

The Prophet of "No!"

And the "uniformly favorable" words of false prophets.

And Ahab the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. He is Micaiah son of Imlah". 1 Kings 22:8, NASB

In coping with her health issues (she has psoriatic arthritis, an incurable and debilitating disease characterized by fatigue and joint inflammation), my wife has visited several doctors and undergone many tests. In dealing with her physical condition, two doctors in particular have treated her: We'll call them "Dr. R" and "Dr. P." On a couple of other occasions, she has met one of her brother's doctors (he has cancer and is on dialysis), and for reason to be explained later, we'll call his physician, "Dr. N."

In spite of some improvement experienced over the last few months, negative symptoms of my wife's disease have reappeared. Recently, Margie revisited her physicians to understand why her treatments don't seem to be working at this time. During the course of a conversation between us about the two doctors treating her—"Dr. R" and "Dr. P"—she remarked that she felt "Dr. R" was more *realistic* in his counsel to her about her disease than "Dr. P," who tended to be more *positive and optimistic*. When she told me she felt "Dr. R" (realism) was more straight forward than "Dr. P" (optimism), I said to her: "Stop there Margie and tell me, which doctor's counsel about your disease do you prefer, would you rather have, "Dr. R's" or "Dr. P's"? Because the disease is what it is, she told me she preferred the counsel of "Dr. Realism" to that of "Dr. Positivity." But then she added, "I prefer both my doctors to my brother's. 'Dr. N' doesn't tell him anything!"

As I listened to her, I applied her thoughts to pastoral ministry. Pastors too deal with a debilitating disease called sin, and the question arises, how should the "S" condition be treated? Incidentally, in contrast to my wife's arthritis, the good news is that sin is curable, partly during this life (sanctification after salvation) and wholly in the next life (glorification). So dear Christian believer, when it comes to the dreaded "S" disease that afflicts all of us, what do you want to hear? Do you desire your pastor to be like "Dr. N" who tells you nothing either about the disease or its cure? Do you want your pastor to be like "Dr. P," majoring on positivity, possibility, and potential (i.e., you can experience success 'n life, you can become a better "YOU")? Or will you prefer the approach of "Dr. R" who, like Jesus the Great Physician (See Mark 7:14-23.), will tell you about both the disease and its cure?

Three years had passed since Ahab defeated Aram. Yet the enemy remained entrenched at Ramoth Gilead. So to drive the enemy out of that location, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, entered into alliance with Ahab, king of Israel (Read 1 Kings 22:1-40.). Concerned about his safety and future, Jehoshaphat asked Ahab if he knew of any prophet who would predict how the battle

would go for him. So Ahab organized a gathering of prophets, and as the vicar of Jehoshaphat asked them, **"Shall I go against Ramoth-gilead to battle or shall I refrain?"** They optimistically answered, **"Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king"** (1 Kings 22:6). *You can do it!* they told the king. If it would be safe for Ahab in battle, so too it would be safe for Jehoshaphat, or so Ahab assumed it would be. The words of four-hundred "positivity" prophets were **"uniformly favorable"** for the kings as they predicted victory for the Israelite allies in their battle against the Aramaeans (1 Kings 22:13).

But suspecting their prophetic collusion was really not of the Lord—they were telling Ahab what he wanted, not needed, to hear—Jehoshaphat asked Ahab, **"Is there not yet a prophet of the Lord here that we may inquire of him?"** Scripture records that Ahab answered Jehoshaphat: **"There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. He is Micaiah son of Imlah"** (1 Kings 22:6-8). Anyway, the kings sent for Micaiah, *the prophet of negativity*, although the messenger sent by Jehoshaphat to summon Micaiah begged the prophet, *Please let your word be like one of the four-hundred "positivity prophets," and speak favorably to the kings* (Compare 1 Kings 22:13.). But even though Micaiah told the truth to them, the kings followed the sugar coated advice of the four-hundred prophets, and went into the battle in which true to Micaiah's prediction, Ahab was killed.

In the contemporary pan-evangelical church there are thousands of preachers who, in giving their audiences "uniformly favorable" messages, resemble the four-hundred "positivity" prophets, who in short, "spin sin." The messages of today's communicators--they're no longer known as "preachers"--are characterized by *positivity* (e. g., Norman Vincent Peale), *possibility*, (e. g. Robert Schuller) and human *potential* (e. g., Joel Osteen), and by the thousands, if not millions, the mass of the American "faithful" flock to hear them. Then there are the *user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, audience-driven* pastors who follow both the style and substance of the Willow Creek and Saddleback models for "doing" church. As they download (plagiarize) their sermons from those pastoral network websites, the Hybels-Warren acolytes mimic the substance and style of those successful pastors. Hum . . . uniformly favorable words? So what might these words be like? If the game is follow the leader, they might be scripted after the style and substance of Rick Warren whose sermons, according to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, "rarely linger on self-denial and fighting sin, instead focusing on healing modern American angst, such as troubled marriages and stress." [1]

Of church goers like Ahab, J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) observed and asked:

Alas, there are many like Ahab in the nineteenth century! They like a ministry which does not make them uncomfortable, and send them home ill at ease. How is it with you? Oh, believe me, he is the best friend who tells you the most truth! [2]

So who ought the preacher to be, a "spin" doctor who either tells you nothing or only affirms your potential, or a "sin" doctor who will tell it like it is?

ENDNOTES

[1] Suzanne Sataline, "A Popular Strategy for Church Growth Splits Congregants," *The Wall Street Journal*, Tuesday, September 5, 2006, A1, 10.

[2] J.C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1879, Reprint) 281.