

Prophet or Pitchman *Deuteronomy 18:15-20* | 1/28/2018

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 attention and get us to buy their products. Many of the ads will be creative and memorable, and more than a few will also feature a celebrity to help push merchandise.

Some of these celebrity "pitch" people get connected to companies and products. William Shatner, the voice of Priceline.com. Joe DiMaggio - Mr. Coffee! Brooke Shields rocked Calvin Klein jeans and now hawks La-Z-Boy. Michael Jordan rips off tags for Hanes underwear. If the greatest basketball player in history likes tagless undies, for example, well, then we should, too. Actually, I do!

But while a celebrity spokesperson often *helps* a product line, many of them have done more harm than good -- namely, the celebrity who goes off the rails by doing or saying something dumb at best or criminal at worst. Consider these cautionary tales:

+ Jared Fogle was featured in nearly every Subway commercial for 15 years because he lost 245 pounds eating their sandwiches. He was imprisoned in 2015 for sexual misconduct. No surprise when Subway immediately dropped him as a spokesman.

+ Paula Deen was the darling of The Food Network until she was taken to court 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 their sponsorships with Nike and Livestrong respectively.

Of course, such behavior isn't limited to commercial endorsements. The church has had plenty of its own high-profile pitchmen get caught up in scandal and damage its reputation over the years. Just consider Jim Jones, Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker. Discerning Christians, like discerning consumers, need to always be on the lookout for authenticity in those who would stand before them with what they claim to be the word of the Lord.

Moses knew this was going to be a problem for Israel, so he offers up some criteria for the kind of people God calls to be his spokesmen and women while warning them how to spot a fake as well. The question for them is the same for those of us who preach and listen to preachers: *How do you know the difference between a real prophet and a religious pitchperson?*

In Deuteronomy 18, Moses offers two criteria for a real prophet: 1) The prophet will be like Moses, and 2) the prophet 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 have been called out from among the people.

Unlike a celebrity endorser, a prophet should be well-known by those in his or her community before they ever receive the call. 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.

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. Many people today assume that if someone is writing books or has a huge online following, they 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 and their message is often difficult to hear, which means that their audiences tend to be smaller. Just look at the struggles of the prophets of Israel and you'll see that it's no picnic!

With that criteria in mind, it becomes a little easier to tell when someone is actually being "prophetic" versus being a pitchman for a particular agenda. 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 particular product or agenda, thus he or she is more 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 hedonistic impulses.

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 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. Any prophet that puts his, her and/or your financial wealth ahead of generosity is simply pitching a product and not the gospel. As Jesus put it, you can't serve both God and wealth (Matthew 6:24).

Their character doesn't match the message! This one seems pretty obvious. 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 Corinthians 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" (Matthew 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 offers the people a surefire way to tell whether God has spoken through a prophet or the prophet is speaking on his own: "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." (v. 22). A real prophet knows the difference between his or her own word and that of God. It's not so much about a prophet's predictions as much as it is whether the prophet has rightly discerned the will of God. Such an 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 or she lives with the people and in a deepening relationship with God.

These are good criteria for both preachers and congregations to evaluate ourselves and one another. In what ways am I, as a preacher, living out this model of a prophet? In what ways are you, the congregation, living into your calling to be the priesthood of all believers? And how can we help each other be even more authentic and attuned to the word of God? Let's take the risk of being prophets, and not just pitchmen.

Pastor Keith