

FAKE PROPHETS

A PENTECOSTAL RESPONSE

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INTERACTIVE SESSION

QUESTIONS AND FEEDBACK SESSION (40 MINUTES)

- WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PROPHECY AND PROPHETS?
- DOES IT STILL CONTINUE TODAY?
- HOW DO YOU DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS
- ANY EXPERIENCES OF TRUE AND FAKE PROPHETS?
- HOW CAN YOU/THE CHURCH DISCERN FAKE PROPHETS AND HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THEM?

SACC PAPER

TASK TEAM AND SECRETARIAT POSITION

Reflecting on our biblical heritage we acknowledge the following principles:

- The Bible is not a static book intended to be full of systematic, contextless principles, and we may not use it in this way.
- We cannot work with or read Bible texts out of their textual and historical contexts and apply them uncritically and literally to our contexts.
- There are different kinds of prophets in the Old Testament, and every biblical prophet must be read and understood within his/her own historical context.

- A prophetic book is always the result of a long and complicated process, which often includes a prophet. The book carries the oral traditions (by the "disciples") of that prophet, who wrote down those words and other traditions related to the prophet. There is therefore a difference between for example the prophet Amos (the person) and the book of Amos. The biblical message relates to all "phases" of this process of transmission of the message.
- We should remember that the prophets were primarily speakers and preachers, but today we only have written texts about them. The compilation of these texts was usually the result of a process long after the death of the prophet. Therefore, we should be careful to talk for example about the prophet Jeremiah, when we are actually talking about the book of Jeremiah.
- Prophecy in the Old Testament was not an office with a concomitant title as we know it today within some churches.

CURRENT REALITIES

- Some New Pentecostal Churches (NPC's) led by "prophets" appear as a form of religious syncretism, where believers stand with their one foot in the church and the other in the ATR. This shows serious contradictions and inconsistencies with the Biblical understanding of conversion. Biblical conversion is not akin to holding onto the Lordship of Christ with one hand- with confidence in his shepherding power against evil forces - and with the other hand hold onto the ATR worldview, dominated by the fear of evil spirits.
- Prophets/prophecy in the NPCs is also different from the African Independent Churches (IACs), which allow prophecy. Within the NPCs, prophecy is person-centered (in the individual prophet) over against the AIC's understanding which is more place-centered and therefore (faith) community-based.

CURRENT REALITIES

- In some NPCs, members make appointments with the prophet (one-on-one). These encounters cost a lot of money and are regarded as a form of commercialisation of religion.
- Some prophets in the church, just like the African Traditional Religion (ATR), approach God from an appeasement perspective (rather than a worshipping and glorifying one). Consequently the tithes, seed offerings and intense religious activities secure blessings and protection. This reflects a superstitious view of God, where God becomes a God of magic, which brings confusion, pessimism, mistrust, and feelings of insecurity in believers. These prophets are further strengthened through the perspective that the ATR have huge utility value and is classified as "deal-making". So, rituals are not meant to offer reverence to God, but are a quest for security of life, maintenance of peace and defending prosperity.

CURRENT REALITIES

- The mediatory role played by some of these prophets in the church puts them in a position of competing with Christ taking over his mediatory role in the lives of believers. These "prophets" proclaim Christ as Lord while they are practically promoting atheism; proclaiming Christ as Saviour they are actually undermining his soteriological work.

TERMINOLOGY USED IN THE BIBLE

OLD TESTAMENT

Within the Old Testament there are basically two concepts that are used but with many different interpretations based on the context. The more direct translation of the word prophet came from the pre-biblical Greek word *prophetes* – which relates to someone who predicts the future.

However, in the Hebrew Bible and its surroundings, the term *nabi* is used, which does not relate to predicting the far-off future, but relates to a person who says something relevant to their own times. As such prophets must not be mistakenly viewed as predictors of the future. In Israel, the prophets did not unveil the future but the absolute; where the absolute refers to God's will for their time.

TERMINOLOGY USED IN THE BIBLE

OLD TESTAMENT

As such, the meaning of *nabi* is different in different contexts. For example, it is also used to describe false prophets (Jer 28), which, in the context of Jeremiah, are prophets who speak the will of the political rulers rather than the will of God. Other concepts that are used to describe the prophet are: *is(ha) Elohim* (man of God – 1 Kings 20:28); *hozeh* (one who receives visions – Amos 2:7, Micha 3:5), the activities of the *hozeh* are described as *hazon* (Amos 1:1; Is 1:1); and, *ro'eh* (seer Is 30:9-10).

NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, prophecy is viewed as a gift of the Spirit (Romans 12:7; 1 Cor 12:10; Eph 4:11). Prophecy is therefore not an esoteric gift given to certain special individuals, but a gift given to the congregation. Therefore, the individual who received the gift (of prophecy) must use it to the benefit of the congregation. A classic passage in this regard is 1 Cor 14.

While we are taking note of these concepts, the etymology of these words does not really help us much with the function and the essence of prophetism in current churches since a word alone does not have a clear meaning. A word/concept only gains its comprehensible meaning within a specific context.

THE MANDATE OF THE PROPHET

Prophets see themselves as called and sent by Yahweh. A prophet does not inherit his/her calling and is not appointed by a predecessor (for example, Amos 7:10-17; Is. 6; Jer. 1, etc.). Receiving his/her calling from Yahweh means the prophet is a spokesperson for God. Therefore, the well-known messengers-formula is usually used – *koh amar jhwh* (Thus says the Lord...). As one who is called, the prophet is the official representative of the Lord, he/she does not talk **about** Yahweh, but **on behalf of** Yahweh. Thus, not his/her own message, but the message of Yahweh.

Being called by Yahweh in the Old Testament goes hand in hand with divine compulsion (Amos 3:8; Ezechiel 3:15, 22; Jer. 20:7). This in many instances led to unfavourable circumstances for the prophets, which is also not pleasant to read. Compare Jer. 15:17-18

*I never sat in the company of revelers,
never made merry with them;
I sat alone because your hand was on me
and you had filled me with indignation.
Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?*

THE CONTENT OF THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE

If the prophet is mandated by a calling from God and he/she is a spokesperson of God, then the content of prophecy is about the honour of God and the building of his church. As such, the content of prophecy relates to all aspects of life:

- Socio-economic context/values
- Political context
- Religious context
- Relationship to the law

The two main categories of the prophetic message have to do with judgement and salvation and the true end of prophecy was to turn the sinful person to repentance or redemption and thereby to effect salvation. In this redemption and salvation message, all walks of life and inhuman actions (e.g., eating of grass), structures (e.g., apartheid), and relations (e.g., racist/xenophobic) are addressed.

HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS/PROPHECY?

POINTERS FOR DISCERNMENT

The assessment of a prophet/prophecy can only happen through discernment within the faith community. As such, there is no objective set of criteria to identify the false prophets or, for that matter, the true prophets. However, the following may help as pointers in the discernment process:

- **A prophet has an unconditional relationship with God.** It implies dependence on God, a personal relationship with God and control by God, and not control by the "self" or the "flesh". When there is a distance between Yahweh and the prophet, he/she can still be preaching known and loved dogmas, but if it is no longer the Word of Yahweh, then it is no longer a calling but just a job.

HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS/PROPHECY?

POINTERS FOR DISCERNMENT

- **All prophets might use the same language/vocabulary and claim the same authority.** Sometimes it might even be the so-called "false prophet" who speaks God's truth (cf 1 King 13:11-34 (21-22)). Discernment is therefore very complicated. However, the basic task of a prophet is, first, to receive a word from God (which is not something a person can force from God), and second, to proclaim the word of God in a specific context.

POINTERS

- **The ministry/prophecy of the prophet must be consistent with Scripture.** The fact that prophecy can be judged by other believers presupposes that it is consistent with Scripture. Prophecy is therefore not secret, esoteric knowledge that only "a prophet" can reveal, but a gift that is part of congregational possession.
- **As a working of the Spirit, the prophecy must glorify Jesus.** Is Christ central to a prophet's ministry, or is it about the person himself or the "secret information" he/she can get from God?
- **Prophecy is accompanied and embedded in God's covenant love.** Is the prophet's life, therefore, consistent with the fruit of the Spirit?

POINTERS

- **Does the prophecy bring spontaneous life to the congregation, and does it guide and prepare people for their service in the world?** Is everyone empowered or does the focus fall on the prophet, and the congregation becomes passive and dependent on the prophet for divine revelation?
- **According to 1 John 4:1-2, a prophet's "spirit" must be judged.** A fundamental tenet is that the prophet confesses that Christ has come in the flesh. This means that the person must recognise Jesus as Messiah/Christ, which implies that his authority must be recognised. The prophet also acknowledges that Jesus truly came as a human being. In other words, Jesus completely identified with us as human beings. He was therefore not a figure who was distant from us as people.
- **According to 2 Pet 2:1-3, a prophet does not deny the Lord.** A prophet is especially not focused on personal gain or greed.
- In the end, it is in the **fulfilment of the prophecy** that its truth is finally vindicated.

CONCLUSION

The important role of prophets in the church as well as the prophetic role of the church in society have always played an important role in our history and should never be underestimated.

In our day and time, the South African society is in desperate need of prophets who live in obedience to Yahweh who are not afraid to be His messenger.

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

ANY FURTHER CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE TOPIC MAY BE SENT TO MY EMAIL:

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THANK YOU/ BAIE DANKIE