

Was Herbert Armstrong A False Prophet?

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," January 2000

Prophecy is a tricky business. If a prophet is too specific—like the Jeanne Dixons or Edgar Cayces of the world, predicting that certain celebrities will marry, divorce or run for political office or that an earthquake will devastate Los Angeles in a particular year—chances are slim he will have a high percentage of being "right." Conversely, if he is too vague or obscure—like Nostradamus, whose predictions could apply to many situations or times—he runs the risk of sounding unsure.

True prophets, the biblical kind, do not have these problems. Their prophecies are direct revelations from God, who declares "the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' . . . Indeed, I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass" (Isaiah 46:10-11). Whether prophesying from a dream, vision or direct conversation with God, a true prophet can be sure what he predicts will happen because he knows the Source never fails.

Over the past few decades, many have wondered whether the late Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), founder and Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God until his death, was a false prophet. He made many predictions during his ministry, and many of them have not come to pass. Some were plain wrong. Some were vague. Some were specific.

Just how should we, who look to his teachings for our doctrinal foundation, consider his track record?

True and False Prophets

Deuteronomy 18:20-22 is the classic passage on judging whether a prophet is true or false:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, "How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?"—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

This seems fairly clear-cut: If a man falsely claims to speak in God's name, or if he speaks in another god's name, he is worthy of death. If the man's predictions do not occur, he is a false prophet. Conversely, if a man speaks in God's name, and what he says happens, he may indeed be a true prophet (Jeremiah 28:8-9).

Apart from Christ Himself, Ezekiel may be the clearest case of a true prophet. He prefaces many of his prophecies with "the word of the LORD came to me, saying . . ." (Ezekiel 3:16; 6:1; etc.), followed by a direct quotation of God's words. This is speaking "a word in My name" (Deuteronomy 18:20). If it is indeed what God commanded him to say, he is guiltless, whether or not it comes to pass within his lifetime. Many of Ezekiel's prophecies, for instance, had a near fulfillment (in type) and a far fulfillment (antitype). In both cases, he is shown to be a true prophet of God.

However, false prophets on occasion get something right. Balaam is a prime biblical example. Ordinarily, he was a false prophet, eager to prophesy for or against others, as his employer and his money desired. God, however, puts true words in his mouth when He attempts to prophesy against Israel (Numbers 22-24). He even prophesies of the coming of Christ (Numbers 24:17-19)! What are we to make of this?

Then there is the occasion when God Himself sends a lying spirit to persuade Ahab to fight at Ramoth Gilead, where he would fall in battle (I Kings 22:1-37). In this instance, He also sends the truth by a true prophet named Micaiah, revealing that the prophets of apostate Israel had been lying to the king all along. Nothing like a curve ball to help confuse matters!

We must also consider the instruction found in Deuteronomy 13:1-5, as it adds two important factors to judging prophets:

If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, "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. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.

The first factor added here is that God recognizes that false prophets, through the power of Satan, can accomplish signs and wonders. The magicians of Egypt imitate Moses' staff-into-a-serpent miracle before Pharaoh (Exodus 7:8-12). The end-time False Prophet will do similar signs as the Two Witnesses, causing most of the world's population to worship the Beast (Revelation 13:11-15). Paul warns in II Corinthians 11:13-15 that Satan's servants are clever counterfeits of Christ's. Signs, wonders and miracles, then, are not conclusive proof that a prophet is from God.

The second factor Deuteronomy 13 adds is our need to recognize the spiritual message accompanying the prophet's signs and predictions. This is the essence of the apostle John's admonition, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (I John 4:1). No matter how impressive or accurate a prophet's miracles or prophecies, his credibility hangs on whether he leads people toward or away from God.

The following questions, then, must all be answered before we judge a person as a true or false prophet:

1. Does he claim to prophesy in God's name or in a false god's name?
2. Do his prophecies come to pass?
3. Does he do signs and wonders?
4. Does he teach the truth based on God's Word?

In Herbert Armstrong's case, we can answer affirmatively only to number 4!

Not a Prophet

Some may raise strenuous objections to this statement, especially in regard to the first question. Did not Herbert Armstrong say he spoke by the authority of God? Yes, he did, but he never claimed to *prophecy*—predict future events—in God's name. He never claimed to be a prophet or to prophesy, and that makes all the difference in the world!

It is true that the Hebrew concept of a prophet contains both aspects of foretelling and preaching under inspiration. The context of Deuteronomy 18, though, deals primarily with claiming to make predictions based on personal revelation from God. A telling phrase appears in verse 22: "if the thing does not happen or come to pass." The test of a prophet in Deuteronomy 18 stresses foretelling, not preaching. What a prophet preaches, coupled with signs or wonders he may perform, is covered more specifically in Deuteronomy 13.

On the basis of Deuteronomy 13 and 18, then, Herbert Armstrong was not a false prophet because he never claimed to be a prophet or divinely inspired to make prophetic statements. His preaching, much of which concerned prophecy, came straight from the Bible, not from direct revelation from God by dream, vision or voice from heaven. He allowed the Bible to interpret itself and tried to fit those interpretations into current world events. Such a process resulted in speculative predictions, based on what he understood at the time, but they were never delivered with the force of prophecy or with the authority of divine sanction.

Some in the church, however, took his speculations as authoritative prophecies, and when they did not happen, they were disillusioned. Many of them left the church in bitterness and became dissidents, accusing him of leading people astray through his "false prophecies." Many such former members are still decrying his "setting of dates" and "gun-lap mentality." Despite their opinions on the matter, the Bible judges Herbert Armstrong was not a prophet, nor did he ever prophesy in the biblical sense.

On the Gun Lap

Throughout his ministry, Herbert Armstrong felt that Christ would come soon—very soon. He always thought and preached that the Great Tribulation was on the verge of beginning and that Jesus' return would occur in the next five, ten, fifteen years. We not infrequently heard him thunder, "You could wake up tomorrow to discover Europe has risen overnight!" The Millennium and God's Kingdom were always "just over the horizon" and certainly "within our lifetimes."

It is this atmosphere of expectation that became known as the "gun-lap mentality." In a race, the gun lap is the final circuit around the track, the time to pick up the pace and make a quick sprint to the finish line. It is the period of the race when a runner makes an all-out effort to cross the tape as a winner, reaping the rewards of an impressive victory. This victory and reward are what Herbert Armstrong wanted for each of us.

But some became frustrated at the pace and length of the gun lap. The final circuit seemed to expand interminably into the future, as they concluded, "My master is delaying his coming" (Matthew 24:

48). And as in the parable, some of these began to beat their fellow servants, specifically Herbert Armstrong and those who faithfully followed his teachings, and return to living as they had before their calling (verse 49).

If, however, a gun-lap mentality is a sign of a false prophet, then the first-century apostles stand as charged! Several of them use apocalyptic language just as Herbert Armstrong did. Notice Paul in Romans 13:11-12:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.

Maybe the most "famous" of Paul's gun-lap misunderstandings is his instruction in I Corinthians 7, the marriage chapter:

But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. (verses 29-31)

Paul is not alone among the apostles in thinking the end was near in his time. John writes: "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know it is the last hour" (I John 2:18). James puts it a little differently: "You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:8). Even Peter says, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers" (I Peter 4:7).

However, they were only imitating the urgent voice of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He made the same kind of statements during His ministry! Is Christ a false prophet? The first words out of His mouth are of this sort: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15)! This urgency is a common theme in His preaching until His death. He says to His disciples on His last Passover, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). He makes His return sound very imminent!

His urgent statements do not end with His death, however. In His Revelation to the apostle John, such urgent language persists:

- » Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near. (1:3)
- » Behold, I come quickly! (3:11)
- » Behold, I stand at the door and knock. (3:20)
- » Behold, I am coming quickly! (22:7, 12)
- » Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand. (22:10)
- » Surely I am coming quickly. (22:20).

If these passages are any indication, Herbert Armstrong's urgency—sprinkled with predictions based upon his understanding of the Bible and world events—is no black mark on his ministry and certainly

no proof he was a false prophet. He was, like his predecessors in the first century, applying a Christ-endorsed technique to get *us* prepared for the Kingdom of God!

Speculation

So what are all those predictions Herbert Armstrong made? Rather than call them prophecies (which they were not) and Him a false prophet (which he was not), his predictions are more correctly speculations, theories based on true but insufficient and unclear evidence. Speculation is not sin, though all speculations involving biblical prophecy—especially regarding the timing of their fulfillments—should be taken with Christ's words in mind:

But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. . . . Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. . . . Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him. (Matthew 24:36, 42, 44)

The implications, then, are minor for those of us who follow Herbert Armstrong's teachings. Knowing he was not a false prophet, we can continue to use what he taught as a base for our beliefs because we can verify it from the Word of God. If his unfulfilled predictions pass without vindication, we know that his "batting average" was no worse than some of the most eminent leaders of the church throughout the centuries. He was indeed human, his perspective flawed, his understanding imperfect. Would any of us fare any better?

The most vital part for us is to recapture his sense of urgency for the nearness of Christ's return. If we should die tomorrow, our day of salvation has ended, and Jesus' second coming will be our next conscious experience! Some of us are not aware how close the end really is for us! If we knew we had only a day or two left to live, what would we do to strengthen our relationship with God? That is how we must live every day!

"Therefore," writes Paul in Hebrews 12:1, ". . . let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race [the gun lap!] that is set before us."