## What Makes a False Prophet?

What turns the gifted person into a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal? Some of the fac­tors are the same in essence as they were in Old Testament times. This fact came home to me as I read a book about false prophecy in the Old Testament – or rather about conflict among the prophets, because the line between true and false is usually difficult to draw when you are in the situation, and a true prophet may become a false one, while a false prophet may speak an authentic word. Perhaps we all have the capacity for either. So what factors influence a prophet to speak false rather than true?

First, the desire for success. A prophet wants to be right, wants to be listened to, and wants both of these for God’s sake. But both may not be possible—the truth may not be acceptable to people, and falsehood may be preferred. One of the greatest of the prophets, Jeremiah, came near to downfall through being unable to cope with the rejection of his word (see Jer 15). Surely God’s own purpose demands that God’s servant gains a hearing? God has an interest in the prophet’s success. But no; God’s servant’s contribution may be made by ac­cepting failure and affliction, as Isaiah 40 – 55 makes clear. The desire to succeed, to succeed for God’s sake, is the desire of the false prophet.

The second threat to authentic prophecy is the institution. In Israel this usually meant the king—Amaziah’s attempt to silence Amos provides a good example (Amos 7). There is a paradox here. The monarchy was a main reason why prophecy existed. The institution always threatens to become God, so it needs a voice of God that stands up to it. But the institution also makes prophecy almost impossible, except at the risk of one’s life, or at least of one’s ministry. So whether today we see the state or the church as the institution, we need to note that prophecy’s job is in part to rescue the insti­tution from thinking it is god. And we must remember that our ‘in-groups’ can function as institutions and inhibit the word of God, even when they officially reject anything institutional.

Thirdly, popular religion can beguile true prophecy into declaring what is not authentic. Sometimes popular religion too easily assumes that God is with us. God is committed to us. We are all right. That was the message of Hananiah, not Jeremiah (see Jer 28). If that is our message, we may be only a hair’s breadth, if that, from false prophecy. At other times, however, popular religion may be convinced that God has abandoned us, as it was in the exile (see Isa 40). Expending energy on the church is like re­arranging the seating on the *Titanic.* The church’s demise is inevitable. The prophets who join in this chorus may also be false. We must beware of both the optimism and the pessimism of popular religion. The prophet is characteristically called to confront the attitudes that are widely held among the people of God, not to confirm them.

Fourthly, the power of tradition can lead the prophet astray. Hananiah’s assumption that God is with us had its basis in tradition – in the psalms, in the prophecies of Isaiah, in Deuteronomy. It was sound and biblical. The trouble was, his was a word out of due time. He was preaching a biblical message, his theology was orthodox: but it belonged to the previous century. It was not what God was saying now, in what was a different situation.

A gifted person turns into a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal through longing to succeed, through conforming to the pressure of the institution instead of confronting it, through assimilating to popular belief as to what God’s attitude to us is bound to be, througing just repeats truths as they applied yesterday.

But finally two words of comfort about when gifts go wrong. One is that this can be part of God’s plan, it can have a place in God’s pur­pose. It can be God’s means of bringing out into the open judgments that people are bringing on themselves by their inner attitudes. One can see this both in the story of Jehoshaphat and the four hundred prophets ( 1 Kings 22) and in Paul’s assertion that there has to be untruth so that those who are untrue have a flag to rally to (1 Cor 11:18-19).

The other word of comfort is that as a true prophet can fall away, so a false prophet can return and be restored. The prophet is not necessarily lost, even after making radical mistakes. Look at Elijah, or Jonah; or Jeremiah:

If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me.

If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth.’ (Jer 15.19)

The book was *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion* by James L Crenshaw.

