

FOUR WAYS YOU CAN TELL TRUE FROM FALSE PROPHETS



Many people today claim to be prophets, but not all of them really speak for God. As the apostle John wrote long ago, “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

New churches, led by self-styled prophets of God, appear almost every week. **Now more than ever, we need to be able to tell the difference between true prophets and false prophets.** For Christians, the Bible is our authority—our standard—for what we believe. What does it teach us about identifying false prophets?

WHY WE MUST TEST PROPHETS

Almost no one ever admits that he or she is a fake prophet! In fact, some false prophets may seem *very* sincere. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Jesus’ imagery here points out that false prophets usually look harmless. They may even do miracles in His name (Matt. 7:21–23). Jesus also warned that the “signs and wonders” (miracles) performed by false Christs and false prophets would be so impressive that “even the elect”—God’s chosen people—might be led astray (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22).

Because false prophets seem convincing, we need to test or examine anyone who claims to speak for God (1 Thess. 5:20–22; 1 John 4:1). Some groups teach their followers that the only “test” they should apply is whether they feel the Spirit confirming to them that the person is a true prophet of God. The problem: not all spiritual experiences are really from the Holy Spirit. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Obviously, you can’t test a spirit by that same spirit. You need something other than the spirit—something besides your inner feeling that you think is from the Spirit—by which you can test whether that spirit is really the Spirit of God or not.

1 | THE FAITHFULNESS TEST

Perhaps the test of a prophet most often presented in the Bible is that of **faithfulness** to what God has already revealed. New revelations will always be consistent with old revelations, even if they build on them in surprising ways. So a true prophet’s teachings must agree with established truths that God gave through earlier, genuine revelations. Since the Bible is a collection of inspired texts that preserve previous revelations, any prophet who proclaims new revelations must deliver teachings faithful to the teachings of the Bible. Any prophet whose teachings clearly contradict the Bible’s revelations is a false prophet.

An important Old Testament “faithfulness test” comes from Moses in Deuteronomy:

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:1–3).

As we wrote above, Jesus warned His disciples about false prophets who try to deceive “even the elect” by using “signs and wonders” (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). Most likely, Jesus was deliberately echoing this passage. Just as the Israelites were surrounded by false prophets urging them to follow other gods, Christians today are targeted by fake prophets. These deceivers claim to represent Jesus, but they often urge Christians to accept radically new teachings that are opposed what He and His apostles taught in the New Testament.

The biblical apostles expected their own teaching to be tested by the same standard. When Paul preached the gospel to Jews in Berea, they were “noble” because they listened eagerly to what Paul taught, “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). In other words, they tested what Paul said by comparing it with the Scriptures they already had (the Old Testament). Paul even told the Galatians that if he himself (or even an angel!) appeared with a different gospel, they should reject him (Gal. 1:8)! In the same way, we must reject any “new” revelation that doesn’t agree with the message that Paul and the other apostles proclaimed on behalf of the Lord Jesus (see also 1 John 4:2–3; Jude 3).



2 | THE FRUIT TEST

The second test to apply to anyone who claims to be God's prophet is to test them by their **fruit**. How do these prophets live? How do they teach other people to live? Anyone who claims to be a prophet of God should demonstrate faithfulness to God in the way that he or she lives.

Jeremiah was a prophet of God when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and destroyed its temple. At the time, the religious establishment in Jerusalem was thoroughly corrupt. Its priests and so-called prophets were misleading the nation instead of teaching them the truth. Jeremiah wrote, "Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the LORD." He added that the royal court "prophets" in Jerusalem "commit adultery and walk in lies" (Jer. 23:11, 14). Prophets who encourage ungodly behavior by their teaching and their example are false prophets.

Earlier we mentioned Jesus' warning about false prophets who come as wolves in sheep's clothing. Immediately after making that warning, Jesus told us how to identify such false prophets: "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15; also see 7:15–20). The true prophet's fruits are good; the false prophet's fruits are bad. False prophets will claim to do amazing things in God's name, but Christ says that in the Final Judgment He will reject them as "workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23).

3 | THE FULFILLMENT TEST

Not all prophets make predictions in the name of God. But if they do, true prophets make true predictions, not false ones. The true prophet's predictions in God's name are fulfilled; predictions in God's name that are not fulfilled identify a false prophet. This **fulfillment** test appears more than once in the Old Testament. Moses wrote clearly: "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; *you shall not be afraid of him*" (Deut. 18:21–22 NASB).



We've already mentioned the false prophets who served in the royal court during the time of Jeremiah. **Those prophets had told the people of Jerusalem what they wanted to hear**—that they would not see sword or famine but would instead have peace. According to Jeremiah, the Lord told him: "The prophets are prophesying lies in My name." Jerusalem would suffer exactly what those false prophets assured them would not happen: They would be victims of sword and famine (Jer. 14:13–16). History shows that Jeremiah was right and the other prophets were not. The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, many of its people were killed, and many more of its people suffered greatly. Jeremiah was the true prophet, and the court prophets were false prophets.

Some of the most common false prophecies in recent times have been predictions of the Second Coming of Christ or of events related to it. When such prophecies are made in the name of God by people who claim they have special authority to speak for Him, the failure of those predictions exposes them as false prophets.

4 | THE FACT TEST

True prophets don't make factually false claims about themselves or about their work. Christianity never asks us to ignore **facts**. Quite the contrary: Christianity is a faith founded on fact—especially the facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul stated quite frankly that if Christ had not been physically raised from the dead, then he and the other apostles who proclaimed Jesus' resurrection would have been false witnesses (1 Cor. 15:15).

In the preface to his gospel, Luke emphasizes that his account about Jesus was based on the testimonies of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–4). When Paul stood before King Agrippa to explain the gospel message, he emphasized that Agrippa knew what he was saying was based on fact: "For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Such sober truth-telling is an essential mark of a genuine prophet.

By contrast, false prophets and other false teachers often deal in fables or myths (2 Tim. 4:3–4; 2 Peter 1:16a). Paul warned the Thessalonians that false teachers might even produce letters supposedly written by Paul that taught false doctrine (2 Thess. 2:1–2). Such fake "scriptures" have repeatedly been a problem in church history. A number of such texts were produced in the second and third centuries AD, and many other "scriptures" have been written in modern times. Typically, these books make "factual" claims that expose them as false. They might seem very pious and may even speak warmly about Jesus, but if they're based on fiction, they cannot be the work of true prophets.

A FOURFOLD TEST

True prophets of God pass all four of these tests. Fake prophets might pass one or two tests, but they won't pass all four. For example, some self-styled prophets may live respectable, moral lives (thus apparently passing the fruit test). But if they teach false doctrine (and fail the faithfulness test), or produce fake scriptures (failing the fact test), they're still false prophets.

A true prophet must pass all four tests. A false prophet will not. Apply these tests to anyone who claims to be a prophet, and you'll be able to tell true from false prophets.

* Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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