

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 56

Wolves In Sheep's Clothing - Part 1

by Maurice Barratt

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

This one verse is the key to understanding much of the final section of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just declared that there is a broad way and a narrow way for Christians, and now he is telling us that there are people whose sole purpose is to pull us away from the narrow way and onto the broad way. This final part of the Sermon on the Mount is all focussed on danger: the danger that Christians will hear the word and approve of it but not obey it; the danger of exclusion from the kingdom if they do God’s work but not God’s will; the danger of judging teachers by their gifts and not their fruit. The focus is all on the difference between two classes of Christians: those on the broad way and those on the narrow way.

“Beware” — the word immediately sounds a note of warning. This is something that we must take very seriously, and we must not think ourselves above the danger. We may think that the church, the “sheepfold”, is a safe place. Jesus tells us it is not. Nothing attracts the wolves like a sheepfold!

What we must take most seriously of all is the hideously subtle nature of the deception. The first danger is that we think we know who the false prophets are. Mohammed, Buddha ... no, they never came “in sheep’s clothing” — they did not come in among the church claiming to be Christians. What about William Russell or Joseph Smith (the founders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons respectively)? They came from within orthodox Christianity, but they are now universally regarded as cults, too well known to be a danger to mainstream Christians.

What about Jim Jones and David Koresh who came from within respected denominations and ended up in a destructive chaos of self-delusion and mass-suicide? They come nearer the mark — but they blew their cover too easily. They were false prophets working on the extreme edge of Christianity, claiming a few victims, but never likely to gain acceptance amongst the general run of Christians. The devil’s target is far wider than that. In fact, the purpose of the appearance of these notorious ministers was partly to attract the gaze of mainstream Christians who would then say, “Aha! there goes a false prophet; we can spot them” — and to lull them into a false sense of security, making them believe they have all the discernment they need, and thus diverting their attention from the real false prophets who are at work, far more subtly, in their very midst.

This is the key: the most subtle of the false prophets are the ones no-one suspects, the ones who find general approval within mainstream Christianity, the ones with the credentials and the recommendations, the magazines and the conferences, the power and the anointing. They are the most dangerous thing in the body of Christ, and the least recognized. They are “wolves in sheep’s clothing”, Jesus says. Sometimes the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” is illustrated as a wolf, all slaving

tongue, fangs and claws, with a sheep's fleece on its back. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is only "inwardly" that they are wolves — and even they themselves may not be aware of the fact. In fact, they are sheep with a wolf's heart. Everything about them tells you they are a sheep — that is to say, they look exactly like good Christian teachers. And they themselves believe they are good Christian teachers. One of the things that makes them so deceptive is that they are deceived themselves. They preach salvation by grace, and they believe it — as do all Christians on the broad way. But their heart is wrong. Somewhere they have allowed covetousness and hypocrisy (the two main themes of the Sermon on the Mount) to get in, or stay in. The thorns have sprung up — "the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things entering in" (Mark 4:19) — and choked the good seed.

Wolves don't hate sheep, they love them — for dinner! And false prophets don't hate Christians. A false prophet is not a persecutor of Christians; he will nourish Christians and gather them around him. But for what purpose? A sheep that is being well fed may think itself valuable — but it doesn't realise it is only being fattened for the slaughter. It is "valuable" for the wool on its back and the meat on its body. And many Christians may feel well fed, accepted and valued in the houses of the false prophets, with all their talk of freedom and celebration and victory — but they don't realise that they are being fleeced and devoured: they are being used to line the pockets and massage the egos of covetous men.

A covetous heart doesn't prevent a man from having a miracle ministry and doing signs and wonders. It doesn't prevent him from preaching eloquently or having vast resources of bible knowledge. The false prophets often possess these things in abundance; that's how they gain their following. But these things are not, and must never be, the measure by which we test the godliness of a minister. In Revelation 13:13 we read that the false prophet who appears alongside the antichrist will do "great wonders", and Paul talks of the antichrist "whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). These "lying wonders" are not sleight of hand or trickery. They are genuine supernatural miracles. The "lying" part is in their purpose, which is to deceive Christians into accepting the teaching and lifestyle of the false prophets, the teaching and lifestyle of the broad way.

Many New Testament scriptures warn us about the dangers of false prophets in the church. The whole of 2 Peter 2 and the entire letter of Jude are devoted to teaching about false prophets. We will examine these in more detail in the next issue of Challenge. For now I want to look at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:9-15. Paul is asserting here that he payed his own way while in Corinth and never solicited any money from the Corinthian church (verse 9); and he did that so as to give no opportunity to those who would accuse him (verse 12); "for such", he says, "are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (v 13-15). False apostles, and false prophets, are actually Satan's ministers, but by all appearances they are "ministers of righteousness" — holy, righteous, dedicated preachers of the gospel! How deceptive!

It is instructive to see that Paul then goes on to defend his own calling as a true apostle, not by telling of the signs and wonders that attended his ministry, nor by appealing to the converting power of his preaching, but by drawing attention to the price he had paid: stonings, shipwrecks, prison,

fastings, beatings, weariness, painfulness, burdens (v 23-30). Why does Paul refer to these things? Because this is what distinguished him from the false apostles and the false prophets. This is the price that the false prophets will never pay. Paul's true love for the church, and his faithfulness to Christ and to the narrow way, drove him to pay this costly price.

But in all other ways, the false prophets seem to have all the proper accreditation for "ministers of righteousness" — and they are deceiving multitudes of Christians today. No wonder Jesus used such strong words to the disciples, saying, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents; and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). If you are in the church, you are in the wolves' territory. These are amazing words from Jesus. He says we need wisdom — not the wisdom of the dove (the Holy Spirit), but the wisdom, cunning and subtlety of the serpent!

In 1 John 4:1 we are told "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world". We have to test or judge the spirit of every teacher and preacher. Don't listen to the objections of those who say "Jesus says we shouldn't judge", because there are many things Jesus says we should judge. (I speak in detail on this subject in my teaching tape "Things Christians Must Judge".) What we cannot do is "pull out the tares". In the parable of the tares and the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), where the tares represent false prophets, the workers are told not to remove the tares from the wheat, but to "let both grow together until the harvest" (Matthew 13:30 — harvest time is the judgement at the end of the world.) We must beware of false prophets, that is "be aware" of them; we must warn others about them and avoid them; but we cannot destroy them or their ministries. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "Let them alone" (Matthew 15:14). We can judge (test, try the spirits), but we cannot bring judgement — that is God's business. We are to be as wise as serpents, not ignorant of Satan's devices, but as harmless as doves, doing harm to no man.

Indeed, if we have discernment, if we are following the narrow way and not the broad way, the false prophets should be a relief to us, not a concern. After all, they are doing us a service. They are enabling us to see through the smog of the mixed motives of Christians. They are serving to show quite clearly who is on which side of the fence. Without them, we do not know who is who. But with them, we can see who is on the broad way and who is on the narrow way - who has a disciple's heart and who has a covetous heart. As Paul says, "there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Some words need to be said with regard to the tests of a false prophet in the Old Testament. A well-known scripture in Deuteronomy 18:22 says that if a prophet speaks and his word doesn't come to pass, then he is a false prophet. That's simple enough, but by itself it's not enough. A few chapters earlier there is another scripture (Deuteronomy 13:1-3) which says that if a prophet speaks and his word does come to pass, or if he performs a sign or wonder, but he says "Let us go after other gods", then you must not follow him. In other words, the fact that what he says comes to pass only proves that he is a prophet; it doesn't tell you whether he is a true or a false prophet. Remember what we said about "lying wonders": they are real miracles, but they are "lying" because their purpose is to deceive. In the same way, a false prophet is not someone who is pretending to be a prophet; a false prophet is genuinely a prophet, but his words are designed to deceive and mislead you.

Let us conclude this part of the message by looking briefly at the next verse. "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" (Matthew 7:16) The tree is known

by its fruit, not its leaves or branches. Only the quality of the fruit is of interest or value to God, not the size or the health or the location of the tree. So the quality of fruit should be our focus also. This is the way — the only way — to tell the false prophets from the true. The symbolism here is significant. Grapes don't grow on thorns, grapes grow only on the vine. Christ is "the true vine" (John 15:1). Thorns are "the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things entering in" (Mark 4:19) — materialism and covetousness. In other words, Christ-like fruit cannot come from a materialistic and covetous heart, and the mark of the false prophet is this covetous heart. The Sermon on the Mount exposes two things in the human heart: covetousness and hypocrisy. The false prophets have refused to be exposed, but have covered their materialism up in hypocrisy, cloaked it in spiritual talk, and deceived themselves, along with multitudes of Christians today.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

SPIRITUAL "RADAR"

If there is one thing lacking in the church of Christ today, it is the gift of discernment. Many people seem intent on seeking God for gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, etc., but very few desire to know which voice they are listening to - God's or the devil's - or where something is coming from - God or the devil. Surely, this should be of the utmost importance to every Christian, especially as so much is being spoken about us being in the last of the last days. The bible is full of warnings concerning what will happen during these perilous times, how there will be such great deception upon the earth that if it were possible even the very elect would be deceived. Friends, it is vital that we beg of God this supernatural gift that we may not be deceived by our enemy. Jesus did not say, "Beware of false prophets, which may come to you in sheep's clothing ..." , He said they would come and we are to beware lest we be taken in by their crafty, deceptive manner because unless God reveals their true inward state it will be completely hidden from us.

I can think of the time, many years ago, listening to a Christmas album sung by Barbra Streisand. She sang some lovely songs and carols putting real emotion and feeling into them. But as I sat in the semi-darkness and closed my eyes listening, I could feel an anointing as she sang about the birth of Jesus Christ. I was so touched that I was absolutely certain that she must have become a Christian. How else would she be able to put such spirit into what she sang? Fortunately I was sharing this with a mature Christian who tried to explain to me the difference between 'spiritual' and 'soulful' music. There is a world of difference between the two. As human beings we are sensitive to many unseen things. I kid my children on sometimes by saying that mums (especially me) have been blessed with a radar system, and we know what our children are up to even when we don't see them doing anything with our own eyes. Many a time, when they were small, the house would go really quiet and instinctively I've looked for them, only to find them pulling wallpaper off the walls, pouring salt all over the table and floor, tearing books, and even unravelling audio or video cassettes. My

children do their utmost to sneak up on me, but I can always just sense their presence in the room and spoil their prank. Thank God for “radar”!

But do we take note of these senses that we have been blessed with, or dismiss them as wrong thoughts? On occasions I have seen a person for the very first time and had first impressions of them. Sometimes, I have been quite shocked with what I’ve thought and, like a good Christian, have put the thought out of my mind telling myself that I am critical and judgmental.

Some years ago Maurice and I were invited to preach and sing at a church in Lancashire. We had never been to the church before and had never met the minister, but when he was leading the meeting from the platform I remember feeling quite repulsed by his manner for it was very effeminate and insipid. I shared with Maurice what I had thought and felt quite embarrassed at even thinking it, let alone sharing it, so dismissed it out of my mind. We chatted to the minister after the meeting and seemed to get along very well with him and I felt even more convinced that I just had a bad mind.

Not long after we were invited to preach and sing at this church again. But this time, when we arrived the minister came to apologise. He wanted me to sing, but, unfortunately for Maurice, the Lord had laid on him a specific message which he felt he should give that very morning and asked if Maurice would mind not preaching. This wasn’t a problem to Maurice, of course, so he just supported me on this occasion. The minister preached a very good sermon on prayer and both Maurice and I felt that it was really anointed by God, so this again confirmed to me that I had been terribly wrong in my assessment of this dear man.

Arrangements were made for us to visit the church again in the near future, but this time the minister was absent. He hadn’t said he would be away so I asked a member where he was. “In prison!” was the reply. I was stunned. Apparently, this minister had been sexually abusing the children in his Sunday School for a long time and the church, as well as his own family, were shocked and deeply hurt by this terrible deception and very fearful for their children.

... And yet I had felt an anointing on his sermon, and that more than anything had made me dismiss my first impressions of this man!

I now know the answer to this dilemma which I had. I once read in a book that you mustn’t refuse a letter just because the postman’s boots are dirty. In other words, God can use anyone and anything to convey His message if He is trying to say something to you. God used an ass to speak to Baalim in the Old Testament, but that doesn’t mean that the ass was holy or a good Christian. Jesus said, “Beware!” - if you discern something in your spirit when you first meet a person, seek the Lord about it. It could save you heartache later if that initial impression was from God.

When I was a young girl and still living at home with my parents, I remember my mother giving hospitality to a problemed young man. He had recently become a Christian and professed to be born again. At the time I was one of 4 children living there, the eldest was 14 years old and the youngest was around 18 months old. He had been with us for a few weeks but one night my mother felt an incredible urgency to get him out of the house. There wasn’t any particular reason for this other than she just had this inner knowledge that something terrible would happen if he stayed. So, even though you can feel quite condemned for this type of behaviour, she got him out of the house. A few

days later this man stabbed and murdered a young boy, who knows what God saved our family from? “Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord’ Then will I profess unto them, ‘I never knew you’ ...!”

Years ago, Maurice, his father and myself were invited to conduct a crusade in Scotland. The man who had invited us was the superintendent of a large denomination whom we had never met before. Maurice and I arrived at the church ahead of his father only to be greeted by the assistant minister, who seemed to treat us in a very critical and offhand manner before taking us to the main minister who was in his office. It would be quite difficult to describe the officious attitude of these men, who seemed bent on impressing us with their efficiency and business manner. The minister continued dictating letters to his Dictaphone handset and let us twiddle our thumbs for quite a while. I must admit, I was quite amused because I was very familiar with office procedure, having been a personal assistant to managing directors, and my first impressions of this man was that he was arrogant and a terrible show off who didn’t know what he was doing. Again, I condemned myself for these awful unchristian thoughts and tried to be humble.

The crusade was tremendously blessed by God and I know that a good work was done in many hearts and lives. But after the meetings had finished, the young son of our hosts came crying to me as he was afraid to share his problem with anyone else. Apparently he was being sexually abused by a couple of male neighbours and was bleeding. But then it came out that he was also being abused, along with other boys in his youth group, by the minister’s own son who was the youth leader, in the church vestry. We delicately shared his problem with his parents who immediately called the minister in for help. But it seemed that this was a known problem to the minister, who had done his utmost to sweep the whole thing under the carpet, even to getting his son married off so that all appearances seemed good, but his son had not changed. The minister was so worried about keeping his good name that he issued a statement to all the churches in his denomination that Maurice and I were trouble makers and had us banned. Instead of dealing with his problem, he blacked us!

Ask for the spirit of discernment. Paul said, “Be ye followers of me, as I am of Christ.” We need to follow the examples of men who are serving God and are in a position of leadership, but unless we have discernment, we will not know whether they are wolves in sheep’s clothing. Ask God to give you the opportunity to see their real fruit so that you are not deceived.