterfeit preachers who want to be popular and "successful," who will pander to the carnal appetites of men and women. Consequently, we must be on guard against these deadly savage wolves. They appear to be angels of light. They are so friendly and nice. Their message is smooth and appealing, but their doctrine will tear your soul to pieces and lead you to everlasting destruction. The devil uses them as enemies of Christ to sow tares among the wheat (Mt. 13:25).

How to Identify a False Prophet

After warning His disciples that dangerous teachers do not always appear as they really are, Jesus tells them how to identify false teachers. "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit" (Mt. 7:16-18). Our Lord bases His argument on the biblical teaching that the state of a man's heart will ultimately determine his thoughts, words and actions. As He says in a similar context, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Lk. 6:45). A teacher who is unregenerate and wicked on the inside may be able to fool people for a short time, but eventually his dark character will reveal itself doctrinally, ethically or both. It is simply impossible for a wicked man to counterfeit virtue over a long period of time. A pig always returns to the mire and a dog to its vomit (2 Pet. 2:22). It is impossible for a thorn bush to produce grapes; a thistle plant cannot produce figs which are good, healthy and delicious. Thorns and thistles can only tear clothes and flesh. They produce nothing good for man. It was common knowledge in an agricultural society that the easiest way to identify a tree was not to examine its trunk or bark or even its leaves, but rather its fruit.

In this passage our Lord never says what He means by "fruit." Consequently, there are different opinions among commentators and expositors. Some insist that the bad fruit refers to heretical doctrine, while others restrict it to immoral behavior. If we interpret Jesus' teaching within the broad context of Scripture regarding false teachers we see that there is no good reason to restrict the meaning to one or the other. A sound teacher will have biblical doctrine and lead a holy life, while a false teacher will have erroneous teaching and an inconsistent life. Bad doctrine has an influence on character and conduct.

In Matthew's gospel, the fruit metaphor can represent both behavior and doctrine. John the Baptist challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees to bear fruits worthy of repentance (Mt. 3:8).

This challenge would certainly involve a change of behavior and implies a completely new direction in teaching or doctrine. In Matthew 12:33 the fruit metaphor is used of what men *say* about Jesus Christ. The Pharisees had accused the Savior of casting out demons by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24). Our Lord responds saying that “a tree is known by its fruits”; that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”...and “an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Mt. 12:33, 34, 35). In other words, their evil hearts produced evil teaching about the Messiah. In the parable of the sower the good seed that bears good fruit is a life lived faithfully for Christ (Mt. 13:23).

In the Old Testament there were a variety of tests to determine a false prophet. The prophet's predictions had to come to pass with 100% accuracy (Dt. 18:21-22). If a prophet prophesied in the name of a false god (Dt. 18:20) or enticed men to serve false gods (Dt. 13:1), then he was a pseudo-prophet and had to be executed because he was a great threat to the covenant community (Dt. 13:9-10; 18:20). The emphasis was on whether or not the prophet was really speaking God's words and on the prophet's theology. No true prophet of God would encourage men to violate the first commandment. The false prophet was a wicked teacher who encouraged the people to abandon their faithfulness toward Jehovah. He wanted the covenant people to adopt the broad way of religious pluralism, syncretism and antinomianism. When God condemned the false prophets through Jeremiah, He focused on their behavior and their teaching. The false prophets are profane, wicked, adulterers and liars (Jer. 23:11, 14). They also have teaching that flows out of their evil, antinomian character.

It is very likely that our Lord's audience would have connected this teaching about false prophets in at least a tangential manner to the strong condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees found throughout this sermon. Jesus not only strongly condemns their hypocritical behavior, but also their false teaching. The religious leaders at the time were false religious instructors who led hypocritical lives. They were leading many in the Jewish nation down the broad path which leads to destruction.

Although it is not warranted to *completely* restrict the false prophet's “fruit” to either teaching or behavior; nevertheless, the main focus of application must be on teaching or doctrine. It is the false prophet's role as a supposed spokesman for God that makes him so dangerous. Bad behavior can cause strife and damage to the local church, but false doctrine can lead untold multitudes toward destruction. Moreover hypocritical teachers can often appear to be outwardly righteous before men. False teachers in the church may have a form of godliness that hides the deadly deficiencies of their doctrine. The best way to tell if a preacher is good or bad is to examine his message. Christ is not speaking of false prophets as mere church members, as private professors of Christianity, but as teachers. These ferocious wolves scatter the flock with their smooth, deceitful words. When determining the fruit of a false prophet, doctrine must hold the first place. Consequently, this will be our main focus.

Before we turn our attention to the teaching of false prophets, it is important to make a distinction between false prophets who are so heretical that they are easily identified and the more subtle dangerous false teachers. The metaphor of the wolf in sheep's clothing indicates that the latter category is what is chiefly in mind. Any Bible-believing Christian with a rudimentary knowledge of doctrine ought to be able to detect a blatant heretic. The modernist who rejects biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, miracles and the resurrection is easily identified as a dangerous wolf. The cult leader or Unitarian who rejects the trinity or the divinity of Christ is immediately recognized as a deluded crackpot. The Romanist who teaches salvation by faith plus works and worships idols should not fool any true

evangelical. The scene that Jesus portrays indicates that it takes some time to recognize the bad fruit. The nature of the bad teaching may not be obvious at first. Consequently, as we look at false teachers, we want to note subtle errors. The heretic who mixes dangerous doctrines with old reformation truths or the teacher who presents a perverted picture of God, Christ and salvation by only emphasizing certain doctrines is a great danger to professing Christians.

The False Prophet's Teaching

As we consider the teaching of false prophets we will move from the general to the particular. The main characteristic of the false prophet is that he broadens the narrow gate and way in his preaching. This is clearly the pattern set forth in the Old Testament. The false teacher is one who tells the people what they want to hear so that they will not have to repent of their sins and serve Jehovah with undivided loyalty. Jeremiah says, "They strengthen the hands of evil doers" (23:14). They speak peace when there is none to the people living in habitual unrighteousness (Jer. 23:17). When God brings judgment upon the people for their sins, they tell them not to worry. "They have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11). When the true prophets were identifying sins and telling the people to repent, the false prophets were offering the people empty assurances of God's blessing and deliverance from judgment. Instead of encouraging people to hate their sins, mourn over them and seek forgiveness, they spoke "smooth things" (Isa. 30:10). They plaster the wall with untempered mortar which results in its destruction (Ezek. 13:11ff.). With their lies, they make the heart of the righteous sad and "have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life" (Ezek. 13:22). They do everything they can to please a corrupt civil magistrate and backsliding populace. Their teaching and counseling ministries are designed to maintain the status quo of syncretism and apostasy, even to the point of opposing the true prophets of God. Their amoral optimism, implicit humanism and grasping after a sense of personal peace at any cost affects a number of crucial doctrines.

First, the false teacher holds to a deficient view of Scripture. He is willing to defend practices that are based solely on human tradition and many of his teachings come from his own heart and not God. He implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, denies the sufficiency and perfection of God's Word. A denial of *sola Scriptura* is the foundation of almost all heretical movements. A false teacher may not openly deny the sole authority of Scripture, but in practice unpopular sections of the Bible are simply ignored, explained away or buried in man-made traditions. For example, the scribes and Pharisees believed in the authority of Scripture, but they used what they called the oral law, which were simply human traditions, to interpret the Bible. As a result they held to a number of heresies. They corrupted true religion and turned it into a perverted and absurd legalism. They strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel (Mt. 23:24). By their traditions, they nullified God's law (Mt. 15:3 ff.; Mk. 7:8-9). They greatly over-emphasized their privileged status as Jews (Rom. 2:17ff.) at the expense of the necessity of saving faith and conversion. Christ said that they were blind leaders of the blind (Mt. 15:4), hypocrites (Mk. 7:6), whose hearts were far from God (Mt. 15:8) and who will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 23:13). They were full of inner corruption (Mt. 23:27 ff.) and guilty of persecuting the true people of God (Mt. 23:34-35). Thus, they were designated as "the synagogue of Satan" by Jesus (Rev. 2:9).

In our day among professing evangelicals, the denial of *sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency of Scripture is much more subtle. Pastors give lip service to biblical inerrancy and the inspiration

of Scripture, but they ignore many vital teachings in Scripture. The Bible has much to say about worship, but this teaching is generally ignored because the preacher does not want to offend the natural man or challenge his accumulated traditions. God's moral law has much to say about sanctification and how civil magistrates should rule, but this is often relegated to a former dispensation and replaced with pluralism and the amorphous expression "old-fashioned family values." God's Word teaches that the Bible has the answers to every conceivable problem. But the trend among evangelicals is to reject the Bible as a source of counseling in favor of secular psychology. Worst of all, they almost completely ignore the many things taught in Scripture about redemption that are absolutely crucial for believers. Doctrines such as vicarious atonement, justification by faith, double imputation, election and regeneration are ignored and replaced with the undefined expression "Accept Jesus into your heart" or "Would you like to have a personal relationship with Christ." Everything is so watered down and so easy and comfortable that virtually anyone can call themselves a Christian.

It is very important for us to realize that a false prophet does not have to be a blatant heretic. He doesn't have to be a Romanist, modernist or cult leader. The man who claims to be an evangelical pastor or leader who simply ignores what the Bible has to say about fundamental doctrines (so that people in the pew believe that redemption is some subjective mystical experience), is just as dangerous as a rank heretic because his message is primarily subjective and humanistic. Today many evangelical leaders are willing to praise the pope as a great Christian because they are so non-doctrinal and shallow that they do not even understand why the Reformation took place. These men do not deliberately set out to widen the narrow gate; but their basic ignorance of doctrine and desire for popularity makes them spiritually very dangerous. "Beware of false prophets."

We must be on guard against subtle attacks on sufficiency of Scripture. The false teacher who claims to be evangelical or Reformed will never openly say that the Bible is not adequate to meet our spiritual needs. Instead, he will argue pragmatically. He will set up other authorities next to the Bible or even above the Bible *implicitly*. He will use modern science to reinterpret the early chapters of Genesis. He may use autonomous human reason as his foundation for truth and apologetics. He will turn to secular psychology to solve marital problems. He will argue that church traditions are a good source for formulating worship practices. His preaching is founded upon *dual authorities*. He places the wisdom of this world on the throne with Scripture without even realizing it. The true prophet receives God's Word as it is, accepts it as true and teaches it to God's people. The false prophet thinks that *Scripture is not enough*. He pragmatically elevates human ideas into a new source of ultimate authority. He does not strive to think God's thoughts after Him, but rather unwittingly seeks to act as his own god. Thus, while many modern pastors give lip service to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, their churches are less and less shaped by the teaching of God's Word and more and more shaped by pragmatic, managerial, sociological, marketing, entertainment, therapeutic, self-centered and humanistic values of our modern post-Christian culture. One can go to many "evangelical" churches for years and learn almost nothing about biblical doctrine. And what one does learn is often a deadly mixture of humanism, pop-psychology and heretical, semi-pelagian theology. Beware of false teachers!

It is important to realize that the Jewish rabbis who brought in their human traditions originally did it because they thought they were helping God's people. They thought that fencing the law with human regulations would help God's people be more obedient. The end result was a religion of human pride that rejected both Moses and the Messiah. The Word of God must stand on its own. It does not need our help or ideas. "You shall not add to the word which I command

you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Dt. 4:2; cf. 12:32). “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

One cannot mention false prophets and a deficient view of Scripture without mentioning the Charismatic movement. There are many people in this movement that claim to receive divine revelations. They believe that God speaks directly to them in the same way that He spoke to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Paul and Peter. They will even stand up in the church service and say things such as, “God has said,” or “Thus saith the LORD,” or “Hearken to My Word.” The New Testament epistles, however, make it very clear that supernatural revelations ceased with the completion of the New Testament. Paul teaches when the “perfect” comes, that which is “partial” shall be done away (see 1 Cor. 13:8-12). Prophecy and tongues are no longer needed after the completion of the revelatory process. He also says that the church, which continues to grow, has been built on the completed foundation (*epoikodomethentes*) of the New Testament apostles and prophets (see Eph. 2:19-22). Once the foundation of the church is completed, we do not need further revelations of the Spirit. Consequently, Charismatic prophecies are not from God, but come from some deluded soul’s imagination. Such prophecies are counterfeit. “The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak...that prophet shall die” (Dt. 18:20). The so-called prophets of the Charismatic movement must be viewed as false and exceedingly dangerous, for they turn people away from Scripture toward made-up fantasies. The Charismatic acceptance of these false prophets proves that their movement is not of God, but of man. It is one of the primary reasons that modern churches have more and more turned toward subjective personal experiences and away from the objective truths of Scripture. We must never forget that almost every cult and many deadly heresies have begun with some leader or leaders who supposedly have received some new revelation from God. Everyone from Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Edgar Cayce, Sun Myung Moon, Mary Baker Eddy, Mrs. Herbert Armstrong, Kenneth Hagan, to Kenneth Copeland has claimed some kind of revelation from God. All have abandoned the crucial doctrine of *sola Scriptura* in a quest for something new and exciting. Beware of false prophets!

Second, the false prophet presents a lop-sided, false view of God. Once again, on this doctrine it is not so much of what the false teacher says, but rather what he doesn’t say. He loves to talk about the love and mercy of God, but he neglects the fact that God is righteous and holy; that God hates all the workers of iniquity (Ps. 5:5) and is angry with the wicked every single day (Ps. 7:11). We are told that our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29); that He hates sin with a perfect hatred. The Word of God emphasizes the righteousness and holiness of Jehovah far more than it does His love. The false preacher knows that the holiness, justice and fiery indignation of God are taught in Scripture, but he makes it a point to avoid these terrifying, sobering topics. Why? Because he knows that such subjects are not popular; that many people who listen will be offended or scared off. Therefore, he makes a conscious choice to conceal some of the most important doctrines about God found in the Bible. Some of the most popular pastors of mega-churches have been asked by the media why they do not discuss hell, or the wrath of God. They responded that indeed such things are discussed in Scripture; but they have decided to have a “positive” ministry. They believe they are called to focus on the good things such as God’s love, personal peace, self-esteem and prosperity while leaving the negatives for others to teach. When the pastor of the largest mega-church in America was told that his preaching had much in common with the teaching of the television talk show host Oprah Winfrey, he did not deny it. He simply smiled and pointed out that Oprah Winfrey taught many biblical principles. The same

pastor's television program and best-selling books are very popular with atheists, Roman Catholics and Jews. How could this be if he were preaching the genuine gospel? This would be impossible if he had not removed the offense of the cross. The unregenerate would hate him if he told them the truth about their sins and the coming wrath of God. To preach only a small sliver of the gospel is not the gospel. It rather is, in essence, a dangerous soul-damning heresy.

False preachers do not realize that neglecting important truths found in Scripture is just as dangerous and wicked as making up doctrines. "To conceal the truth is as reprehensible and as damnable as to proclaim an utter heresy; and that is why the effect of such teaching is that of a 'ravening wolf.' It is so pleasing, but it can lead to destruction because it has never confronted them with the holiness and the righteousness and the justice and the wrath of God."² To tell an unrepentant sinner that God loves him and has a wonderful plan for his life is irresponsible and unbiblical. If people are not confronted with the holiness, justice and wrath of God against sin, then the cross of Christ becomes almost meaningless. The cross can only be understood against the background of God's righteousness and wrath. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to eliminate the guilt and punishment for sin. God's nature and character demand that all rebellion against His throne be punished in either the sinner himself or in a sinless substitute. Once the justice and wrath of God is ignored, then the work of Christ simply becomes a smart, life-enhancing choice. People talk about the death of Christ with no content or meaning.

Moreover, false teachers in our day usually redefine the sovereignty of God in a manner that makes God impotent to save. The God that the false prophets proclaim is not the sovereign LORD of Scripture. The Bible says that "salvation is from the LORD" (Jon. 2:9). God's work of redemption in Christ is rooted in the fact that He is sovereign over everything that exists. The certainty of our salvation in Jesus is based on the biblical truth that God's purpose can never and will never fail. Paul says that true believers were predestined by God "according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11); that ultimately we were elected and saved by God, not because of our works or anything in us, but because of Him who calls (cf. Rom. 9:11). Jehovah "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim. 1:9).

When false teachers deny the sovereignty of God and replace it with an Arminian, semi-Pelagian or open theism concept of sovereignty, they destroy the very foundation upon which the certainty of the gospel rests. They teach that God wants to save and tries to save, but the foundation of salvation really rests with sinful man. The great Reformed scholar B. B. Warfield points out that the teacher who embraces Arminianism cannot even honestly recite the Apostle's Creed. He writes, "When one says, he tells us, 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty,' he means it with reserve for in the domain of man's moral choices under grace, man himself is almighty, according to God's self-limitation in making man in his image and after his likeness. God himself, he goes on to declare, has a creed which begins: 'I believe in man, almighty in his choices.'"³ Because the false teacher denies the biblical definition of God's sovereignty, he also denies the immediacy of saving grace and the supernaturalism of salvation. He will argue that there are supernatural elements in it; but ultimately everything boils down to man's autonomous, sovereign choice. Logically, this view is the total rejection of Christianity. "Beware of false prophets."

False teachers, in their attempt to justify their unbiblical concept of sinful man having a completely free autonomous will, have dethroned God. They have stripped God of His

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:245.

³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 84-85.

omnipotence. Pink notes this tragic fact when he writes, “The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man. The God of the popular mind is the creation of a maudlin sentimentality. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence. To say that God the Father has purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ; when as a matter of common observation, it is apparent that the great majority of our fellow-men are dying in sin, and passing into a hopeless eternity: is to say that God the Father is *disappointed*, that God the Son is *dissatisfied*, and that God the Holy Spirit is *defeated*.”⁴

Because the false teacher rejects the biblical understanding of God’s sovereignty, he does not speak of salvation as something accomplished and applied by God. Instead, redemption is viewed as two-sided; God does His part with the work of Christ and man makes this redemption effective by appropriating it. This is a *synergistic* view of salvation. Faith is not viewed as a gift of God (cf. Eph. 2:8), but as an autonomous *work* of man. In this scheme, people are not saved *by* or *through* faith (in the biblical view faith is an instrument which lays hold of Christ), but rather *because* of faith. In other words, they posit that God rewards those who seek Jesus and believe with salvation *because of what they did*. According to this view, the Savior does not really save anyone. The decisive act in salvation is made man’s autonomous choice of Christ. The all-powerful resurrected Lord is helpless to save sinners and thus must sit and wait for men to exercise their free will. According to the false (Arminian or semi-Pelagian) teacher, it is up to man whether or not he will justify himself by making a salvation decision. The effectiveness of God’s grace as well as God’s sovereign dispensing of His grace is entirely limited by or dependent upon man’s “free” will. The very common idea in our day that God has somehow voluntarily ceased to be sovereign over certain aspects of His creation has resulted in a gospel every bit as false and soul-damning as the faith-works synergism of Roman Catholicism. “Beware of false prophets.” Any teacher who preaches an Arminian or semi-Pelagian gospel is a dangerous false prophet who has no business whatsoever entering into a pulpit. To sit under such preaching is to place oneself in extreme spiritual danger.

Third, the false prophet presents a false gospel. The great ignorance of doctrine and negative view of theology that characterizes much of modern “evangelicalism” is a direct result of the work of false teachers. Many pastors do not understand many doctrines that are central to the gospel such as justification, expiation, propitiation, redemption and reconciliation. Consequently, people are basically told that Christ somehow died for everybody. The gospel has, in the main, been abandoned for what are considered more practical matters such as having a fulfilling life. When attempts are made to preach the gospel, the message is grossly deficient and heretical. Some of the characteristics of false gospel preaching are as follows.

The preaching of the law has been largely replaced with either a vague general reference to sin, or with a hedonistic offer of the gospel. Paul said that “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). The preaching of the moral law shows us the utter sinfulness of sin, our complete guilt and unworthiness before God and our total helplessness to do anything about our own salvation. Paul says he “would not have known sin except through the law” (Rom. 7:7). The more we see the specific requirements of the moral law, the more we will understand the righteousness of God and the fact that our only hope is Christ’s sacrificial death and imputed righteousness. But, tragically, due to the influence of dispensationalism on evangelicalism, the detailed, searching, convicting preaching of the law has been replaced with a detached, general

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 20.

appeal: “Do you admit you are a sinner?” Most people would answer “yes.” They know that they are not perfect. But there is no strong conviction or sense of despair in such preaching. Moreover, if the moral law in the Old Testament was arbitrary and not based on God’s nature and character and is abrogated in the New Testament era, as dispensationalists allege, then why is the cross even necessary? Without a biblical view of the law, there is really no reason why Jesus had to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death on the cross. After all, Christ came to *satisfy* the demands of God’s holy law with regard to obedience and punishment. If people deny the absolute, unchanging character of God’s moral law, then eventually they will deny the biblical doctrine of justification, for an antinomian version of Christianity has no real need of any judicial act of God to achieve salvation. “The Gospel has such respect to the Law of God, and the latter is so much the reason and ground of the former, and so essential to the wisdom and glory of it, that it cannot be understood by him who is ignorant of the Law: consequently, our idea and apprehension of the Gospel will be erroneous and wrong just so far as we have wrong notions of God’s Law.”⁵ Perhaps this explains why the modern “gospel” has largely degenerated into: “Ask Jesus to come into your heart.”

The false teacher presents Christ as a Baal god who came to give people bigger crops and a more fertile livestock. Contemporary preaching is often done in the midst of an atmosphere of entertainment with rock bands, country singers, and emotional music. The presentation of the gospel is not adorned with the doctrine of God, the law or God’s wrath against sin, but is accompanied with hedonistic promises about a prosperous, fulfilling life. Jesus is set forth as a cosmic Santa Claus or a mere fire escape from the great tribulation. The music, excitement and sociological pressures are followed by an appeal to “ask Jesus in” or “accept Christ as your personal Savior.” “Accept Christ, and have a better life now, more money, a better car, a bigger house and more self-esteem.” Consequently, people walk the isle, pray a prayer and sign a card, often with no real sense of sin or no real understanding of the gospel. They know nothing about justification by faith, the substitutionary atonement or propitiation. The first thing that is needed for biblical faith is a true knowledge about the facts of the gospel. But contemporary preaching is so shallow and so filled with worthless, humanistic gimmicks and emotional stories that people are not given enough biblical information to grasp the genuine object of faith. People end up having faith in faith or trusting in some subjective mystical experience. The preacher may have meant well and may have believed that he was really preaching the gospel; but his message has left people on the broad path without them even knowing it.

The false preacher has a heretical understanding of the effects of the fall upon man and teaches that men are saved by their own “decision for Christ.” The Bible teaches that men are fallen, lost and depraved because of Adam’s sin (Rom. 6:12 ff.; 1 Cor. 15:21; Gen. 8:21; Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Jn. 3:6; Eph. 2:3). It teaches that man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-5), spiritually blind (Isa. 6:9-10; Jn. 8:43-44, 47; 1 Cor. 2:14), completely helpless (Rom. 5:6; Ezek. 16:6) and thus totally incapable of saving himself (Jn. 1:4-5; 3:19-20; Rom. 10:20; cf. Isa. 65:1), meeting God half-way or even taking the first step toward God. The false teacher says that man is not dead, only sick; that man’s decision causes God to act and regenerate him; and that man begins the work of conversion. In this false system grace is no longer the unmerited favor of God to those who deserve to perish, but the aid of God so that man can save himself through an autonomous act of the will. As we noted before, the false prophet teaches that man’s free will is the key which unchains God and allows Him to help man. In other words, God only helps those who first help themselves.

⁵ Samuel Hopkins, as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 358.

But the Scriptures teach that Jesus merited salvation in the fullest sense of the term by His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. He sits enthroned as King at the right hand of God. Christ sends the Holy Spirit to work directly on the hearts of His elect, regenerating dead hearts, enabling men to believe the gospel and repent of their sins (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:11-13; Ac. 16:13-14; Jn. 1:13; Rom. 9:16; Heb. 7:24-25). Jesus said, "The wind [the Holy Spirit] blows where it wishes.... So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:8; cf. Jn. 17:8). Those who believe in Christ "were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:13). Our Lord said, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (Jn. 6:44).

The false teacher tells man that the ground of his salvation is not the person and work of Christ, but ultimately the personal choice of an autonomous man. When people express doubts about their salvation, they are instructed to look back at their decision for Christ. God is presented as a great resource that man can tap at will. God exists to serve and glorify man instead of the other way around. The doctrine of salvation is turned upside down and God is made man's servant and instrument. At every step the initiative belongs to man and not God.

The false teacher will say that Christ's death did not actually secure anyone's salvation since God can only choose those people who first choose Christ. Thus, when a typical evangelical is asked why he has a title to eternal life, he does not speak about Christ's dying as a substitute for His people or about God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of Christ's work, but rather will say, "I know I am saved because I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior" or "I asked Jesus to come into my heart." The false teacher reduces the gospel from the objective work of Christ, sovereignly bestowed by the resurrected, all-powerful King upon the elect, to sovereign man letting Christ subjectively dwell in his heart. These very common expressions "accept Christ" and "let Christ come into your heart" are not found in Scripture and were never used by our Lord, the apostles or the New Testament evangelists. Evangelicals will appeal to Revelation 3:20 where the Savior stands at the door and knocks to be let in as a justification for such appeals; but, the context clearly indicates that Jesus is asking backslidden *Christians* to repent and reestablish proper fellowship. This passage has *absolutely nothing* to do with evangelism.

Another passage used to justify modern evangelical methods is John 1:12: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." What does it mean to receive Christ? If one studies the gospel of John, does one find Christ and the apostles inviting people to receive Jesus into their heart? In the gospel of John, receiving Christ is synonymous with believing in Christ. Jesus said, "I have come in My Father's name and you do not receive Me.... For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words" (Jn. 5:43, 46-47). The only way to receive Christ is to believe in Him. To receive Christ is to believe the words which He speaks and the scriptural testimony regarding Him. Believing in Christ means trusting in Christ's person, character, work and word; one believes that Christ can carry out His promises. He can save to the uttermost. Receiving Christ is not a formula through which man sovereignly controls the Lord of lords and King of kings, but is a wholehearted trust in the divine-human mediator Jesus Christ. While, in the gospel of John, people are never exhorted to receive Christ as their personal savior, the verb *pisteuo* (to believe) occurs 98 times. In evangelism, the Holy Spirit's emphasis should be our emphasis. There is nothing wrong with the phrase, "receive Christ," as long as it is biblically defined.

The biblical passages which refer to Christ dwelling in the believer are never used in the context of an evangelistic formula, but are always used in the context of Christian sanctification and assurance (read Rom. 8:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:5). Everyone who is regenerated and believes has the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ within. We are never told to invite Christ in, but rather to believe “in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not the works of the law” (Gal. 2:19). Inviting Jesus in sounds nice, but it is very different from believing in Christ.

The terminology of asking Jesus to come into the heart as a method of salvation is contrary to Scripture and the Protestant Reformation. The Bible emphasizes that Christ’s work of redemption for His people is *objective*. His perfect obedience to the law and sacrificial death took place in history *outside* of the sinner. When a person believes in Christ, he is declared righteous by God the Father in the heavenly court. This also takes place *outside* the sinner. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *result* of justification and not the cause of it. Thus, the terminology of inviting Jesus into the heart has nothing to do with justification. The indwelling of Christ’s Spirit is not what justifies. The work of the Holy Spirit in man is that of regeneration, effectual calling and sanctification. Modern evangelical methods of evangelism do not differentiate between an imputed righteousness (justification) and an infused righteousness (sanctification). Our Lord’s objective work *for* His people is confused with His work *in* His people. This is the great error of Roman Catholicism. Preaching and doctrine today is so shallow and unbiblical that redemption is seen merely as some undefined mystical existential relationship with Jesus that we sovereignly initiate. The false prophet substitutes a man-centered subjectivism for the true, objective, forensic nature of justification. This teaching is rank heresy, even though it is very common among evangelicals. “Beware of false prophets.” Be on guard and watch for their doctrine can devour your soul.

The false preacher does not preach the necessity of repentance. Men are told that they can receive Jesus as Savior, while receiving Him as Lord is not necessary to salvation. If a person wants to make the Redeemer Lord of his life down the road and lead a victorious life that is fine; but, it is wrong to insist on it. In fact, a number of prominent dispensational evangelical ministers and scholars have attacked the doctrine that repentance is necessary as a dangerous heresy. But what they call heresy is simply the historic Protestant position. That repentance is part of the gospel is proven by the following considerations.

a) The message of the apostles was “believe on *the Lord* Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:31). Paul said, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ *the Lord*” (2 Cor. 4:5). In the book of Acts the word “Savior” appears only twice (5:31; 13:23), while the title “Lord” occurs 92 times. The most commonly quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament are Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 2:7, both of which speak of Christ’s exaltation and lordship. Paul says that Christians are to confess with the mouth “the Lord Jesus” (Rom. 10:9). The apostles and New Testament evangelists preached the lordship of Christ and obviously expected sinners to believe in Him as both Savior and Lord. The modern idea that we can only trust in part of Christ or divide Him up like a pie and take what we want so we can continue a life of sin is a deadly doctrine. We must believe in Jesus as He is revealed in the Scriptures. He must embrace Him as Prophet, Priest *and* King. We must look to His humiliation as well as His exaltation. The one leads directly to the other. They are organically connected. If we trust Him as Lord, then as a result we will repent and lay down the weapons of our warfare against Him. The antinomian false teacher who denies the necessity of repentance implicitly denies the resurrection, exaltation and enthronement of the Messiah.

b) When Paul described the gospel message that he preached, he expressed two separate elements. The apostle taught publicly, “testifying to Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 20:21). There is faith which is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). This faith (which includes understanding, assent and trust) lays hold of the Redeemer and thus man is justified *by faith alone*. But saving faith never remains by itself. Although faith is *not* repentance, conversion or obedience to God’s law, it inevitably leads to all these things. God always follows the gift of faith (which is the instrument by which we lay hold of Christ and all His saving benefits) with the gift of repentance (which is a fruit of our justification). The antinomian false prophets do not seem to be able to distinguish between justification (salvation in the narrow sense) and salvation in the broad sense (which includes all the other saving graces such as repentance and sanctification).

The false teacher not only turns faith into a work by making it an autonomous choice of man instead of a gift of God, but also turns right around and essentially denies that justification immediately leads to sanctification. They may give lip service to the narrow gate, but they essentially deny the narrow way. However, God has ordained that although we are saved solely by Christ apart from any works of our own. True faith (that flows from a regenerate heart) always results in repentance, becoming a disciple of Christ, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, doing good works and persevering to the end of life. The false prophet essentially denies the teaching of Romans 6 that union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection results in a sanctified life for every true believer. How could anyone teach that we can continue a life of slavery to sin and still be a Christian when Paul says that we have died to sin’s reigning power (Rom. 6:2, 6, 11)? The apostle answers both legalists and antinomians by teaching that the person justified by Christ is sanctified by Him as well. Justification and sanctification cannot be separated. There is simply no such thing as a Christian who has been justified, yet has not also been made holy by the power of our Lord’s death and resurrection. The typical modern “evangelical” Arminian preacher is so full of heresy and gross error that his theological system is an irrational, unbiblical mess. “Beware of false prophets.”

c) The Scriptures teach that people who habitually engage in wicked behavior are *not* Christians. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Paul says "such *were* [past tense] some of you." Many people in the Corinthian church had lived a lifestyle characterized by sinful behavior, but once they were converted, that wicked lifestyle was put off. Paul says that believers should not even eat with professing Christians who engage in such wicked behavior. "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person" (1 Cor. 5:11). Hodge writes, "A man professing to be a Christian professes to renounce all of these sins; if he does not act consistently with his profession, he is not to be recognized as a Christian. We are not to do anything which would sanction the assumption that the offenses here referred to are tolerated by the gospel."⁶ Spurgeon concurs, "If the professed convert distinctly and deliberately declares that he knows the Lord's will, but does not mean to attend to it, you are not to pamper his presumptions, but it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved. Do not suppose that the Gospel is magnified or God-

⁶ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 [1857, 59]), 60.

glorified by going to the world...and telling them that they may be saved at this moment by simply 'accepting Christ' as their Savior, while they are wedded to their idols, and their hearts are still in love with sin. If I do so, I tell them a lie, pervert the Gospel, insult Christ, and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness."⁷

We are not asserting that believers are intrinsically perfect, sinless or that their works are meritorious in any way. The Bible teaches that Christians are simultaneously sinful and justified, that even our best works are tainted with sin (cf. Lk. 17:10). We are saying, however, that the old, unconverted lifestyle of walking in darkness is broken and defeated by the work of the Spirit in us. As John writes, "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 Jn. 2:3-4). The person who continually walks in sin is lawless (cf. 1 Jn. 3:6), does not have a saving relationship to Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 3:6), is of the devil (cf. Jn. 3:9) and has not been born again. "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). In light of these and many other passages we wonder how today's anti-Lordship salvation false teachers could pass off our precious Savior as a mere fire escape from hell. The idea that Jesus came so that we could have remission of sins and still live like the heathen is satanic to the core. "Beware of false prophets."

Fourth, the false prophet often is a master of using trickery and deceit in his teaching ministry. It is important that we understand how many false prophets operate. Some of their deceptive tactics are as follows. They will focus on passages that *appear* to support their position, while ignoring the many passages that refute their theology. Behind every false teacher lies an erroneous hermeneutic. Every false teacher, from Romanists, Federal Vision advocates to dispensational antinomians, refuses to use the analogy of Scripture when formulating doctrine. A man can appear quite orthodox, but if he does not preach the whole counsel of God regarding salvation then he has broadened the gate and way. Often they will use old, well-defined and accepted theological terms with a completely new and unique meaning. For example, modernists will still speak about the glorious resurrection of Christ; but by this expression, they do not mean what the Bible means. They do not believe in or speak of a literal real bodily resurrection that took place in history. Similarly, the Auburn Avenue heretic will speak about the wonderful Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, but his definition of faith is a *working* faith. Faith is not simply a mere instrument, but is inclusive of good works as well. Therefore, his doctrine has more in common with the Council of Trent than the Westminster Standards. When he says that he subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith he is not being honest. False teachers are very adept at equivocating.

Many false teachers will hold to teachings that are contradictory or mutually exclusive. The anti-Lordship salvation dispensationalist will insist that we are saved by grace alone but also will insist that faith is not a gift; repentance is not a gift; and perseverance in sanctification or a continued trust in Christ is not a gift. In other words, getting saved is really primarily a work of man. Many of the Federal Vision false shepherds will insist that they accept justification by faith alone, but then will completely contradict that statement within minutes. The tactic of speaking out of both sides of one's mouth has been used very successfully by the Auburn Avenue heretics. Many professing Christians cling to their statements of orthodoxy as proof that these men are still true prophets of God. But when their teaching as a whole is carefully examined, their errors are exposed. Don't be deceived by double talk, equivocations and deceptive language.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, in *Today's Evangelism*, 25-26.

False prophets are experts at imposing their unbiblical presuppositions upon passages in the Bible that are not in accord with their system. For example, even though John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and the apostles preach the necessity of repentance, the anti-Lordship salvation dispensationalists argue that such passages only apply to a former dispensation or can only be applied to the Jews. When the Bible explicitly says that the unregenerate are spiritually dead and blind and unable to choose Christ without a prior work of regeneration, the Arminian false prophet still insists that man must have a free will in spiritual matters. Often humanistic philosophical ideas are imposed on the text of Scripture without the false teacher even being aware of it. Isaiah spoke of such blind teachers when he said, “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

If orthodox pastors and Christians begin to point out the false doctrine of these wolves, the false teacher will appeal to the peace of the church, Christian love and the necessity of Christian unity to avoid scrutiny and church discipline. Such tactics have been very effective. Often in the modern era, men who attempt to deal with such false prophets are hated and accused of being unloving. The mushy, uninformed middle historically has almost always sided with false teachers because such men seem so nice and so loving. People who do not understand theology wonder why these false teachers are being attacked. Tragically, we are living in a time when professing Christians are exceptionally ignorant and want to accept and welcome virtually anyone who claims to be a Christian. But men who resist the truth and teachers with corrupt minds must be opposed with true apostolic doctrine (cf. 2 Tim. 3:6-10). John writes, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11). If we treat false teachers as true Christians and do not oppose them, then we increase their opportunities of doing spiritual harm to others and they will never be able to see their own errors. The “compassion” of much modern evangelical and Reformed churches is cruel, unbiblical and dangerous. “Beware of false prophets.” Our love of man cannot be separated from our love of God and truth. A love of that which is good and true cannot exist without an intense hatred of evil and all that opposes Christ.

The present state of the modern church in general is one of crisis. Many pastors and Christians are ignorant, weak and ineffective—both personally and socially. The church cannot be a salt and light to modern culture until it repents, casts out the false preachers and returns to the great Christian truths rediscovered during the Protestant Reformation. All the talk today about Jesus, a better life now, church growth, building expansions and various exciting programs is all worthless without the true gospel and the call to discipleship found in the Sermon on the Mount. May God bring revival and reformation to our land. If He does not, we may be entering a new dark age of ignorance and superstition in the guise of Christian piety.

Some Applications

In our examination of false prophets, we have seen that the greatest danger to professing Christians is their teaching. Their teaching can not only infect and destroy individual professors of Christ, but can also destroy whole churches and denominations. Therefore, it is important that we take steps to protect ourselves and our churches from these ravenous wolves. There are a number of things that can be done.

First, after examining the deceptive, subtle methodology and content of the false prophet's teaching, we can see the vital necessity for all professing Christians to carefully study the Bible and theology. When believers have a solid understanding of truth, they have the ability to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit, the orthodox and the heterodox. "When the understanding is dominated by the Word the whole soul is 'full of light,' so that all its faculties are under its beneficent influence: the conscience being informed, the affections turned to their legitimate object, the will moved in the right direction. In God's light we 'see light' (Psalm xxxvi, 9) perceiving the difference between good and evil, the things to be sought and those to be avoided."⁸

The reason why false teachers have such a wide audience today among professing Christians is the simple fact that people know hardly anything about theology or biblical interpretation. Today most people spend virtually all their spare time watching television, playing video games or engaging in other frivolous entertainments. Consequently, when a preacher comes along with some new idea that is heretical and dangerous, the people accept it because of the "authority," charisma and intellect of the pastor instead of the authority of God's Word. Popery, modernism and cults can only prosper in the soil of ignorance.

The Protestant leaders of the first and second Reformation periods understood the importance of doctrine and thus the greatest theologians of these eras produced creeds and confessions (e.g., Heidelberg, Belgic, First and Second Helvetic and the Westminster Standards) so that the flock could learn the whole counsel of God in an organized, systematic form. We would do well to familiarize ourselves with these precious documents and teach them to our children to inoculate ourselves against the new, exciting, but devious false shepherds that arise from time to time.

Second, our Lord is teaching us by implication the importance of attending a faithful church. No believer who embraces the Reformed faith or biblical Christianity should attend a church that teaches or tolerates Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, antinomianism, modernism, corrupt worship (i.e. high church or celebrative worship) or the Federal Vision heresy. "Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err, and destroy the way of thy paths" (Isa. 3:12). Paul wrote, "Now I urge you brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

If people attend a church of compromise and declension, then it is virtually inevitable that they will compromise and decline spiritually. The deceptive systems of error, like the first lie itself, generally have something that is fascinating and desired by the sinful flesh. The only safe course, therefore, is separation from such corruption. A corrupt church may not make obvious bold departures from the truth. But rather their teaching and leadership causes the flock to stray gradually. The deviation from the straight and narrow path is scarcely noticed until it is too late and apostasy has gained a solid foothold. Jesus said, "Take heed what you hear" (Mk. 4:24). All instruction is not toward life and godliness. Teachers of evil, time servers and ministers of Satan abound. We have seen a steady decline in faithfulness in the last generation among Presbyterian communions which are regarded as "conservative." These compromisers with sin and heresy cannot be trusted to lead the flock until they repent and return to the old paths. They subscribe to the Westminster Standards with crossed fingers and tragically most people love to have it so. The spirit of humanistic tolerance, antinomian love and post-enlightenment pluralism is guiding much of the leadership of these corrupt communions. "Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines" (Heb. 13:9). "[W]e should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 372.

about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Eph. 4:14). Beware of seminaries and denominations whose fruit grows more rotten and corrupt over time. “By their fruit you will know them.”

Third, it is crucial that churches and denominations not only identify false teachers in churches, seminaries and colleges and point them out to the flock; but, they also must be willing to discipline them and cast them out of the church. Paul says that such men should be deposed from the ministry: “A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Tit. 3:10-11). The word translated “reject” (the imperative *paraitore*) means that the person is to be dismissed or removed from membership in the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Thess. 3:14; Mt. 18:17-18). The apostle tells us that refutations and warnings are not enough when the false teacher is obstinate. Church discipline must be applied in order to protect the flock from these hungry wolves.

Paul teaches that the church has a responsibility to stop false teachers from spreading their heresy among God’s people. He writes, “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers [i.e. those who contradict Scripture]. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. 12-16). When the apostle says that their mouths must be stopped he uses a verb (*epistomizein*) which has the primary meaning of to “stop the mouth either with a bridle or muzzle or gag.”⁹ Such men must be silenced; they must not be allowed to teach. If they persist, they must be excommunicated. Gangrenous limbs must be removed to preserve the health and life of the body. Calvin writes,

A good pastor ought therefore to be on the watch, so as not to give silent permission to wicked and dangerous doctrines to make gradual progress, or to allow wicked men an opportunity of spreading them. But it may be asked, “How is it possible for a bishop to constrain obstinate and self-willed men to be silent? For such persons, even though they are vanquished in argument, still do not hold their peace; and it frequently happens that, the more manifestly they are refuted and vanquished, they become the more insolent; for not only is their malice strengthened and inflamed, but they give themselves up to indolence.” I reply, when they have been smitten down by the sword of God’s word, and overwhelmed by the force of the truth, the Church may command them to be silent; and if they persevere, they may at least be banished from the society of believers, so that they shall have no opportunity of doing harm.¹⁰

As travelers on the hard and narrow path, let us beware of those who pervert the truth and seduce professing Christians to the broad path that leads to destruction. Although they deceive many, they do not deceive God. These false teachers who produce bad fruit will be cut down, and cast into the fire. May God sharpen our perception of the truth and enable us to identify those things that are a great danger to our souls.

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[HOME PAGE](#)

⁹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:600.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 298.

