



HANDLE WITH CARE

Presented by

DR. JOEL NEDERHOOD

on

cheBacL
ro |
goeJl

The Denominational Broadcast of
THE REFORMED CHURCHES
of
Australia and New Zealand

HANDLE WITH CARE

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them if prophecy is in proportion to our faith. . . . Romans 12:6

The other day I heard a man tell a lie on television. He was a preacher and he expected his viewers to believe what he said and praise the Lord. Nevertheless, he lied. He may not have been fully aware of it himself, but what he said was a lie nonetheless, and it must be branded as such.

I level no charge at the man personally, for I have forgotten his name; he was not important. What he said, however, is worth noticing because it illustrates something perverse and detrimental that is happening these days in the realm of religion. I speak to the issue reluctantly, but I do speak to it because the damage is done by such lies is immeasurable.

The lie was this. The preacher told how a young boy was brought to him with a bad case of tonsillitis. The preacher told how he laid his hand on the boy and prayed. The boy coughed. There was meat in his mouth. He spit out his tonsils.

Pardon me for telling you some of these unpleasant details in the language the preacher used, but I felt I had to, for this lie illustrates the extent to which human beliefs are expected to stretch these days. And, after all, this alleged miracle supposedly occurred because of the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom I also serve. I am concerned about the impressions that are made through the telling of such stories, and I fear the predominance of such falsehood in much high visibility Christianity nowadays will, frankly, lead many people astray. Moreover, such lies create an extremely faulty impression regarding what Christianity really is among those who are not Christians

now, but who might become Christians if they understood Christianity better. If I were not a Christian and I heard nonsense such as I have just reported, I would certainly not want to be associated with a group of people whose credulity could be expanded to such an extent and whose powers of judgment were so deficient as to let them to be impressed by such religious trash.

There is, after all, religious trash, for religion is not necessarily beautiful and good. Bad religion is actually hideous and deforming. As we all know, bad religion has been responsible for heinous crimes committed in the name of some deity other, and it has been used to provide a rationale for every known human perversion. Religion is dangerous in the extreme, and each of us owes himself to be very careful when he comes in contact with it. It must be handled with care. And I am so sure that I have described the one in which a boy spit out his tonsils illustrates some of the damage that religion which is being circulated these days does to the name of Christianity. I am well aware of how dangerous it is to express judgments of the kind I have expressed, but I am even more aware of the disastrous damage that can be wreaked upon the lives of the unsuspecting if nothing is ever said about this problem.

It may seem to some that I have singled out healers because of the episode I have just described. I have chosen it because it is especially dramatic and it illustrates so well the directions in which religion is now being traveled by some of the spectacular religious leaders of our time. Let me just say, however, that religious damage is being accomplished not only by such, for there are others who speak little about healing, who nonetheless present a picture which is not the gospel at all. And before continuing, let me say as well that I believe there is a healing that occurs in the context of faith.

And those who have been acquainted with The Back to God Hour over the years know that on other occasions I have spoken about such healing very positively.

At the moment, what I am talking about involves the bizarre, excessively public and intrinsically credible foolishnesses that are now presented to the ignorant and undiscerning foolishnesses that lead them down a path of psychological torture, unfulfilled expectations, and eventual disillusionment. One would think that it would not even be necessary to talk about events so patently frivolous and fraudulent. But the way such events dominate public religion today, especially as it is delivered by the media, and the apparent ubiquity of the public, make it necessary for the church to express a judgment about what is happening.

The spectacular religious side show being carried on these days in the name of Christ must be examined carefully. Perhaps the first thing necessary is simply to remind ourselves that if there are excesses being perpetrated these days in the name of Christ, this should not be surprising. For the Bible itself prepares us for the arrival of false prophets who will lead many astray.

Jesus, during His earthly ministry among us, warned His people that false religious leaders were coming. He said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). The apostle Paul also spoke of the presence of those who would come and try to turn the church aside from the truth. He said to the elders of Ephesus, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29, 30). The apostle John also cautioned the church regarding these matters when he said, "Be-

loved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Such material from the Scriptures alerts us to the possibility of the appearance of false religious leaders. And from what we have just read, at least a couple of things are significant. First of all, in the light of Jesus' words that the wolves will be wearing sheep's clothing—we should not be surprised that false religious action and teaching come in the garb of piety. It is attractive and promising. As he goes about accomplishing his work, the devil does not wear his horns and tail, nor does he carry his traditional pitchfork. (See 1 Corinthians 11:13-15). Secondly, both the apostle Paul and the apostle John suggest that false religious leaders come out of the Christian community itself. (See also 1 John 2:19) They are thus closely related to Christianity. So we should expect that it will be difficult to tell the difference between true and false prophets. If it turns out, it is very difficult indeed.

In terms of the difficulty of determining where truth and falsehood lie in connection with religion, this verse in the 12th chapter of Romans has played an important role: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching ..." (vv. 6, 7).

These words were written to those who prophesy or are especially helpful for those who want to find their way through the current jungle of religious happenings: "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith" (v. 6 Authorized Version).

This material speaks of prophecy according to the proportion of faith—a rather obscure phrase at first

blush, but not especially so when examined. When the Bible was written, to *prophecy* meant to *speaking religious truth*. Thus, this material refers to those who are speaking religious truth these days as well. Often it is spoken glibly, it is apparently nearly "off the cuff" but it is a form of prophecy, nevertheless. Now, the Bible says that this prophecy must occur according to the proportion of faith.

The phrase *the proportion of faith* is the important element in Romans 12:6, and if understood it can help us find our way today. The word for *proportion* in the original is the word *analogian*, or the word *analogy*. The thought conveyed is that prophetic utterances, the speaking of religious truth, must not simply occur all by itself, but it must be expressed in terms of what the Bible here calls faith.

The point is that a person who thinks she is a prophet may not simply go off in all kinds of directions and say all kinds of things, assuming all along that what he says is the clear word of God that everyone must believe. No, prophetic utterances must measure up to a certain standard. That standard is the standard of faith. Prophetic utterances must stand according to Romans 12:6, stand up when they are measured and compared with faith.

Now the problem here is that for us today this phrase is not very helpful because we often operate with a one-sided conception of faith. When we read that people who prophesy must do so in proportion to faith, we tend to read this as if it says that anyone may feel free to speak about religious truth so long as he is absolutely convinced himself that it is true. I mentioned at the beginning the preacher who told how God had performed a tonsillectomy on a boy, and it is quite possible that for some reason or another this preacher actually believed what he was saying. Because we tend to think of faith as something we have in us, an emotional,

subjective feeling or opinion, we therefore tend to receive all apparently sincere utterances by religious people as if they are truth in some sense or another. So I say that when we read in the Bible that prophecy must be in proportion to faith, we are not helped too much by that idea, because we think of faith too personally, in too subjective a manner.

The apostle Paul, however, had something quite different in mind when he said that prophecy should occur in proportion to faith, or in terms of the analogy of faith. For Paul, faith did not refer first of all to the subjective state of the believer, but it was, in the first place, the body of truth that had been delivered through the inspired prophets and apostles. This idea is found in the book of Jude in these words: "Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3). The faith consisted in a body of revealed truth which the church received. Faith in this situation, you see, is not just an internal state of feeling but it is the truth revealed by God. We use the word *faith* in this way, when we sing "Faith of Our Fathers." We say, "We shall be true to [this faith] until death." We use the word *faith*, then, as a body of truth that we hold to be true.

Now, this is the background of the Biblical remark concerning prophecy. The speaking of the truth, according to the Bible, does not occur when a religious enthusiast, possibly very well meaning, expresses himself on a number of subjects and relates a number of events which are supposed to be received as authentic miracles of God in our time. No, we must test what we hear and see these days and ask whether it measures up to the faith that has been once and for all delivered to the saints, the faith found in the Bible. We must

examine modern religious phenomena in this light, and we must not allow ourselves to be carried away by reports of great religious happenings, nor must we be overly influenced by skillful communicators who are using millions of dollars to create carefully contrived religious impressions.

Religious truth is not what popular preachers say it is, necessarily. Nor is it what unpopular preachers say it is. All preachers, whatever their status are obligated to form their prophecy in the light of the Bible, and they must measure their performance in terms of the truth that has been revealed there. If a person's speaking of religious truth does not measure up to the Biblical revelation, it should be rejected out of hand. The apostle Paul who wrote under the inspiration of God and whose writings now constitute the part of the Bible we have been speaking of, put the matter this way in I Corinthians 14: "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized" (v. 37).

Along this same line, the apostle John, who called early Christians to test the spirits to see if they are of God, furnished an objective standard that we can use to test exactly that. He said, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God" (I John 4:2, 3). What it all comes down to is this: religious truth must be measured by the faith that has been revealed in the Bible. Religious truth that is consistent with the truth found in the Bible, is worthy of our faith. So-called religious truth that contradicts the Bible, or is unrelated to the Bible, is to be rejected.

We have observed, thus far, that we are living in a time in which there is a great deal happen-

ing in religion, much of it very spectacular. We began by noting a particularly strange religious healing which was presented by a faith healer as evidence of the working of the Lord in our day. Our examination of Romans 12:6 indicated that religion must be measured according to the measure of faith that has been given. Now then, what are some of the practical applications of this standard to our present day?

In the first place, a general rule which one must keep in mind when making religious judgments is this: religious truth and religious events are authentically Christian when they arise out of the life of the church and bind people more and more closely to the church.

From a certain point of view, this rule itself confronts us with a multitude of problems, for it is difficult to define the church. But I think we may assume that fly-by-night organizations, organizations that set themselves up as churches for income tax purposes and the like, are clearly not the church in the true sense of the term. We can ask on that, can't we? The church whatever its denominational expression, is at bare minimum a body of people who have been influenced by the Word of God, the Bible, who benefit from the ministry of the sacraments, and who express some kind of discipline among themselves. Such a church existing in our time, will, in addition, be able to establish a line of continuation between itself and the early church revealed fully in the New Testament part of the Bible.

Now this is very general, I admit, but it is serviceable for us for now, because today there are so many who are telling incredible religious stories and who avoid any close relation to the church. The church is the place where the measure of faith which the apostle Paul referred to operates and exerts a formative influence. We have every rea-

son to be skeptical of any religious leader who does not himself live within the church and under its control, who does not encourage his followers to view their religious life in the context of the church, and who does not view his ministry entirely in terms of building up the church.

Secondly, we expect that the religious truth we need will, ordinarily, be conveyed to us by people who have been seasoned in the faith. One of the dominant elements of modern religious life is that newly converted people are quickly put on a pedestal and the religious pronouncements which they express are received as the latest word from the Lord. The prominence of testimonies in modern religious life is an expression of this trend. Now, there is a place for testimonies of course, but when a testimony comes from a person who one year ago was living in rebellion against God, possibly involved in consciousness-changing drugs and what not else, that testimony must be put in perspective. Such a person should not suddenly be considered a prophet.

The Bible speaks to this matter in I Timothy 3:6 in a section that talks about the kind of people who should be given leadership in religious matters. We read here: "He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil..." This is not being remembered these days. When a prominent government figure becomes a Christian, his testimony is elevated high above that of the faithful Christian pastor who has been earnestly ministering to his people out of the Word of God for many years. When a show business personality is converted, his opportunity for making an impact on the Christian community is far out of proportion to his spiritual maturity. Many who have come from the entertainment world actually continue in show business, but they cover it with a religious veneer; sometimes the

show business element they inject into the Christian community does a great deal of harm.

We cannot expect new converts to be fully aware of the marvelous beauty of the Bible's revelation concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot expect them to be seasoned, mature Christians. We do not gainsay the reality of their conversion, nor of their commitment to the Savior, but we should not allow them to become prophets and models for the Christian community.

Finally, when the Bible tells us that we must measure prophecy according to the measure of the faith that has been delivered to the church, we are helped regarding our attitudes toward the many reports of miracles we encounter these days. I began with the strange story of the miraculous tonnage. Well, there are many reports of this kind everywhere. Now then, how must a Christian respond to such reports?

It seems to me that a Christian is required to believe in the miracles recorded in the Bible, and in these alone. I say, he is required to believe in these. After all, miraculous events occur through the operation of the Holy Spirit of the living God, and somehow we must attempt to find out, regarding any miraculous happening, whether or not the Holy Spirit is responsible. One thing we know for certain: the miracles that the Bible records actually happened. We know this because the same Holy Spirit who caused the miracle to occur wrote the Bible. So we have proof positive that the miracles occurred.

Those who want to find the truth need not feel an obligation to be impressed with any other miracle reported to them. When we see a faith healer moving through a crowd on a television program, there is nothing in that event that requires a Christian to believe that Holy Spirit miracles are occurring before his eyes.

Sometimes we have miraculous things happen in

our own lives. Well and 'good. We may be convinced of that. But we need not be surprised when other Christians are less impressed than we are. The only miracles that the Christian community can be absolutely sure about are those recorded in the Bible. Here we have a rich treasury of miracles that confirm and strengthen our faith, and we must believe them. So far as others are concerned, we may be skeptics. We must be.

Religion is very, very dangerous. It must be handled with care. We must be on our guard and not allow ourselves to be overly impressed by religious personalities who tell us strange stories and expect us to believe them all. Somehow each of us must find his way. Somehow each of us must live out the faith that has been revealed in the Bible.

We must do this, not to refute those who could lead us astray, but we must do so, so that we find our way into the marvelous religion of the Bible. Then we will be able to benefit fully from the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He can save us, and He will, as we believe in Him and His Word.

The message printed in this pamphlet was heard on Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Reformed Churches of America in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia and by shortwave throughout the world.

P.O. Box 108,

SUTHERLAND, N.S.W. 2232.

P.O. Box 15392
New Lynn

AUCKLAND N.Z.