

BUCKINGHAM

REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH CRITIQUE OF THE ISSUES, PEOPLE &
EVENTS AFFECTING TODAY'S CHRISTIAN LEADERS

DEALING WITH PROPHETIC TYPES IN CHURCH

Any spiritual church is going to attract people who claim to wear a prophet's mantle. These people seldom fit the norm and are often disruptive. How then should the leadership deal with these extraordinary people?

Across the years we've had hundreds of these people—men and women—show up at our church. One young man, who called himself Billy Sonshine, claimed he could see through people's skin into their psyche. He wandered around the church with "words of knowledge," "discernments," and giving some really off-the-wall "prophecies" to unsuspecting folks.

One woman used to stand in the services and wail in a loud voice. Another woman had various end-time prophecies, all filled with gloom and doom. Still another had received a "word" from God concerning dietary laws the church was to obey. Recently we've had a very intense man attending our services carrying a huge sign warning people not to fall under legalism.

This last individual, a tenderhearted man whose personal life is a shambles, forced me to come up with 10 basic principles which I presented to our elders. Each one is accompanied by my personal application concerning this current "prophet" in our midst—referred to as "X."

Obligations of Leadership

1. **Accept all those God sends into our body, regardless of their personality and life-style.**

Not every person who comes into the church and irritates a lot of people is from God. Some of these are placed by the devil; others are simply egotists looking for a platform. However, in applying various scriptural standards I find that X loves the Lord above all things. He recognizes Jesus Christ as his Lord. He has been baptized in the Holy Spirit and manifests the Spirit's gifts in his life. He is an unabashed dreamer, poet and literary genius. He grieves over his past and

present mistakes. He is open to correction and has a desire to submit, despite his strong will. He is aware of his deep-seated anger and wants to be more loving. Although his concept of the church is twisted, he loves her as the bride of Christ and wants her to be perfected in Jesus. He prays (perhaps more than most of us) for this church and its leadership. He is, in short, a man of God. We have no choice but to love him, accept him as a brother and lovingly judge his message.

2. **Accept and understand that the mentality and life-style of the Old Testament prophet often accompanies those who minister in the New Testament office of prophet.**

X is a loner who loves people. The conflict arises in that despite his gregarious nature, he is so intense and single-minded people do not understand him. They see him as an irritant. This forces him into the wilderness and gives the impression he is an Ezekiel, Jeremiah or John the Baptist. Those who fulfill the prophetic office, however, are often different from those who function as pastors, evangelists, teachers or apostles. They seldom manifest any of the motivational gifts of Romans 12 except for exhortation. On the other hand, they may have tender hearts and weep easily over the sins of others—as well as over their own shortcomings. They are seldom, if ever, able to live up to their own message which causes not only misunderstanding on the part of those who hear them, but deep, inner conflict as well.

3. **Speak the truth in love to—correcting without rejecting—any who dare speak for God.**

Our task is to listen, not only to his words, but to his spirit. We are then to correct lovingly. In X's case, the only time he has spoken out was at the City Council zoning hearing in which he took the side of the topless bar proponents. He was wrong. He misunderstands nudity in the Garden of Eden—and God's best purpose for society. On the other hand, I admire his

boldness and the fact he is standing against scribal legalism. Unfortunately, he does not grasp the greater picture of the rights of society to protect itself against evil. In his desire to combat legalism, he fell into the trap of lining up with that which is a social evil—and he was not able to distinguish between the two.

4. Examine with unbiased eye and loving spirit all which is spoken and written to the body, foregoing the pleasure of judging the content of the message by the looks, attitude or behavior of the messenger.

I have a copy of X's book which he wants to sell at church. It is virtually unintelligible. Despite its mumbo-jumbo and verbosity, the book is the same Galatians message of freedom from the law I have been preaching for 20 years. Our church staff has examined the book and was right in telling X he cannot sell it in the church building. X reacted strongly and has stated in letters to the pastor and me that we have rejected the word of God. He has asked me to write an endorsement for the back cover. I have refused. I do not know what he may do next which would be totally unacceptable. Yet, while we cannot endorse his book, we must be extremely cautious about banning it.

5. Endeavor to pick up the spirit of the prophet when his (her) words seem unintelligible, harsh or paradoxical.

It is unfair to judge a man like X without hearing his spirit. He does not want to be a disruptive influence, although his recent behavior with that huge sign he waves around the auditorium could become disruptive if not handled correctly.

6. Prevent ourselves from judging one message on the basis of another.

Simply because one utterance proves false—such as X's approach to topless bars—does not mean the person is a false prophet. It simply means he struck out his last time at bat.

7. Forego the pleasure of reacting defensively.

We must remember that any message which is contrary to our current beliefs or attacks the comforts of our particular life-style will be initially rejected.

8. Realize our task is not only to defend the flock from wolves, but to expose them to the voice of God designed to expand their minds—even though that voice may come through strange and unexpected sources.

As elders we are to protect the flock without banning and banishing. God often uses folks like X to expand our capacity, forcing us to stretch

our minds to hear God. Question: If we are to protect the body from error, does this mean we tell them what to watch on TV—and what not to watch? What to read and what not to read? What kind of entertainment to enjoy? Does this mean we are to play the role of the conscience? I think not.

9. Realize we do not have all truth contained in our staff and eldership.

X is an irritant—like a rock in the shoe. We don't like dissident voices. However, we must remain open to truth from sources other than our own voices. On the other hand, we must be extremely cautious about "endorsing" a man or his work. Remember, the thing that hones the edge of the true prophet, forcing him to hear from God, is the danger he may suffer if he is wrong. The New Testament concept of covenant protection gives the true prophet a safe platform from which he can minister without being stoned.

10. Protect not only the lambs in the flock from outside wolves, but protect the black sheep as well—who may be in danger from those in the flock who are irritated by or misunderstand his actions and words.

The New Testament pastors and apostles protected the prophets from being stoned. In Old Testament times the prophets functioned solo and were often ridiculed, persecuted and killed. The New Testament prophet is to be in submission to other prophets in the body, is to be in submission to church leadership, and is to function as part of a team composed of apostle, evangelist, pastor and teacher. One of the reasons for this is to protect the prophet, whose message is often harsh and misunderstood. The other reason is to force the prophet to submit his often egotistical personality to men who will judge and correct when necessary.

SUMMATION: We should exercise extreme caution in giving public recognition to X, or anyone else in our body, as a prophet. That would do him incredible harm. (1) People would tend to accept all he says. (2) He would not be able to handle our recognition and would immediately try to take over, flooding us with written and spoken verbiage—most of which would be nonsensical. (3) Or he (or any other recognized prophet) would become part of the system. The best way to render a true prophet ineffective is to make him a "company man," a court prophet. Public recognition should be reserved for isolated prophecies, rather than for the prophet himself. That final blessing and endorsement are reserved for those few who prove themselves across the years as impervious to the

temptations of the world system.

A FINAL CAUTION: Many prophets border on mental instability. They do irrational things not because God requires it of them, but because they are irrational. The same mental propensity which drives a prophet to proclaim fearlessly what he sees as truth may also drive him off the edge and drop him into a morass of irrational and even dangerous behavior.

ALLOW THE SICK TO WITHDRAW

Some hurt is so deep it can only be experienced alone. The old singer was right:

I must walk this lonesome valley,

Walk it by myself.

Nobody else can walk it with me,

I must walk it by myself.

A pastoral counselor told me of a patient he was visiting in the hospital who was undergoing chemotherapy. She told him, "I call my days of chemotherapy my days of solitary confinement. No one else is allowed into my hurt spirit but Jesus—and sometimes I even shut Him out."

Jesus, my friend told her, understood.

When people are seriously ill, their energy may be entirely reinvested in themselves. When this happens, it is impossible to cope with the attention of others. Friends and family can't always accept this unnerving withdrawal. The task of the pastor is to help them understand and let them know withdrawal may be not only acceptable, it may be part of the healing process. Here are some reasons friends and family try to cheer people up.

1. They see withdrawal as lack of exuberant faith. They fail to take into account, however, that the deepest faith contains little or no exuberance or enthusiasm. Instead it runs silent and runs deep—and often runs alone.

I asked Corrie ten Boom about the seeming conflict between "walking in the light" (1 John 1:7) as opposed to "abiding in the shadow" (Ps. 91:1). "The closer you get to God," she said, "the less you know about Him. When you see God from afar off you know a lot about Him. But as you draw near you move into His shadow. When you dwell in the 'secret place of the Most High,' knowledge is replaced by something greater—faith."

2. They think his depression or complaints indicate surrender to the disease. However, the sick person simply may be concentrating all his resources to fight the disease—and has no time to hold a conversation, sing a chorus or even enter into a bedside prayer meeting. Allow him the right to withdraw into the holy place where, with the angels, a victorious battle is possibly being waged.

3. The family probably doesn't realize their own deep-seated anger which extends toward a family member who is gravely ill. It is the same anger a husband may feel toward a wife if she gets sick while they are on a business trip, causing him to miss a banquet—or even worse, a contract. Thus, the family feels, if the sick person at least pretends to be well, the family can then suppress their anger at her for being sick and their fear she will die.

4. Fear also reflects our own mortality. Having to deal with a friend or loved one who is gravely ill calls up our own fear that one day we might be in this same situation. If the sick person, then, will pretend to be well we do not have to face the fear of our own vulnerability and mortality.

When a friend is gravely ill, it is important to respect his or her need to withdraw and to educate the family to this same need. In your hospital or home visitation, allow the person the right to express gloomy thoughts. It is, if you receive them, a type of catharsis. Changing the subject or insisting the person "cheer up" or "have faith" is a denial of what the person is feeling—which is frustrating. It may cause the person to mumble, "I know I should have more faith." But it does not produce faith. Truth produces faith. Allow the person to be truthful in expression—then pray a prayer of faith and trust God yourself. If you don't believe, how can you expect the sick person to believe?

IN THIS ISSUE I AM SPOTLIGHTING...

BACKFIRE FOR BURNOUT

The 35-year-old youth director had served the church for only four years when he abruptly resigned to become an insurance agent. "I burned out," he told me. When I asked him to define what that meant he began to describe his frustration over the lack of stability among the young people of the church, the constant turnover of his youthful constituency and the lack of commitment of his youth leaders.

I pointed out this was par for the course for any youth pastor, just as the parade of sick people into his office is standard fare for the medical doctor. The physician who leaves his profession saying, "I couldn't stand the thought of seeing another sickie," was in the wrong profession to start with.

So it is with the youth pastor. Kids always grow up. Praise God! Those who don't cause more problems than those who do.

Further probing revealed that the real reason for his leaving the ministry was the unreal and unreasonable expectations he put on

himself. The fact he took on himself great responsibility for problems which were significantly outside his control indicated a powerful superego, the kind which is always ready to be harshly self-critical.

Dealing With Superego

Intense superego pressure drives many youth pastors to maintain high standards and to treat others with integrity. But it can also lead to unreasonable expectations of oneself. This in turn can lead to discouragement, anger, hyper-criticism and/or burnout. The result can be irrational behavior, immorality, resignation from the ministry, or even suicide.

What can a senior pastor do to help the youth director keep his expectations reasonable?

1. Have a job description which specifies the limits as well as the extent of responsibility. A conscientious staff member seldom gets in emotional and psychological trouble for doing too little. His problems arise from assuming responsibilities no one has assigned to him—and feeling that since no one else is doing them, he should. The wise pastor knows how to limit his young stallion (or mare) and tell him when it is time to go home and leave a particularly sticky issue to someone else.

2. Make certain the youth director knows where he fits in the broader scheme of the ministry. He needs to know to whom he answers: church business administrator, director of education, youth committee, deacons, elders or the pastor himself. He also needs to know to whom his supervisor answers in case there is ever a need to appeal what he feels is an unjust directive or decision.

3. Share with the youth director the transcendent purpose of the church—allowing him to be part of the broader picture. If he can differentiate purpose—which may take a lifetime to accomplish—from short-range goals such as evangelism or the number of kids who attend a retreat—he will be better equipped to establish reasonable self-expectations.

4. Spend personal time with the youth director on a regular basis. Recently my pastor, Curry Vaughan, instituted a program calling for him to spend one half day with each member of the pastoral staff. He agreed to meet any place the staff member wanted—in a home, walking on the beach, in a restaurant or sitting on a stump in the woods. They would spend the entire half day talking in utter confidence about anything the staff member wanted to talk about.

Curry had no agenda except to be present, listen, understand and if asked, minister to his friend. One staff member, a 70-year-old associate pastor with an international ministry, said it was the first time in his ministerial career anyone, especially a supervisor, had ever given him a half day to talk about anything he wanted to. While such a program for a busy leader may be impossible to maintain at more than an annual (or at best semi-annual) frequency, it may be the finest investment of time he will ever make in the life of a staff member.

5. Regular office visits of an hour, or even a half hour, on the subject of expectations will help. Sometimes it is good for the pastor/leader to open himself to his youth director, sharing the problems he, the pastor, has in setting and maintaining realistic expectations.

6. Encourage your youth director to spend time with other staff members, a personal counselor, other youth directors from churches of the same size, friends, or family. In the self-contained and highly specialized world of youth ministries, it is easy to develop exaggerated expectations which may be readily apparent to an outsider.

7. Every youth pastor needs to be part of a small group (extended family, home church, etc.) which is separate from staff, elders or any other official church group. In such a group he and his wife can open up, ventilate and express their feelings. The ideal group will respect these feelings and become a sounding board which will allow him to adjust his expectations and head off the dreaded burnout syndrome.

When the youth director is discouraged about his failures (and no staff member has more built-in failures than the youth ministry) and when he is upset about his personal failure to meet his or her unnecessarily high goals, it is up to the pastor to clarify the youth leader's responsibilities. If the youth pastor feels low repeatedly, referral for professional help is indicated. It's not enough to write off such worries as unreasonable or clap the fellow on the shoulder and say, "It's all going to work out." Self-criticism may be unreasonable, but it is very real and can result in frantic overwork, depression or psychosomatic symptoms. The pastor's job is to spot these ahead of time and light a backfire which will prevent burnout.

