

# OpenTheo

## Prophetic or Merely Performative

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

In this article, Kevin discusses how Christians are to honor each other and Christ when critiquing and correcting each other.

## Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations. This is life and books and everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung.

Good to have you with us. As I mentioned before, this aspect of LBE, where I read these articles, we're hoping to move in the near future to a separate, podcast, a different stream, just so it's not confusing what we're doing here on LBE, which is really to do the long-form interviews. But this tends to get a lot of good feedback that this isn't helpful, so we'll continue with this reading these articles.

But you can look for that in the weeks or maybe the next couple of months. Probably take a short break over the summer on both interviews and articles. But good to have you with us today.

I don't know why I'm saying "us." It's just me here. World opinions, the article today, prophetic or merely performative. It's important to follow the Bible's pattern for rebuke and critique.

The Bible is not opposed to critiquing Christians. There is hardly a book in the Bible that doesn't involve some form of correction, warning, or rebuke for God's often wayward people. In fact, in many texts, Christians are exhorted to confront our brothers when sinned against Matthew 18:15 to gently restore those caught in transgression, Galatians 6:1, and to warn those who have wandered from the truth, James 5:19.

Indeed, the Scriptures were given to us for reproof and for correction. There is no problem when done wisely, humbly, and fairly, with Christians pointing out problems with the Christian church, or for that matter when Christians address publicly what others have spoken, written, or done publicly. The danger is when Christians, as a full-

time vocation, or as an online hobby, become professional critics of the church.

Good parents discipline their children at the right time and in the right way. Bad parents, exacerbate their children with constant harping and provocation. But what about the prophets you might counter? Wasn't their full-time calling basically to show God's people their sins? Of course, religious people and religious institutions don't like the prophetic voices in their midst.

God's people have always persecuted the prophets, you might say. True enough, no one likes to be confronted with sin, error, or hypocrisy. All of us, especially those who know we are debtors to mercy alone, should cultivate the kind of humility that makes us open to seeing our faults and leads to repent of our sins.

And yet, just because someone sounds "prophetic" does not mean he or she is justified in what he says or how he says it. Let's think about the prophets in the Bible and consider some ways not to speak prophetically to other Christians or about the church. Here are some surefire ways to ruin the credibility of your critique.

First, be unaccountable. Because prophets in the Bible were often without honor, especially in their hometown, it's tempting to conclude that any objection to the prophetic voice is just another sign of one's recalcitrant heart. But here we should remember that the Bible is replete with many false prophets.

That's why in both Testaments, God's people are called to be discerning about those who claim to speak prophetically. It's also why false prophecy was punishable by death due to Ronomy 1820. Whenever we claim to speak for the Lord about his bride, whether from the pulpit or from the pages of the New York Times, we should be exceedingly careful to make sure what we are saying can be proven from what God has said in his word.

Second, only speak about the sins of God's people. That's another way to get this wrong. The Old Testament prophets often functioned like prosecuting attorneys, see Malachi for example, making the case that God's people had been unfaithful.

But let us not forget that most of the Old Testament prophets also denounce the sins outside of Israel. The books of Isaiah and Jeremiah have long sections about the wickedness of the nations, even Amos who famously lambasts those who are at ease in Zion begins his prophecy with a word about the judgment coming on Israel's neighbors. We ought to be cautious about "profits" in our day who are quick to speak to the Gentiles about the sins of Israel, while never speaking with the same prophetic force about the sins of those outside the fold of God's people.

Just add there, it's quite possible to make a living or to find quite a nice avocation, speaking to people who want to hear bad things about the church without ever confronting those people about their own disobedience to God. Third, never speak to

God's people as his chosen, beloved, covenant people. The Old Testament prophets say plenty of hard things, but they usually put those hard things in a broader context.

Think again of the parenting analogy. Bad parents berate their children not a frustration, anger, and even dislike. Good parents discipline their children while reminding them of their special status and privileged position.

The prophets of the Old Testament rebuke and warn, but they also woo, persuade, and draw the wayward back with God's cords of kindness. Fourth, never offer grace and mercy. The good prophets in the Bible offer the same basic message to God's people, repent, return, and be redeemed.

There is mercy for Israel just as there is redemption for Gomer, Hosea 3. Too many internet "profits" so-called, and to be fair, probably too many of the prophetic preachers as well know how to scold, but do not know how to suck her. They know how to apply the law, but not how to offer the gospel. It's all "bad dog" and never "well done good and faithful servant" enter into the joy of your master.

Fifth, never hold out hope and the promise of future glory. Most of the prophetic books cover similar ground. Joel is a classic example.

Israel has sinned. Chapter 1, repent and return. Chapters 1 and 2, the Lord will have pity and will bless you.

The rest of chapter 2, the Lord will judge the nations chapter 3, and then at the end, there is a glorious future awaiting God's people. Isolated words of rebuke might be offered for the worst individuals like Ahab and Jezebel, but when speaking to God's people, the prophets don't just harp on sins. Without also speaking of God's electing love, his forgiving grace, and his coming glory.

Think about the prophetic letter we call "revelation." The words of correction from Jesus to the seven churches are two chapters out of 22 that exalt in the glory of Christ, encourage God's people to press on, condemn the evils of Babylon, and celebrate the church's final victory and vindication. If the chastising voices of our day, even though they have true things to say, never sound these notes, we might wonder whether the speech is actually more performative than prophetic.

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