

# PROPHETS

Spring 1990

As a foundation from which to make some observations concerning a widespread problem in the Church, we need to provide a brief word concerning the ministry of prophets. Without attempting to be complete, we need to say the following as being minimum, even simplistic: As priests represent humanity to God, prophets represent God to humanity. While they often announce God's agenda ahead of its out-working, more often they are involved in providing a divine perspective on events, which are already taking place. In other words, they look at things from God's point of view, and have the task of communicating God's view point to those involved.

Against this background, let's begin by looking at Matthew's Gospel: MAT 7:15-20 *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*

*“False prophets”* in this context, are those who appear, and may even be like those to whom they are speaking. Outwardly in, “sheep's clothing,” they seem to be part of our community of belief. It may even be possible that they embrace most of the essentials of our own understanding of God, and His purposes. The problem lies in the area of those things about which they have a different perspective, and to the degree that they represent their perspective as being that of God. In other words, they present a perspective, and do so with prophetic authority. When the perspective, so represented, is not that of The Lord, then, they are acting as *“false prophets.”*

As a community of believers, we are admonished to *“let the prophets speak...”* and then *“...the rest judge.”* In the Matthew passage, there is reason to believe that the relevant factors, on which judgment is to be based, include fruit associated with the prophet's life, and not just the perspective offered in the Name of The Lord. Where is the prophet coming from? Where is this person going? What is their impact? What is their authority?

The focus of the passage is on prophets who come in the Name of The Lord. They may even know the Lord, but be misguided in their calling, doctrine, self-assessment, and certainly not operating in the Spirit in their prophetic operation. Not only is this possible, but to hear Paul tell it, (about which more, shortly), it is to be expected. Not only is it possible to know the Lord, and be a false prophet, but zealous in the roll, to the point of having the action and spirit of a ferocious wolf.

## SAVAGE WOLVES

In the following passages, we see that wolves are not limited to the community of believers:

MAT 10:16,17 *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.”*

LUK 10:3 *“Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”* Here the wolves are the community of unbelievers by whom we are surrounded. It is not just that there are some wolves among them. It is that they surround and react to the believers as a pack of wolves surround defenseless sheep. The response of the believer is to be as *“shrewd as snakes,”* Genesis tells us that *“serpents are shrewder than any other creature;”* as *“innocent as doves;”* and elsewhere, as *“bold as lions.”*

As sheep, we need to know how serpents think and operate. When Satan came as the *“prince of this world”* to Jesus in His eleventh hour, Jesus said *“he (Satan) had nothing in Him.”* This is to say, Jesus was as innocent as a dove. Because He was innocent as a dove, Satan had nothing in him, had no hook in, or handle on Him. Jesus never *“...gave place to the Devil.”* As a result, Satan could not harm Jesus in any eternal sense. In fact, all that Satan could do, was to be God's instrument in the, *“...perfection through suffering”* of Jesus as the *“...author of our salvation...”*

By faith we have the innocence of Jesus. Jesus is also the *“Lion of the tribe of Judah.”* By faith we also have the boldness of the lion of God. No wolf or pack of wolves is likely to be victorious over, or even attack a lion in its prime.

We need to recognize that we are as sheep surrounded by the wolves of this world, perhaps even more important, we need to be able to recognize those among us who are behaving as wolves. A wolf in the house is likely to be much more devastating than one on the outside.

We cite the passage below, because it brings out an important fact about those who are false, or are operating in a wrong spirit. They “*claim to be somebody.*” This can be very subtle in those who are “good” at it, but it is almost always present in false prophets, and certainly true of those who are operating aggressively to the point of being “*ferocious wolves.*”

*ACT 5:36 “Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.”*

If we can see them for what they are, and respond appropriately, they will come to nothing. Unfortunately, too often, we haven't seen them for what they are, or we haven't responded properly, and they have not always come to nothing, particularly in their impact on the Body of Christ.

*ACT 20:28 “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”*

Here in Acts, Paul is admonishing the Elders, who have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit, to be shepherds of the community of believers. In the exercise of their authority, they are to keep watch, first over themselves, presumably in their relationships with each other, and also the flock. It is clear in what then follows as the focus of Paul's concern, that Paul is very concerned about wolves, and particularly wolves that are in the house or trying to get in the house.

*ACT 20:29-31 “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”*

Paul not only expected wolves to get into the house, but he came to Ephesus with this expectation. So much so that, from the time of his arrival, he “*never stopped warning them day and night with tears.*” As with Jesus, Paul makes it clear that these are not nice wolves, or just wolves, but “*savage wolves.*”

Paul who had the “*wisdom of serpents, the gentleness of doves, and the boldness of lions,*” knew that as long as he was on the scene, the wolf pack would be held at bay. The wolf pack was no match for Paul, a healthy lion, and Paul knew it. “*He*

*who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” Paul knew that after his departure these elders collectively, would not have Paul's ability to deal with wolves. He also knew that one of the reasons would be that even some of these elders would turn into savage wolves. Paul “*knew*” this. He was convinced of it, and most probably because of his prior experience elsewhere.

It is little wonder then, that, “*Save the Lord watch the city, the watchmen watch in vain,*” when some of the watchmen turn out to be wolves. Acknowledging the problem, we need to take a look at the methodology and the fruit of “*savage wolves.*”

“*...Men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*” “*Men will arise...*” In light of our earlier discussion of the matter of authority as it relates to men and women, it is probably no accident that it will be “*men*” who will arise. The next thing to look out for is that they will “*arise.*” Kingdom leadership descends. It comes down from heaven, and is heavenly. Gentile leadership arises. It comes up out of the earth, and is earthly.

They will build their operation around the “*truth.*” Likely this “*truth*” includes the Old Testament, but very probably the gospel as well. In a very real sense, the Gospel is Christ. The false gospel is Christ plus something else. In Paul's day the “circumcision group” was brand “X” number one, but there were other gospels. In our own day, there are countless others. **Every gospel, which divides the Body of Christ is False.** Jesus makes us one. Jesus plus something else is a “distortion of the truth.”

Distortion of the truth is the method. This means that false prophets have to be knowledgeable about the truth, and they also have to be on the inside, that is to say, they have to have the trust of those they are leading astray. Their knowledge of the truth provides the point of entry into that trust. Knowledge is good, and trust is good, but neither provides the assurance that there won't be abuse or the abuse will be recognized by those who are about to place their trust or are already trusting.

**The fruit, and apparent goal of false prophets is that they “... draw away disciples after them...”** Paul knew about this problem. In Corinth there were those who were saying “*...I follow Paul...*” Paul could have caused or even encouraged this attitude on the part of those at Corinth who trusted him, but he did not. He neither caused it nor encouraged it, nor even allowed it to continue. Rather he saw this attitude as being childish, carnal, earthly. A godly quality in Paul, seldom seen in our own day, is that he was willing to rebuke his own following for their inordinate loyalty.

**To “lead away” presupposes a place that is not “away.” In Ephesus, that place was the unity of the Body of Christ in Ephesus. The fruit, and even intention of false prophets is the destruction of this unity of the Body.**

There was nothing wrong with some of the Corinthian believers having a special closeness to Paul, or Apollos or Peter, but if their apprehension of that closeness was impacting them in such a way as to cause them not to get along with each other, then they held the relationship with a wrong spirit. They were “carnal.” They had an identity crises. The evidence was that they were calling themselves stuff. It is natural for children to experience bad attitudes in their relationships. Healthy parenting is designed to deal with these immature and destructive, even devilish attitudes. Paul was a healthy spiritual parent. Many spiritual parents are not.

God is very clear in His Word about “*place*” where the unity of the body is concerned. The degree to which the matter of “*place*” has become confused, is the degree, and extent to which we have already been “*drawn away*” in our own day. **Any relationship, be it personal, corporate or institutional, which acts on you in such a way as, for your part, to reduce your ability to get along with the Body of Christ in the “place where you live” is either an ungodly relationship, or is impacting you in an ungodly way.**

There are increasing numbers of relational structures, and authority structures, which are being imposed on the Body of Christ, and which, by intention or fruit are causing, encouraging, or maintaining the division of The Body of Christ. The time demands alone are sufficient so that there is no time left to relate to the rest of the Body of Christ where we live. This should not be. Those who are presenting these structures to the Body of Christ in the Name of The Lord, as being representative of God's purpose and perspective are, to that degree false prophets.

The “*place*” from which we are to be “*on guard*” against being “*drawn away*,” is the unity of The Body of Christ, the Church in your town. If your “church” is not named after your town, the only name God ever used for a Church, or if there are other “churches” in your town where the people of God are meeting with out regard for the rest of the Body, then you have already been “*drawn away*.”

Where is the prophet coming from? Where is this person going? What is their impact? What is their authority? These questions are all designed to help in identifying whether or not the prophetic operation is from above or from below. **The unity of the Body of Christ, is such a foundational truth, that any operation which acts to destroy this unity should be immediately suspect.** Paul,

himself used this as a bench mark by which to measure his own work, and we can permit ourselves to do no less:

About the Israelites, Paul says, “...that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own...”<sup>1</sup> If their zeal was not based on knowledge, then upon what was it based?

## DECEPTION

Jesus' disciples came to Him, and asked two questions: When...?, and What...?.<sup>2</sup> He began His response with the warning: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” God, in Jesus Christ was about to make a new creation. The old creation had been damaged by deception.

Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus said: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”<sup>3</sup>

“You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>4</sup>

“Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”<sup>5</sup> “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone come to you and preaches ... a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.”<sup>6</sup>

“For sin seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.”<sup>7</sup> This was the pattern right from the beginning.<sup>8</sup> The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the weapon that the

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:3, 4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24:3, 4

<sup>3</sup> John 8:44

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 4:5

<sup>5</sup> I Timothy 2:14

<sup>6</sup> II Corinthians 11:3, 4

<sup>7</sup> Romans 7:8, 11

<sup>8</sup> GEN 3:1

Devil used right from the beginning. The consequence of its use by the Devil was first, deception, then sin,<sup>9</sup> and finally the setting up of a barrier, a dividing wall of hostility.<sup>10</sup>

Jay Ferris

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<sup>9</sup> II Corinthians 11:3, 4, Revelation 12:9, I Timothy 2:14

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2:14