

These are just a few of the sad stories of spokespersons gone wild, which led to a bad image and bad press for the companies they endorsed. Sadly, such behavior isn't limited to commercial endorsements. The church can list plenty of its own high-profile pitchmen who got caught up in scandal, damaging the church's reputation over the years. Those who presume to speak for God are watched even more carefully than celebrities to see if their conduct and character match the message they are preaching. Discerning Christians, like savvy consumers, need to check the authenticity of those who stand before them with what they claim to be the word of the Lord.

Moses knew this would be a problem for Israel, so he spends time in the latter part of Deuteronomy offering some criteria for the kind of people God calls to be God's spokespersons and warning the people how to spot a fake. The questions for them are the same as they are for us: How do you know the difference between a real prophet and a religious pitchperson? How can you tell if someone is on the up and up or if he or she is leading the people into spiritual bankruptcy? According to Moses a true prophet will be like him and will be raised up from among God's own people (v. 15). In other words, real prophets will speak and act in line with the law of God and whatever they prophesy will affect them as much as the people, because they are called out from among the people.

These are important distinctions: they ground the prophet's words and work in the word of God and in the community to which and out of which God calls them. Unlike a celebrity endorser, a prophet should be well-known by those in his or her community before they ever receive the call. People will have had the opportunity to observe their public persona in private, witness their character in action, and determine whether their message matches the Scriptures they have studied and discerned together in community.

As God told Moses, the prophet will "speak to them everything I command" and whoever fails to heed that word will be held "accountable" (vv. 18-19). The prophet will have a stake in the community to whom he or she preaches, thus whatever the prophet proclaims for the community will affect him or her as well. To put it another way, the prophet's word is less directed toward "you" and more toward "us."

Moses' warning is especially poignant in an age when it's possible for anyone to download messages from a host of celebrity preachers who are personally detached from our real-life communities by miles of wire and satellite signals. Many people in our day assume that if someone is writing books or has a huge online following he or she must be a prophet.

The thing is, however, that a true prophet may not have that fat book contract or TV show. Their people know them - warts and all - and their message is often difficult to hear, which means that their audiences tend to be smaller. Most of the time, real prophets are rather reluctant because they know that the message God has laid on them can sting them as much as it will the rest of the community. Just look at the struggles of the prophets of Israel and you'll see that it's no picnic!

Here are a few telltale signs that you're hearing a pitchman instead of a prophet: **It's all about them.** A pitchman is primarily in business for the benefit received from hawking a specific product or scheme, thus he/she is likely to use their platform to manipulate others toward that end. When a person begins with an admonition like, "God told me to tell you..." or "God gave me a vision," it should put you on high alert. History is full of those who have claimed a special hotline with God and have led people to destruction while lining their own pockets or feeding their self-indulgent impulses. Through Moses, God warns Israel to watch out for those who "speak in my name a word I have not commanded the prophet to speak" because that word is usually their own (v. 20).

A real prophet, on the other hand, is more likely to suffer for the word he or she is bringing. Witness the trials of Jeremiah and Isaiah, John the Baptist, or the disciples of Jesus for just a few examples. If God calls you to be a prophet, God is not doing you a favor!

They're holding up other gods. God warns against prophets who are actually pitchmen for other gods (v. 20). In Moses' day that meant the idols of the Canaanites, but there are still plenty of false gods to go around today. If your "prophet" is making promises about your financial prosperity, for example, that should be a major red flag. The biblical prophets were far more concerned about the poor than the rich, as was Jesus.

Money is often part of an unholy trinity of other gods that includes sex and power. None of these things are bad, it's just that they make good servants but terrible masters. When a prophet speaks a word that places wealth, sexual license or a political agenda over and above the word of God, then you've got yourself a pitchperson for another set of gods. You don't have to read far into the Bible to realize what kind of destruction that causes!

Their character doesn't match the message. If someone is preaching a gospel that they're not living out, then he or she is a religious peddler and not an authentic prophet. Paul warned of such "peddlers of God's word" and urged people to seek those who speak

and act like "persons sent from God and standing in his presence" (2 Cor. 2:17). Jesus warned his disciples against false prophets and religious pitchmen who come as wolves in sheep's clothing, but whose real character is revealed by their "fruits" (Matt. 7:15-20). The most authentic prophets are those who are vulnerable, whose weaknesses are known by the community, and who live in humility and with good character. Real prophets may not be the most eloquent speakers, but their lives speak volumes as to the truth of the message they proclaim.

Their preaching comes to nothing. Through Moses, God says: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it" (v. 22). A real prophet knows the difference between his/her own word and that of God. It's all about whether the prophet has rightly discerned the will of God and whether the community begins to change as a result. Such evaluation takes time, which is why the best prophets are often those that remain in a community over a period of years. They are there to see the word of God through to its completion, rather than simply dropping a message and then hitting the road. A real prophet's message will continue to bear fruit and shape the community of faith as he/she lives with the people and in a deepening relationship with God.

These are good criteria for both preachers and congregations to evaluate themselves and one another, especially since the apostle Paul calls each of us "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). Our baptism and our inclusion in the family of faith makes us spokespersons for Christ and his gospel. What we say and what we do reflects on Christ and his church. If we are faithful to God, acting as true disciples of Jesus, listening to and working with the Spirit of God, then our words and our lives will preach the gospel loudly and clearly. If we say one thing, but do another, then the work of the congregation and the impact of the gospel is damaged. We are not all called to be prophets, but in the sense that we represent Christ and his Church, we are called to be ambassadors: we stand in for Christ, who is in heaven, as the visible presence of God on earth.

Prayer: Lord, we would be prophets, not pitchpersons. You have an amazing word of love and grace and mercy and healing to offer the world: may what we say and what we do bring you honor and glory, and may our lives preach your message. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Source: Dudak, Cory. "10 famous spokespeople who blew it big time." *Crave Online Website*. July 21, 2015. craveonline.com. Retrieved August 10, 2017.

Prophet or Pitchperson

Sunday, January 28, 2018
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

With the "Big Game" coming up next Sunday, folks will be huddled around their televisions to watch the commercials as much as the action on the field. Advertisers will spend millions of dollars to attract our eyeballs and get us to open our wallets to buy their products. Many of the ads will be creative and memorable, and more than a few will also feature a celebrity or familiar representative to help push merchandise.

Some of these celebrity "pitch" people get connected to companies and products over a long period of time. Who can forget when William Shatner hung up his Captain Kirk uniform and started hawking for Priceline.com? Or when retired slugger Joe DiMaggio moonlighted as Mr. Coffee? Brooke Shields rocked Calvin Klein jeans and Michael Jordan donned his Hanes underwear. They become so connected that we remember them years after the products fade into retail obscurity. Those celebrity faces added authenticity to a product, at least on the surface. If Michael Jordan likes tagless t-shirts, for example, well, then we should, too.

But as often as a celebrity spokesperson *helps* a product line, many of them have done more harm than good. When the celebrity pitchperson says something stupid or does something scandalous it's the company image which suffers.

- + Jared Fogle featured in every Subway commercial for 15 years because he lost 245 pounds eating their sandwiches; Subway dropped him in 2015 after allegations of sexual misconduct.

- + Michael Phelps pitched cereal for the Kellogg Company until a video of him smoking marijuana (2009) and a second DUI (2014) got him bounced from the cereal aisle.

- + Paula Deen, the darling of *The Food Network*, found herself in court, sued by former employees on charges of racial and sexual discrimination. Smithfield Foods dropped her as spokesperson.

- + Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong were both at the top of their respective sports until scandal took them down along with sponsorships with Nike and Livestrong respectively.