

## **“True vs. False Pastors” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah**

Based on commentary by John Calvin  
Edited by Wabash Bible Ministries

Just as there were many prophets in the days of Jeremiah, so there are many pastors, ministers, preachers, and Bible teachers in our day. And just as in Jeremiah’s day the majority of the prophets were false prophets, so in our day it seems that the majority of pastors are false, too. How do we determine between the true and the false? The Old Testament book of Jeremiah provides us with much insight as to the differences between true and false prophets and true and false pastors and how to differentiate them.

It is no new thing for Satan’s ministers to prophesy in God’s name, that is, falsely to assume His name, when in reality and truth they are vain pretenders.<sup>1</sup> False pastors and false teachers have always been present in the Church. For we find that in all ages the Church of God has been subject to the evil of having wolves occupying the place of pastors, of having impious and treacherous men daring to oppose God in His own name.

It was a most grievous trial when in the very Church itself the ministers of Satan thus falsely pretended the name of God. It has been God’s will in all ages to try the faith of His servants by permitting to Satan and his ministers the liberty of pretending falsely His holy name. And as we see that the Church has ever been exposed to this evil, there is no cause for us to be disturbed at this day, when, the same thing happens, for it is nothing new. (Jer. 23:26-27)<sup>23</sup>

What was the state of the church in Jeremiah’s day?

### **In Jeremiah’s day, nearly all the clergy were apostate.**

The Levitical priests had almost all degenerated and become apostates so that hardly one in a hundred showed the least sign of religion. Since, then, the Levitical order had become thus corrupt, it is no wonder that Jeremiah had to declare war against the priests; and we shall hereafter see that this was done (Jer. 1:18).<sup>4</sup>

In Jeremiah’s day there were priests and prophets who occupied a place in the Church, and who boasted of their titles, though they were nothing but mere masks, having no care to possess what their calling required. Thus the masked priests were satisfied with an honorable vocation and cared nothing for the account that was to be rendered to God; and thus in all ages hypocrites have abused the gifts of God. (Jer. 18:18)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. III, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 374.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. III, 190-191.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. II, 418.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. I, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. II, 416.

**In Jeremiah's day, nearly all the religious people were apostate.**

Jeremiah had to fight with a host of false prophets; for there was a greater number of them, as is ever to be found in the world. The whole priestly order was corrupt and openly carrying on war with God; and the people were nothing better. Jeremiah then had to contend with the king and his counselors, with the false prophets, with the ungodly priests, and with the wicked people. So he says that there was not one man among them who engaged himself in appeasing God's wrath. (Jer. 5:2)<sup>6</sup>

**Yes, in Jeremiah's day, there were virtually no true Christians and virtually no true preachers.**

Jeremiah complains that there were no prophets. There were none to arouse the careless people who were asleep in their sins. But by this sentence he claims authority for himself; for though he was without associates and assistants, he yet suggests that his teaching was not on that account of less value. In effect, he said, "Let it be that there is no prophet to recall the people from their sins, to exhort them to repent, to terrify the ungodly; however this may be, yet the Lord has appointed me to teach and to exhort the people." We hence see that the Prophet claims for himself full and complete authority, though he alone denounced God's vengeance. Many indeed then boasted that they were prophets; but they were only false flatterers. When the Prophet saw that many abused the name, and did not perform the office faithfully and sincerely, he set himself in opposition to them all. (Jer. 9:12)<sup>7</sup>

**The importance of true pastors and teachers: they are God's blessing to His people.**

The well-being of the Church is secured when God raises up true and faithful teachers to proclaim His truth. But when the Church is deprived of sound teachers, all things soon fall into ruin. Nothing is more ruinous to the Church than for God to take away faithful pastors.<sup>8</sup>

Doubtless Prophets and teachers are nothing else but the instruments of the Holy Spirit; for no one is fit to teach but when he is guided by the Spirit of God. We learn what an incomparable blessing it is to have faithful and true teachers; for God, through them and their labors, with certainty declares that He cares for our salvation, as though He watched over us, as though He rose up early, as though He visited us; and the preaching of the Gospel is not without reason called the visitation of God. There is, then, no reason for us to seek anything better, when God is present with us by His word; for we have a sure testimony of His presence whenever true and faithful teachers rise up. (Jer. 32:33)<sup>9</sup>

How invaluable is the benefit which God bestows when He raises up honest and faithful teachers; for it is the same as when the head of a family rises early from his bed, calls up his children, and takes care of them. Let us, then, know that teaching, when it is communicated to us, is an evidence of God's paternal care, because He would not have

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<sup>6</sup> Vol. I, 254.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. I, 479.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. I, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Vol. IV, 197.

us to perish but comes down to us and sees what is needful, as though He were present with us, and as a father towards His children, He takes care of us and of our affairs. (Jer. 44:1-7)<sup>10</sup>

**What do true pastors preach and teach? They preach the Scriptures alone. They proclaim the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.**

God first chose His prophets and committed to them the office of teaching, then He commanded them what to say and dictated to them as it were His message, so that they might not bring forward anything devised by themselves, but only be His heralds.<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah spoke not according to his own ideas as a man; he was a celestial herald to proclaim what God commanded.<sup>12</sup>

None ought to be acknowledged as God's servants, no prophets or teachers ought to be counted true and faithful, except those through whom God speaks, who invent nothing themselves, who teach not according to their own fancies, but faithfully deliver what God has committed to them.<sup>13</sup>

If God's Word is not allowed to have authority, it is the same as though its despisers attempted to thrust God from heaven or denied His existence. We hence see how the majesty of God is indissolubly connected with the public preaching of the truth.<sup>14</sup>

Jeremiah daily thundered and threatened approaching ruin; for he was like a celestial herald, who filled every place with terror; but he was not heard; and at the same time the Jews praised the false prophets, who soothed them with various promises. We hence perceive, that God had not spoken peace to them; but that the Jews, not only willingly, but with eagerness, laid hold on those things by which the false prophets sought to gratify them (Jer. 4:11-12).<sup>15</sup>

It is not enough for one to have been once called unless he faithfully delivers what he has received from God Himself.<sup>16</sup>

It is a support which can never fail us, when we know that our service is approved by God and that as He prescribes to us what to say, so what proceeds from Him shall ever possess its own weight and that it cannot be effected by the ingratitude of the world, that any portion of the authority of celestial truth should be destroyed or diminished. Whenever then the ungodly deride us and elude or neglect the truth, let us follow the example of the Prophet, let us ask God to look on us; but this cannot be done, except we strive with a sincere heart to execute what He has committed to us. Then a pure conscience will open a door to us, so that we may be able confidently to call on God as our Guardian and Defender, whenever our labor is despised by men. (Jer. 18:19)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Vol. IV, 528.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. III, 178.

<sup>12</sup> Vol. II, 436.

<sup>13</sup> Vol. I, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Vol. I, 280.

<sup>15</sup> Vol. I, 215.

<sup>16</sup> Vol. II, 374.

<sup>17</sup> Vol. II., 421.

Ministers are to bring forward nothing but what they have learned from God Himself. Though Jeremiah was a great man and endued with excellent gifts, yet he was not to bring one word or a syllable as from himself; how great then must be the presumption of those who seek to be superior to him by bringing their inventions, and at the same time demand to be deemed as oracles? This passage confirms the doctrine of Peter, who says, "He who speaks, let him speak the words of God." (1 Pet. 4:11)<sup>18</sup>

True prophets preach God's law: God said in effect, "If they had stood in My counsel, they would have doubtless made known My word to My people. What is that word? The definition follows, even the word of the Law, *They would have turned* the straying people from their *evil way*." (Jer. 23:22)<sup>19</sup>

The Prophet Jeremiah confirms that he was not the author of what he taught, but only a minister who faithfully announced what God had committed to him; and so the people could not have objected to him by saying that he brought forward his own devices, for he repelled such a false accusation. (Jer. 26:1-2)<sup>20</sup>

Jeremiah testifies in his usual manner that he did not bring forward what he himself had invented but that God was the author of his prophecy. He at the same time declares that he was God's minister; for God did not descend from heaven whenever it pleased Him to reveal His favor to the Jews, but, as it is said in Deuteronomy, He normally spoke by His servants (Deut. 18:18). In short, Jeremiah recommended the things he was about to say, that the Jews might reverently receive them, not as the fictions of men, but as oracles from heaven. (Jer. 50:1)<sup>21</sup>

➤ **True pastors must also *refute* falsehood.**

The apostle Paul teaches that one of the requirements for the office of pastor/teacher/elder/bishop/overseer in Christ's church is that he must "be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9). A true pastor must not only teach what is true but also refute what is false.

In our day also when insolent and unprincipled men rise up and dare to vomit forth their blasphemies by which they darken and degrade the doctrines of true religion, we are under necessity to contend with them, otherwise what we teach would be ineffectual; for the minds of many (I mean the simple) are in suspense and fluctuate when they see a great conflict between two contrary parties. It was therefore necessary for the holy man (Jeremiah) to expose the lies of Hananiah, for he ever vaunted (bragged about) himself and boasted of his own predictions. But what did Jeremiah say? *The LORD has not sent you*. This refutation ought to be noticed whenever we contend with Satan's ministers and false teachers; for whatever they may pretend, and with whatever masks they may cover their lies, this one thing ought to be more than sufficient to put an end to their boastings—that they have not been sent by the Lord. (Jer. 28:15)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vol. II, 435.

<sup>19</sup> Vol. III, 182.

<sup>20</sup> Vol. III, 307.

<sup>21</sup> Vol. V, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Vol. III, 408.

*It is not sufficient for one simply to teach what is right unless he also restores from error those who have been already deceived or are in danger of being deceived. For to assert the truth is only one-half of the office of teaching, because Satan ever leads his ministers to corrupt the pure doctrine with falsehoods. It is not then enough to proclaim the truth itself, unless all the fallacies of the devil are also dissipated, of which there is at this day a manifest instance under the Papacy; for as the minds of almost all are there inebriated [drunk] with many corrupt inventions, were any one only to show that this or that is right, he would certainly never in this way eradicate errors from the hearts of men. And hence Paul commands bishops not only to be furnished with doctrine in order to show the right way to the teachable, but also to be so armed as to be able to resist adversaries and to close their mouths (Tit. 1:9). (Jer. 29:8)<sup>23</sup>*

Inasmuch then as from the beginning of the world Satan has never ceased to try and attempt, as far as he could, to corrupt the truth of God, or to immerse it in darkness, it has hence been always necessary for God's servants to be prepared to do these two things—faithfully to teach the meek and humble—and boldly to oppose the enemies of truth and break down their insolence [haughtiness].<sup>24</sup>

The truth of God will ever serve to dissipate all the mists in which Satan never ceases to envelop the pure truth. When the people are imbued with any error, it ought to be boldly resisted. Furthermore, Jeremiah points out to us by his own example the weapons with which all God's servants ought to fight in order to expose all those fallacies by which pure doctrine is assailed, even by setting in opposition to them the word of God. (Jer. 29:10)<sup>25</sup>

- **True pastors preach the whole counsel of God to all without discrimination, for God does not show favoritism (Rom. 2:11). They must be God-pleasers, not men-pleasers.**

Those only are deemed by God to be the faithful pastors of the Church who are not influenced by respect of persons, who do not turn to this or to that side, but rightly judge according to the law of God; for by the law is the difference to be made between the precious and the worthless, as we are no fit judges except insofar as we agree with what God has said. The law then is alone that by which we can distinguish the precious from the worthless. They who keep to this rule do justly condemn some and approve of others, because they only are God's heralds who bring nothing of their own.<sup>26</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah saw that he was despised by God's enemies. Nevertheless, he knew that his doctrine [teaching] was in force before God and retained its own importance and could not fail. (Jer. 18:19)<sup>27</sup>

This is true of all true pastors: if they please men they cannot be the servants of God.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vol. III, 423-424, emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Vol. III, 424.

<sup>25</sup> Vol. III, 427-428.

<sup>26</sup> Vol. II, 295-296.

<sup>27</sup> Vol. II, 421.

<sup>28</sup> Vol. II., 373.

Teachers are with closed eyes to do whatever God commands them, without showing any respect of persons; and thus they are to fear no offences, nor even the name of a king, nor a drawn sword, nor any dangers. (Jer. 36:29-30)<sup>29</sup>

True pastors must disregard religious hypocrites: We only rightly and faithfully discharge the prophetic office when we show no respect of persons and disregard those external masks by which the ungodly deceive the simple and are haughty towards God while they falsely pretend His name. (Jer. 20:3)<sup>30</sup>

The servants of God ought boldly to discharge their office and not to flatter the great and the rich, nor diminish any of their own authority when they meet with dignity and greatness. Therefore, let those who seem to be more eminent than others learn that whatever eminence they may possess cannot benefit them, but that they ought to submit to prophetic instruction (Jer. 22:1-3).<sup>31</sup>

True pastors do not seek popularity; they seek to be faithful to their Lord: Baruch's message was by no means popular but on the contrary very disagreeable; hence is seen the devotedness of Baruch. He made no refusal, for he knew that this burden was laid on him for some purpose. (Jer. 36:8)<sup>32</sup>

True pastors deny themselves and renounce self-love: Baruch loved himself too much, and wished to evade dangers when God ordered him to engage in the conflict. Baruch, disregarding the public safety, was too cautious, and was thus timid and tender as to his own life. The Prophet Jeremiah shows that Baruch was too delicate as to himself; and because he was blinded by the love of himself, he did not consider the public safety of the people nor did he regard the Temple and the holy land.<sup>33</sup>

- **True pastors must be willing “to die on every hill,” for no part of Scripture is unimportant or non-essential to believers. If they fail to do this, the Church will become corrupt and apostate.**

If pastors are unwilling to die for any part of God's Word, then they have surrendered God's Word to Satan to trample it underfoot. True pastors must concede *nothing* to the rebellious and hypocritical: The Prophets were sent for this end—not to gratify men or to soothe them by flattering words, but rather to continue firm and constant in executing their office and to turn refractory men to Him, and not to concede *anything* to them. We know how great is the pride of almost the whole world, and also their love of pleasure, so that no one can willingly bear to be reproved. As then the greater part of mankind are so proud and self-indulgent, were the word of God to bend to the humor of this or that man, what would become of it? There would certainly remain in celestial truth no dignity and no majesty (Jer. 15:19).<sup>34</sup>

It is therefore necessary that all faithful teachers in the Church should so conduct themselves as not to concede to the vices of men nor to cherish their fancies, but to

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<sup>29</sup> Vol. IV, 353.

<sup>30</sup> Vol. III, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Vol. III, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Vol. IV, 333.

<sup>33</sup> Vol. IV, 569.

<sup>34</sup> Vol. II., 296, emphasis added.

constrain them to undertake the yoke of God. The apostle Paul said that if he pleased men, he could not be the bondservant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).<sup>35</sup>

- **True pastors must persevere even when there seems to be no fruit from their efforts.**

Facing complete rejection by those who heard his preaching, Jeremiah contemplated throwing in the towel: This was indeed a most severe and dangerous trial; it is therefore no wonder that the Prophet says that it came to his mind to turn aside from his office as a teacher. (Jer. 20:8-9)<sup>36</sup>

The Prophet Jeremiah says that he found no fruit from his labors, but, on the contrary, he saw that all his efforts and endeavors had an opposite effect; for they exasperated all the Jews, inflamed their rage and drove them into a greater licentiousness in sinning. Hence he says that he purposed to give up the office assigned to him, but that by a secret impulse he was constrained to persevere and that thus he was not at liberty to desist from the course which he had begun. (Jer. 20:8-9)<sup>37</sup>

It was not in Jeremiah's power to either abstain from teaching or to do what God commanded; for a burning ardor forced him to go on.<sup>38</sup>

Let us then rouse the sparks of this fervor until it inflames us so that we may faithfully devote ourselves altogether to the service of God; and if at any time we become slothful, let us stimulate ourselves and may the power of the Holy Spirit be so revived that we may to the end pursue the course of our office and never stand still, but assail even the whole world, knowing that God commands us and requires from us what others disapprove and condemn.<sup>39</sup>

The labor of true pastors is *never* fruitless. The labor of true pastors is fruitful to the glory of God, even if it saves no one!: Let us now then learn by the example of the Prophet Jeremiah that whenever Satan or our flesh raises an objection and says that we ought to desist from preaching celestial truth because it does not produce its proper and legitimate fruits, it is nevertheless a good aroma before God, though fatal to the ungodly. Though then the truth of the Gospel proves the savor of death to many, yet our labor is not on that account of no value before God; for we know that we offer to God an acceptable sacrifice; and though our labor be useless as to men, it is yet fruitful as to the glory of God; and while we are the aroma of death unto death to those who perish, yet to God our labor is acceptable. (Jer. 20:8-9; cf. 2 Cor. 2:16)<sup>40</sup>

All Jeremiah's teaching had been without fruit, though Jeremiah had labored much among the Jews and had been diligent and faithful in the discharge of his office as a teacher. (Jer. 36:1-2)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Vol. II, 297.

<sup>36</sup> Vol. III, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Vol. III, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Vol. III, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Vol. III, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Vol. III, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Vol. IV, 326.

True teachers must persevere, as they seek the Lord through prayer: Baruch was for a time a strenuous and courageous servant of God; but when there appeared no end, he began to grow faint. Let us then learn constantly to flee to God and to seek of Him a new increase of grace, so that He may sustain us by the power of His Spirit, and raise us up when fallen, for otherwise we cannot but fall every moment, even when our career seems glorious; but let us learn, being mindful of our infirmities, to ask the Lord to hold us up and to stretch forth His hand to us every day. (Jer. 45:1-5)<sup>42</sup>

### **False pastors teach lies and false doctrine, distorting, twisting, and denying the Scriptures.**

The prophets, Jeremiah says, prophesy falsely. It was no doubt enough to make all astonished, when these impostors assumed the name of prophets at Jerusalem, where God had chosen His dwelling and His sanctuary; how great and how base a profanation was it of God's name? There were indeed at that time impostors everywhere who boasted that they were God's prophets, who in many places passed as oracles the delusions of Satan; but to see the ministers of the devil in the very sanctuary of God (which was then the only one in the world), even in the very city where he had His habitation and dwelling, was a monstrous thing, which ought to have made all men astonished.<sup>43</sup>

Those are not God's instruments or ministers, nor are worthy of any honor, who so pervert vices and virtues as to say that light is darkness and that darkness is light.<sup>44</sup>

#### ➤ **False prophets speak their own words, not God's words.**

Jeremiah says that they brought forward the vision of their own hearts and did not speak what came from God's mouth. This is a mark which can never deceive us, except we willingly throw ourselves into the snares and intrigues of Satan, as many do who willfully seek to be deceived and even hunt for falsehoods. For every one who speaks according to the mere suggestions of his own mind must be an impostor. No one then ought to be deemed a sound teacher, except he who speaks from God's mouth (Jer. 23:16).<sup>45</sup>

False prophets do not exegetically preach through the whole counsel of God: These false prophets knew that if they wished rightly to perform their work, they ought to have been the expounders of the Law, but they were not. (Jer. 23:9)<sup>46</sup>

He says that it was an evident proof that they were not God's prophets, because they did not faithfully teach what they ought to have derived from the Law. (Jer. 23:22)

God shows how we are to form a judgment when a question is raised respecting true and false teachers. Whatever is without God's command is like the wind and will of itself vanish away. There is, then, no solidity in anything except in God's command. Hence it follows that all those who speak according to their own fancies are false and whatever they bring forward has no weight in it. No one, except he simply obeys God and

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<sup>42</sup> Vol. IV, 568.

<sup>43</sup> Vol. I, 308-309.

<sup>44</sup> Vol. II, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Vol. III, 167-168.

<sup>46</sup> Vol. III, 153.

faithfully declares what he has received from Him, can be of any account; for his whole weight is lighter than a feather, and all his apparent wisdom is falsehood. (Jer. 23:33)<sup>47</sup>

- **False teachers do not believe in absolute truth; they teach that everything is *gray*, not black and white.**

In the eyes of false teachers, the Scripture is a nose of wax; it has nothing sure or certain; it can be twisted to favor any party. Hypocrites always pervert the word of God; and therefore it follows that to them there is nothing certain or clear in the Scripture.<sup>48</sup>

- **False teachers preach “positive and encouraging” sermons and seek to flatter men and tickle their ears. They teach falsehoods, only part of the truth, and things in addition to the truth.**

Jeremiah introduces another mark by which the false prophets might be distinguished from the true prophets—they flattered the ungodly and wicked despisers of God (Jer. 23:17-18).<sup>49</sup> The false prophets had caused the ruin of the miserable Jews by promising them God’s forgiveness and by ever announcing favorable predictions.<sup>50</sup>

The false prophets, when they came forth, pretended to be God’s ambassadors, sent to promise tranquility, peace, and prosperity to the Jews. (Jer. 27:9)<sup>51</sup>

The world is ever afflicted by this disease—that they seek flatteries, as God upbraids them by Micah: “You seek prophets who promise to you an abundant harvest, an abundant vintage” (Mic. 2:11). Since, then, the Jews wished their vices [sins] to be spared, and not only disliked their faithful and severe reprovers, but also hated them, they had deserved to be thus dealt with: it was God’s will that many impostors should assume the prophetic name.<sup>52</sup>

“Behold,” says God, “you wish to have prophets who will speak to you of rich provisions and of every kind of affluence; and you do not wish them to prophesy evil; you would not have them to denounce on you the punishment which you fully deserve” (Micah 2:11). As, then, the despisers of God wished to be soothed by flatteries, and rejected the best and the most beneficial remedies, hence God has from the beginning given loose reins to Satan, and hence impostors have gone forth, whose preaching has been, Peace, peace; but to no purpose; for there is nothing real in such healing, for the Lord says, there is no peace.<sup>53</sup>

The Jews wanted “positive and encouraging” messages: Whenever men are too credulous [gullible] and readily embrace deceptions, it is certain that their hypocrisy is thus justly punished by God. And it was well known to the Prophet, that the Jews ever wished for such prophets as soothed their ears and promised them an abundant harvest

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<sup>47</sup> Vol. III, 204.

<sup>48</sup> Vol. II., 419.

<sup>49</sup> Vol. III, 169-170.

<sup>50</sup> Vol. I, 213.

<sup>51</sup> Vol. III, 364.

<sup>52</sup> Vol. I, 213.

<sup>53</sup> Vol. I, 338.

and a fruitful vintage (Mic. 2:11). As then they had itching ears, a liberty was justly given to Satan to deluge the whole land with falsehood; and so indeed it happened.<sup>54</sup>

False prophets seek only to soothe people with flatteries; and as they hunt for favor, they entirely omit the doctrine that may offend and is in no way sweet and pleasant to the flesh. The prophet Jeremiah did not with indulgence cherish the vices of the people, as was commonly done by the false prophets. (Jer. 30:16)<sup>55</sup>

All those who either ambitiously seek the favor of men or are indulgent to their vices and by flatteries nourish their corruptions are impostors.<sup>56</sup>

The false prophets of Jeremiah's day preached a false god of only unconditional love and grace: Jeremiah said in effect, "If they believe that there is a God in heaven, it is surprising that they are so brutish as to dare to boast of His name and yet silently to allow heaven and earth to be mingled together. Where, then, is their reason, when they dare so heedlessly to profess a name so fearful and awful? For whenever God's name is mentioned there ought to come into their minds not only His goodness and mercy, but also His severity, and then His power, which is dreadful to all the wicked. As then these men dare thus to trifle with God, must not their stupidity be monstrous?" (Jer. 23:9)<sup>57</sup>

In our day the Papists [the followers of the Pope], though they have inebriated the whole world with their ungodly and delirious doctrines, they yet boast that they are the servants of God. Hence the Prophet Jeremiah, after having spoken generally of God's word, adds a special distinction—that the doctrine of God is that which edifies, which teaches and leads men to repentance and the fear of God. He intended to condemn all false interpreters of Scripture, as there were many then who boasted that they were the best teachers, while yet they only pleased itching ears.<sup>58</sup>

**Flattering false pastors are murderers of souls!** There is no evil worse than when false teachers, under the name of God, flatter us and drive away every fear and concern for our souls. This evil prevailed among the ancient people, as it does also at this day. *Indeed the greater part of the world have ever sought flatterers*, and when God sees that men thus indulge themselves, and in a manner seek for themselves snares, He gives loose reins to Satan and his ministers, that they may deceive those miserable men who thus willfully seek to be deceived. (Jer. 23:21)<sup>59</sup>

Jeremiah sought to remind the people often that all flatteries were nothing but the wiles of Satan or some deadly poison which stupefied all their senses. For when one gives a person poison, which extinguishes the senses of the body and the faculties of the mind, it is all over with the miserable being who has been thus drugged. We see a similar thing done by false teachers, who soothe miserable sinners and promise peace to them (Jer. 23:21).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Vol. II, 228.

<sup>55</sup> Vol. IV, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Vol. II., 296.

<sup>57</sup> Vol. III, 153.

<sup>58</sup> Vol. III, 183.

<sup>59</sup> Vol. III, 177, emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Vol. III, 177.

➤ **False pastors serve men first, are men-pleasers, and seek to be popular in the world's eyes because they have ungodly motives.**

All God's servants are miserable as to this world and according to the perceptions of men, for they must carry on war against the prevailing dispositions of all and thus displease men so that they may please God; but mercenaries [those motivated solely by a desire for monetary or material gain], who have no religion and adulterate God's word, desire the office, and why? Because they see that they can deal in a pleasing manner with men, for they will carefully avoid everything that may offend. (Jer. 17:16)<sup>61</sup>

False prophets do not convict men of their sins, nor exercise church discipline: We know that men think themselves half absolved when no one severely reproveth them. When, therefore, the (false) prophets ceased from their work, there was so great a security among the whole people, that there was no fear of God in them. This is the reason why the Prophet now says that his heart was troubled on account of so much indifference; for the (false) prophets were, as it is said elsewhere, like dumb dogs; they overlooked the most grievous and the most atrocious sins, they made no effort to restore the people to the right way. A heavier judgment awaited them, for they ought to have been the instruments of God's Spirit, the heralds of His judgments; they ought to have undertaken His cause by using exhortations, reproofs, and threatenings (Jer. 23:9).<sup>62</sup>

Hananiah the false prophet sought to flatter the people, and by his adulations [excessive flattery] hunted for favor and applause, as is usual with such impostors (Jer. 28:7-9).<sup>63</sup>

➤ **False pastors blaspheme God's name.**

The Prophet Jeremiah describes with what haughtiness and even fury the false prophet Hananiah came forward to deceive the people and to proclaim his worthless deceptions, when yet he must have been conscious of his own wickedness. As Hananiah then stood before God's eyes, how great must have been his stupidity to thrust himself forward and impudently [shamelessly] to announce falsehood in the name of God Himself! (Jer. 28:1-2)<sup>64</sup>

The people saw that God's name was become a subject of contest; there was a dreadful conflict, "God has spoken to me;" "No, rather to me." Jeremiah and Hananiah were opposed, the one to the other; each of them claiming to be a Prophet. It was indeed easy for them to distinguish between Jeremiah and Hananiah; for they saw that the former announced the commands of God, while the latter sought nothing else but the favor and applause of men.<sup>65</sup>

➤ **God hates false doctrine and will judge all false pastors severely.**

As His truth is precious to God, so it is a sacrilege that He cannot bear when His truth is turned into falsehood. James warns, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1).

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<sup>61</sup> Vol. II, 373.

<sup>62</sup> Vol. III, 151.

<sup>63</sup> Vol. III, 394.

<sup>64</sup> Vol. III, 386.

<sup>65</sup> Vol. III, 386.

### **Most people reject true pastors and embrace false pastors.**

Jesus said, “Blessed are you when men hate you, And when they exclude you, And revile *you*, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward *is* great in heaven, For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. . . . Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.” (Luke 6:22-23, 26)

It has ever been an evil, common to all ages, either to neglect or completely to despise the servants of God.<sup>66</sup>

The same is the case now; the majority of people, when God thunders and gives proofs of His vengeance by His servants, ridicule everything and heedlessly cast away every fear—“Oh, they are mere words; for the preachers fulminate boldly and terribly in the pulpit; but the whole vanishes and whatever they denounce on us will fall on their own heads.” We see at this day that many ungodly and profane men use such a bantering [teasing] language as this. (Jer. 5:13)<sup>67</sup>

The Jews dared openly to assault the prophets and willfully to charge them with declaring what was vain. By these words, the Jews denied that the prophets were to be believed, however they might pretend God's name, for they boasted falsely that this or that was committed to them from above. Thus it was that every instruction was trodden under foot, and the same we find to be the case in the present day; for what reverence is manifested anywhere for God's word? This passage then ought to be especially noticed by us; for it shows as in a mirror to what extent of audacity and madness men will break forth when they begin to discredit God's word.<sup>68</sup>

It is a proof of extreme contempt, when we not only repudiate what God says to us, and refuse to obey His authority and advice, but when we close up every avenue, and, as far as we can, forbid Him to speak to us; this is surely an extremity of shamelessness. The Jews insolently [arrogantly] rejected all the words of the prophets.<sup>69</sup>

For when Jeremiah spoke to them, all his threatenings were scorned and laughed at; hence he now addresses God Himself, as though he had said, that he would have nothing more to do with them, as he had labored completely in vain. (Jer. 12:1)<sup>70</sup>

The false teachers made a clamor, and whenever Jeremiah began to speak, they violently assailed him, and the common people also perversely barked at him. As then they thus contemptuously resisted God and His truths, the Prophet suggests that the time would come when they should become mute through shame: “You are now very talkative, and God cannot obtain a hearing from you; but he will check your perversity, when the enemy shall distress you.” (Jer. 13:21)<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Vol. I, 283.

<sup>67</sup> Vol. I, 280.

<sup>68</sup> Vol. I, 281.

<sup>69</sup> Vol. II, 82-83.

<sup>70</sup> Vol. II, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Vol. II, 187.

The Prophet Jeremiah had often found that the promises as well as the threatenings of God were disregarded, that his doctrine was despised, and that he had to deal with a proud people, who, relying on their own defenses, not only esteemed as nothing what was brought before them under the authority of God, but also openly and unashamedly rejected it. (Jer. 17:5-6)<sup>72</sup>

We see at this day, and experience sufficiently teaches us, that *men are more ready to receive error and vanity, than to receive the word of God*; and so it was then, *and the Jews imagined that they honored God, because they regarded His Prophets. But when any one faithfully performed the prophetic office, he was often despised.* The Jews therefore were taken up only with a mere name and thought that they did all that was required by saying that they attended to the prophets, while at the same time *they boldly despised the true servants of God.* (Jer. 27:9)<sup>73</sup>

➤ **True pastors should expect persecution.**

The Jews dared not to vomit forth their blasphemies against God, they assailed His servants and wished to appear as though their contest was with them. Yet God had committed to Jeremiah his office; He had appointed Jeremiah to be the herald of His vengeance. Jeremiah brought nothing of his own. (Jer. 11:18)<sup>74</sup>

When Jeremiah sought to live quietly with his own people in his hometown, he had even there no friend, but all persecuted him as an enemy. We hence see how miserable was the condition of the Prophet; for he had no rest, even when he sought retirement and fled to his own country (Jer. 11:21-23).<sup>75</sup>

The persecution of Jeremiah by the Jews of his day shows us that we should expect persecution not only to come from the professed enemies of Christ who load us with reproaches but also from those religious hypocrites who deem themselves to be members of the Church.<sup>76</sup>

Since the holy Prophet Jeremiah was so atrociously treated, let us not think it strange when the same thing at this day is endured by God's children, and for the same cause, even for bearing testimony to celestial truth.<sup>77</sup>

Here is a holy Prophet [Jeremiah] overwhelmed with unjust accusations and also reproaches, and the princes abstained not from stripes and at last he was cast into a pit. Whenever, then, such a thing happens to us, let us cast our eyes on Jeremiah, and let it not be grievous to us to follow the steps of the holy Prophet; nor let us think it hard to endure the trials with which God was pleased to exercise him. (Jer. 37:16)<sup>78</sup>

True Christians are often persecuted, just as Jesus was: If then we shudder at any time at the horrors of the cross, so that it may seem hard to us to bear persecution, let us

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<sup>72</sup> Vol. II, 343.

<sup>73</sup> Vol. III, 362, emphasis added.

<sup>74</sup> Vol. II, 108.

<sup>75</sup> Vol. II, 117.

<sup>76</sup> Vol. II., 271.

<sup>77</sup> Vol. IV, 377.

<sup>78</sup> Vol. IV, 376.

remember this example of the Prophet Jeremiah. On the one hand, we see the wickedness of the world. On the other hand, the wonderful constancy and singular meekness of God's servant Jeremiah shine forth gloriously. (Jer. 38:6)<sup>79</sup>

Persecution unto death is often God's mercy: When God calls His servants from this world, He regards their salvation, so that death is for their good. (Jer. 40:14)<sup>80</sup>

The Prophets disregarded their own lives, preferring obedience to God's commands over their own welfare, as we find was often the case with Jeremiah, who frequently at the risk of his life proclaimed prophecies calculated to rouse the hatred of all the people, and to create the greatest danger to himself. (Jer. 38:15)<sup>81</sup>

➤ **True pastors should expect to be slandered.**

Jeremiah calls himself *a man of strife and contention*, because he was slanderously spoken of throughout Judea, as one who through his moroseness [unfriendliness; gloomy pessimism] drove the whole people to contentions and strife. This then is to be referred to the false judgments formed by the people; for there was hardly any one who did not say that he was a turbulent man, and that if he was removed, there would have been tranquility in the city and throughout the whole land. (Jer. 15:10)<sup>82</sup>

All faithful teachers are reminded here that if they perform their office strenuously and wisely, they will surely be loaded with many slanders, and be called tumultuous [rowdy] or morose, or disturbers of the peace. They ought then to be fortified against such stumblingblocks, so that they may persevere in the course of their calling.<sup>83</sup>

The world slanders true pastors as angry and violent men who disregard all others. Profane men take occasion to be secure and indifferent when they imagine that pastors and teachers are unfeeling men—"O, what do we care for fanatics [i.e., true pastors], who do not possess common feelings? And it is no wonder, since they are stupid and insensible, that they are thus angry and violent, disregard all others, and feel nothing that is human."<sup>84</sup>

The chief men and the priests were contriving means to form an accusation against the holy man, Jeremiah; for we know what is commonly done in conspiracies of this kind; worthless men run here and there and hunt for every little thing; then they bring their report and from this the accusation is formed. (Jer. 20:10)<sup>85</sup> If, then, deceitful men at this time assail us by secret means and others oppose us openly, let us know that nothing new has happened to us; for in these two ways God tried Jeremiah.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Vol. IV, 393.

<sup>80</sup> Vol. IV, 456.

<sup>81</sup> Vol. IV, 403.

<sup>82</sup> Vol. II, 268.

<sup>83</sup> Vol. II, 270.

<sup>84</sup> Vol. III, 33.

<sup>85</sup> Vol. III, 36.

<sup>86</sup> Vol. III, 37.

Hypocrites misrepresent the teachings of true prophets: It was a common thing with the ungodly to lay hold on some pretext for slander; for as soon as the Prophets opened their mouth, they could have said nothing but what was immediately misrepresented.<sup>87</sup>

False prophets attack God's true prophets and God Himself: When the false prophets denied God's servants were His counselors, they might indeed have said so, viewing them only as mortal men; but their object was to discredit and to render void the word of God; they wished not only to put a restraint on men but also on God Himself. This was an intolerable insult to God. Jeremiah said in effect, "Doubtless you stand not in God's counsel. How so? Because the counsel of God is included in His Law; and as you have departed from the doctrine of true religion, as you have no care to convey instruction, as your doctrine does not teach men the fear of God, nor leads to repentance, it follows that you are not God's counselors nor His prophets." (Jer. 23:22)<sup>88</sup>

Faithful teachers ought indeed to remove, as far as they can, all slanders, and to check the wicked and malicious, so that they may not have the occasion to speak evil; but when they have done all, they will not yet exempt themselves from slander; for their words and their deeds will be misconstrued. Thus Jeremiah was loaded with false charges. (Jer. 37:11-14)<sup>89</sup>

The servants of God ought to be so courageous as to despise the slanders of the unprincipled, and, when it so pleases God, to prepare themselves for patience whenever any reproach is to be undergone, only let their conscience be always clear before God and angels; and let also their integrity confute all slanders, and let them disprove them, too, provided there be those who can bear to hear them; but if a defense be not always admitted, let them patiently bear this indignity.<sup>90</sup>

True Christians are often slandered: All the sayings and doings of the saints have been always unjustly condemned. And if the same thing happens to us at this day, let us patiently bear it. All these reproaches we have to bear, as Jeremiah did, when, with a quiet mind, he endured the hatred which the princes unjustly pronounced against him on account of his doctrine, which yet he had announced by God's command, and which was necessary for the safety of the city and people. (Jer. 38:4)<sup>91</sup>

God's servants have been always exposed to extreme reproaches, even when they have exhibited the greatest integrity. If then, at this day, we hear of evil reports, after having labored to act uprightly, it ought not to appear to us a hard or a new thing to bear them with patience. We must, indeed, do what we can to stop the mouths of the malevolent and the wicked; nor ought we to give occasion, as Paul admonishes us, to the malignant. But when we have done our duty faithfully, if yet dogs bark at us, if we be loaded with many reproaches and crimes, let us learn patiently to endure them. This, then, ought to be done by us, since we see that Baruch was accused of extreme treachery and cruelty. (Jer. 43:1-3)<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Vol. III, 37.

<sup>88</sup> Vol. III, 182-183.

<sup>89</sup> Vol. IV, 373.

<sup>90</sup> Vol. IV, 374.

<sup>91</sup> Vol. IV, 390.

<sup>92</sup> Vol. IV, 506-507.

➤ **The Protestant Reformers were slandered and called heretics.**

The Protestant Reformers were falsely accused of causing schism in the Church: The same objection is at this day made by the enemies of the truth and godliness; they say, that we needlessly create disturbances, and that if we were quiet, there would be the most delightful peace throughout the whole world, and that dissensions and strifes arise only from us, that we are the fans by which the whole world is kindled into contentions. (Jer. 15:10)<sup>93</sup>

The Papists [the followers of the Pope] say, “We must not dispute with heretics, for things formerly settled, and which the Church has once decreed, must not be called into question.”<sup>94</sup>

➤ **Why are true pastors slandered?**

In his dealings with his own people, Jeremiah did not incur their hatred for any private reasons, but rather their reproaches and slanders arose on account of his faithfulness in the discharge of his duty (Jer. 15:16)<sup>95</sup>

Jeremiah was hated by the whole people because he pleased God.<sup>96</sup>

For since they loaded the Prophet with the most wicked slanders and said that he was a turbulent man and confounded all things by his morosity [negativity], God here shows, on the other hand, that all the commotions and the fightings ought to be attributed to them, because they ought to have obediently received the doctrine set before them (Jer. 15:20).<sup>97</sup>

When the prophet Jeremiah cried against the greedy, there was a commotion instantly made by all those who lived on plunder, when he spoke against the indulgence of lust, there was a second conspiracy against him; when he condemned drunkenness and gluttony, there was a new combination formed to oppose him. We hence see how all the ungodly in all parts and for various reasons assailed the Prophet. (Jer. 17:17-18)<sup>98</sup>

➤ **How true pastors should respond to slander.**

God’s servants prove their firmness and constancy when they are assailed on every side by the false accusations of men and yet are satisfied with the testimony of their own conscience, and go on in their course, and look forward to the judgment of God, and care not what men think or speak, provided God approves of them, and is their judge in heaven. (Jer. 43:1-3)<sup>99</sup>

➤ **True Christian servants often face poverty.**

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<sup>93</sup> Vol. II., 268.

<sup>94</sup> Vol. II, 419.

<sup>95</sup> Vol. II, 282.

<sup>96</sup> Vol. II, 287.

<sup>97</sup> Vol. II, 299.

<sup>98</sup> Vol. II, 375.

<sup>99</sup> Vol. IV, 507.

Jeremiah had then a *crust* or a piece of *bread every day*. We see how mean [poor] was his food; but God often tries His servants in this way, withholding from them all the delicacies of this world. (Jer. 37:21)<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, God provides for His own: God often so provides for His servants, that He appears to have forsaken them; and yet He then especially takes care of them and supplies them with what is needful for their support.<sup>101</sup>

### **To reject God's true pastors is the same as rejecting God Himself!**

Jeremiah was called by God; He was God's servant. He said in effect, "As then I am only the instrument of God, what will you at last gain after having quarreled ever so much? No doubt God will show that He is an adversary to you, and can you conquer Him?" (Jer. 17:16)<sup>102</sup>

God's will from the beginning has been that his servants should be obeyed, as though He himself had come down from heaven. Hence the Jews dealt no less contemptuously with God in despising His prophets than if they had dared to treat God Himself with contempt. God then now shows how much He abhorred that madness through which they rendered void all the labors of His servants. (Cf. Luke 10:16)<sup>103</sup>

We hence learn how much God values His word; for He testifies that there is no difference between Him and His servants, whose labors He employs in teaching His Church. We also hence learn how inexcusable is our wickedness when we reject God speaking thus familiarly to us. (Jer. 11:6-8)<sup>104</sup>

Whoever then rejects the faithful teachers of the word shows that he is a despiser of God Himself. God defines His word not as an oracle of any kind but as the doctrine which has been deposited with faithful teachers. (Jer. 29:18-19)<sup>105</sup>

### **Those who reject true pastors will face God's wrath and judgment.**

When therefore we find teachers rightly and sincerely discharging their office, let us know that we cannot possibly escape the judgment of God except we submit to their teaching.<sup>106</sup>

Since we see that the ungodly do nothing except kindle God's wrath the more when they attack His true prophets, we ought to go on more courageously in the discharge of our office; for even when for a time they suppress by their great clamors the truth of God, He will yet check them, and so check them, that the doctrine, which is now subverted by unjust slanders, may shine forth more fully.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Vol. IV, 383.

<sup>101</sup> Vol. IV, 383.

<sup>102</sup> Vol. II, 369.

<sup>103</sup> Vol. I, 282.

<sup>104</sup> Vol. II, 82.

<sup>105</sup> Vol. III, 445.

<sup>106</sup> Vol. II, 116.

<sup>107</sup> Vol. II, 422.

- **Christ is the Almighty Lord, and He will conquer all the enemies of God and of His true servants. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18).**

The apostle John writes, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Jeremiah found out what it was like to have the whole world against him, but God prevailed (Jer. 20:8-9).

The Prophet declares that though he was shut up in prison, the Word of God was not bound and that he himself was not less loose and free in his confinement than if he rambled through the whole city and visited all the lanes and the streets. He then did not desist from his office as a Prophet though he was cast into prison. *And thus we see that the course of heavenly truth cannot be impeded, no matter how much the world may rage against all its ministers, and bind them in order to make them mute.* (Jer. 32:1-3)<sup>108</sup>

Though the ungodly sought in all ways completely to extinguish the word of God, they yet did not attain what they wished; for God broke through all hindrances and continued the course of His word notwithstanding all their attempts. And this ought to be carefully noticed, for we see at this day all sorts of contrivances made by the wicked to impede the course of celestial truth. Let then this history be remembered, that though Jeremiah was a captive, yet his word was free and his tongue at liberty, as Paul also boasts, that though he was bound with chains, yet God’s word was not bound (2 Tim. 2:9).<sup>109</sup>

### **The character of true pastors**

- **True pastors must serve in obedience to a clear calling from God, and they must have sincere motives for serving.**

Jeremiah prescribes here a law for all pastors and teachers: True pastors are not to aspire to this office as many do who are guided by ambition. He alone is to be deemed a lawful minister and prophet of God and a teacher in His church who is not led by the impulse of his own flesh, nor by inconsiderate zeal, but to whom God extends His hand, and who being called obeys. The beginning then is obedience, if we wish to become lawful teachers.<sup>110</sup>

Whoever then takes so much liberty as not to follow God but is carried away by his own spirit is to be repudiated and deserves not to be reckoned among lawful pastors.<sup>111</sup>

Jeremiah was a true prophet, but resisted God’s call. He dreaded the prophetic office and confessed that he was not able to speak. As then he alleged his own stammering, he was very far from having any corrupt desire.<sup>112</sup>

Jeremiah knew that he was approved by God because he was sincere and honest (Jer. 20:12).<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Vol. IV, 152.

<sup>109</sup> Vol. IV, 155.

<sup>110</sup> Vol. II, 370-371.

<sup>111</sup> Vol. II., 371.

<sup>112</sup> Vol. II, 372.

No one is worthy of being heard unless he is a true minister of God. There are two things necessary to prove a person to be such—a divine call, and faithfulness and integrity. Whoever, then, thrusts in himself, however he may pretend a prophetic name, may be safely rejected, for God claims the right of being heard to Himself alone. He who is called must also faithfully labor for his God.<sup>114</sup>

- **True pastors serve God first, men second. They are leaders, heads, and ambassadors, all serving under the authority of King Jesus.**

In the second place he shows that those who are called to the office of teaching are not endued with a sovereign power, so that they can announce whatever pleases them, but that *they are pastors for God*. God indeed would have His prophets to take the lead, so as to point out the way to the rest of the people, and He thus honors them with no common dignity. He would have them to be *heads or leaders, or ensign-bearers*.<sup>115</sup>

Jeremiah did nothing except by God's command; but as his authority was not acknowledged by the Jews, he here testifies for their sakes that he would say nothing but what God Himself would command.<sup>116</sup>

- **True pastors should have courage, not fear. God strengthens His true servants if they will fear Him, not men.**

True prophets ought to be sufficiently fortified, knowing that they have been sent by God and thus act under the authority of the highest power; they should not fear any mortal man.<sup>117</sup>

Strength shall never be lacking to God's servants, while they derive courage from the conviction that God Himself is the author of their calling and become thus magnanimous; for God will then supply them with strength and courage invincible, so as to render them formidable to the whole world; but if they be unhinged and timid, and turn here and there, and be influenced by the fear of men, God will render them base and contemptible, and make them to tremble at the least breath of air, and they shall be completely broken down.<sup>118</sup>

Jeremiah thought himself unfit to undertake a work so onerous; he had also to deal and contend with refractory men, who were not few in number; for the whole people had already, through their ungodly and wicked obstinacy, hardened themselves in the contempt of God. As, then, there was no more any care for religion and no regard shown by the people for heavenly truth, Jeremiah could not, timid as he was, undertake so heavy a burden, without being supported by the hand of God (Jer. 1:18).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Vol. III, 41.

<sup>114</sup> Vol. III, 178.

<sup>115</sup> Vol. II, 371, emphasis added.

<sup>116</sup> Vol. II, 435.

<sup>117</sup> Vol. I, 63.

<sup>118</sup> Vol. I, 64.

<sup>119</sup> Vol. I, 65.

Jeremiah was fully armed, that he might not fear on seeing dangers surrounding him. God said to Jeremiah in effect, "Prepare yourself to suffer; for except I were your Deliverer, it would be all over with you, and you might perish a hundred times; but there is no reason for you to fear any dangers amidst a thousand deaths, since I am present with you as your Deliverer. (Jer. 1:18)<sup>120</sup>

God's servants need to have courage and perseverance, lest the hypocrisy of men should dishearten them. Pious teachers might be weakened in their efforts and disheartened, or completely discouraged, unless God supported them. It was then for this reason that Jeremiah was expressly told, that he had to deal with a deceitful and false people.<sup>121</sup>

Jeremiah is a role model for courage in a true prophet: We hence see how courageous and persevering a mind was Jeremiah endued with, that he dared to preach thus in the midst of the city, and to set himself in opposition to the king and his counselors, and to the whole people, who wished to be soothed with flatteries, and who had been thus treated by the false prophets.<sup>122</sup>

Jeremiah sacrificed wealth and worldly honors in order to be faithful to God: Jeremiah possessed an heroic courage in despising all the splendor of the world and in regarding as nothing those proud men who boasted that they were the rulers of the Church (Jer. 15:18).<sup>123</sup>

Jeremiah was in himself disturbed with anxiety and fear, and affected with weariness, and wished to shake off the burden which he felt so heavy on his shoulders. He was then subject to these feelings, that is, as to himself; yet his doctrine was free from every defect, for the Holy Spirit guided his mind, his thoughts, and his tongue, so that there was in it nothing human.<sup>124</sup>

- **True pastors ought to refrain from worldly business and that which detracts from their ministry.**

Great care ought to be taken that those who sustain the office of public teaching should not engage in worldly business and be thus exposed to the necessity of contending about worldly things; they have enough to do, and more than enough, in the warfare in which the Lord has engaged them.<sup>125</sup>

- **True pastors humbly labor to the glory of God *alone*.**

The only way of governing rightly is when they who rule strive to give glory to God and regard Him in all their thoughts and actions; but when they act otherwise, they must necessarily play the fool and become infatuated, however wise they may appear to be.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Vol. I, 68.

<sup>121</sup> Vol. I, 468-469.

<sup>122</sup> Vol. I, 477.

<sup>123</sup> Vol. II, 290.

<sup>124</sup> Vol. II., 290.

<sup>125</sup> Vol. II, 271.

<sup>126</sup> Vol. II, 52.

➤ **True pastors are zealous for God and His Truth.**

Jeremiah was zealous for God.<sup>127</sup> He had been inflamed with zeal for God.<sup>128</sup>

The word of God became *as a burning fire in his heart*; and it was also *closed up in his bones*, so that he was led by an ardent zeal and could not be himself without going onward in the course of his office. (Jer. 20:8-9)<sup>129</sup>

**Encouragement for true pastors: God promises true pastors that they will prevail against their enemies.**

God taught His servant Jeremiah that he would be invincible, and that whatever his enemies might devise against him, they would not yet prevail. Now though this was said formerly to Jeremiah, yet godly teachers may justly apply it to themselves, who are honestly conscious of their Divine call, and are fully persuaded that they do nothing presumptuously, but obey the bidding of God. All, then, who are thus confirmed in their legitimate call from God, can apply to themselves this promise—that they shall be made invincible against all the ungodly (Jer. 1:18-19).<sup>130</sup>

➤ **If God approves of our ministry, that is what really matters.**

Even were the whole world united to suppress the light of truth, Prophets and teachers ought not to despond, nor to rely on the judgment of men, for that is a false and deceptive balance; but rather they ought to persevere in the discharge of their office, and to be satisfied with this alone—that they render their office approved of God, and exercise it as in His presence (Jer. 11:20).<sup>131</sup>

Even if the whole world seems to be opposed to them, true prophets and pastors must not yet cease from their perseverance, nor be changeable, but ought to consider it enough that God approves of their cause.<sup>132</sup>

Jeremiah appeared to be alone, a voice crying in a spiritual wilderness. Yet, he was on the Lord's side. He said, in effect, "I indeed am alone, but sent by God; and I am thoroughly convinced of my legitimate calling, and am also ready to prove that I bring no inventions of my own brain; let not, then, a false comparison of one man with a great multitude deceive you. For the question here is not of men or of their authority, but what we ought to inquire is, who sends them? If God be the author of my mission, then I, though alone, am superior to the whole world; and if they have not been called by God, though they were a hundred times more than they are, yet all that they boast of means nothing, for in God alone we ought to believe."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Vol. II, 114.

<sup>128</sup> Vol. II, 290.

<sup>129</sup> Vol. III, 32.

<sup>130</sup> Vol. I, 66.

<sup>131</sup> Vol. II, 116.

<sup>132</sup> Vol. II., 116.

<sup>133</sup> Vol. III, 177-178.

As, then, Jeremiah was fully persuaded of his own calling and knew that God was the author of all his preaching, he boldly concluded that his blood could not be shed with impunity. All faithful teachers ought to encourage themselves for the purpose of discharging strenuously the duties of their office with this confidence—that God who has committed to them their office can never forsake them but will ever bring them help as far as it may be necessary. (Jer. 26:14-15)<sup>134</sup>

Let us then learn simply to obey God, though the labor He requires from us may seem to be useless. And hence Paul rises above all the ingratitude of the world and says that the ministers of the Gospel are a sweet aroma to God, whether for death or for life (2 Cor. 2:15-16), for though the greater part are rendered worse by hearing the Gospel, yet the obedience rendered to God by ministers is acceptable to Him. (Jer. 36:22-23)<sup>135</sup>

➤ **God protects true pastors and teachers.**

However treacherous friends on the one hand tried privately to entrap him and open enemies might on the other hand publicly oppose him, Jeremiah yet did not doubt that God would be a sufficient protection to him. We must first know that God stands on our side; for the power of God can avail nothing to animate us unless we are firmly persuaded of this truth, that He is on our side. (Jer. 20:11)<sup>136</sup>

Whenever we fight with the world and the devil and his slaves, this ought in the first place to come to our minds, that God stands on our side to defend our cause and to protect our safety. This being settled, we may then boldly defy both the stratagems and the violence of all enemies; for we can be certain that God will scatter, lay prostrate, overwhelm, and reduce to nothing all those who fight against Him.<sup>137</sup>

**Additional Lessons for True Servants of God**

**God uses afflictions to teach us to trust Him more.** As, then, being inclined to distrust, we are likely to become soon apathetic in our calamities, as though we were very remote from God, and as though He did not turn His eyes to look on our miseries, let us apply to ourselves what is here said, even to *remember the LORD from afar*; that is, when we seem to be involved in extreme miseries, when God hides His face from us and seems to be afar off; in short, when we think ourselves forsaken, and circumstances appear as proving this, we ought still to contend with all such obstacles until our faith triumphs, and to employ our thoughts in remembering God, though He may be apparently alienated from us. (Jer. 51:50)<sup>138</sup>

**In times of adversity, Christians ought to look to the Church, not to the world.**

Let us also learn to direct our minds to the Church; for however miserable our condition may be, it is yet better than the happiness which the ungodly seek for themselves in the world. When, therefore, we see the ungodly flattering themselves as to their possessions, when we see them pleased and delighted as though God were dealing indulgently with them, let then *Jerusalem come to our minds*, that is, let us prefer the

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<sup>134</sup> Vol. III, 329.

<sup>135</sup> Vol. IV, 345.

<sup>136</sup> Vol. III, 38.

<sup>137</sup> Vol. III, 39.

<sup>138</sup> Vol. V, 273.

state of the Church, which may yet be sad and deformed, and such as we would shun, were we to follow our own inclinations. Let then the condition of the Church come to our minds, that is, let us embrace the miseries common to the godly, and let it be more pleasant to us to be connected with the children of God in all their afflictions, than to be inebriated [drunk] with the prosperity of those who only delight in the world, and are at the same time accursed by God. (Jer. 51:50)<sup>139</sup>

**True Christians trust in God and press forward without fear.** Let us, then, remembering Ebed-melech the Ethiopian's example, hope beyond hope, when God requires us to do a thing, that is, when faith, the obligation of duty, demands anything from us, and which may be done, if we close our eyes to all obstacles and go on in our work; for events are in God's hands alone, and they will be such as He pleases. In the meantime it is simply our duty to proceed in our course, though we may think that our labors will be in vain and without any fruit. Ebed-melech happily succeeded, and how? Because he performed the part of a pious and upright man. Thus God will extend His hand to us; whatever difficulties may meet us, we shall overcome them all by His power and aid. (Jer. 38:10)<sup>140</sup>

**True Christians walk by faith, not by sight.** Jeremiah doubtless cast all his cares on God and His providence. Though then he does but briefly tell us that he did as he was commanded, he yet has left us to consider how much confidence he had, when he immediately obeyed and did not decline what he might have justly feared that he was feeble and weak; nor did he know whether his hands were strong enough to hold the cords, nor how the cords were to be applied to his shoulders. He therefore did what Ebed-melech had told him, for he knew that the advice came from God. (Jer. 38:12)<sup>141</sup>

**God rewards those who help His servants.** Whatever we do for God's servants, He acknowledges as done to Himself, and will have it to be laid to His account, according to what Christ says, "He who gives a cup of cold water to one of the least of My disciples, shall not lose his reward" (Matt. 10:42). There is then no doubt but that the Spirit of God intended by the example of Ebed-melech to rouse us to the duties of humanity, even to teach us to provide relief to the needy and to give them help as far as we can, and not to shun the hatred of men or any dangers, which we may thereby incur. And as we are apathetic and negligent in doing good, the reward given to the Ethiopian is set before us, so that we may know, that though nothing is to be hoped from men when we are kind and liberal, yet we shall not lose our labor, for God is rich enough, who can render to us more than can be expected from the whole world. (Jer. 39:15-18)<sup>142</sup>

### **The character of false pastors**

**False pastors are deceivers and do not serve the true God.**

The ministers of Satan transform themselves into angels of light; and yet they cannot so dexterously imitate God's servants except that their deceit makes itself presently known;

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<sup>139</sup> Vol. V, 274.

<sup>140</sup> Vol. IV, 397.

<sup>141</sup> Vol. IV, 400.

<sup>142</sup> Vol. IV, 436.

for craftiness is very different from a right and prudent counsel. God endues His servants with counsel and wisdom; but Satan, with craft and guile. (Jer. 29:24-27)<sup>143</sup>

**False pastors boast in their numbers, money, and power.**

This objection might have appeared sufficient against Jeremiah—that he was alone and that the other prophets were many in number. It is, indeed, the dictate of common sense that we ought to believe a hundred persons rather than one. Jeremiah, then, was alone, and there was a great number of false prophets; and the prophetic name was common to them all. (Jer. 23:21)<sup>144</sup>

**False pastors are prideful and boast in their titles (e.g., Most Holy Reverend).**

God's grace is not to be tied either to ranks of men or to titles.<sup>145</sup>

As formerly the manifest enemies of God contended with Jeremiah, even so now they openly oppose God by this vain pretence only—they are priests, they are prophets, they are elders or presbyters, that is, they have a religious title given to them by a church.<sup>146</sup>

The false prophets were led by the spirit of pride, as they were the children of Satan. Jeremiah shows how insolently and arrogantly the false teachers conducted themselves in audaciously opposing the true and faithful servants of God. (Jer. 23:17-18)<sup>147</sup>

**False pastors are corrupt religious hypocrites.**

The Prophet condemns the prophets and priests on two accounts—for being mute and for not undertaking God's cause when they saw the land polluted with all kinds of defilements; and he then shows the fountain of this evil, that is, the cause why they were idle and entirely indifferent, and that was, because they dared not say a word against those crimes of which they were themselves guilty, yes, with which they were more loaded than even the common people. (Jer. 23:11)<sup>148</sup>

The priests displayed their wickedness in the Temple, as they practiced a sort of commercial business under the cover of the priesthood. And then the prophets corrupted and adulterated God's worship; and what was religion to them but the means of financial gain? When, therefore, the prophets thus trod under foot the service of God, corrupted and perverted the Law to make gain or to acquire power, their impiety was not only seen in the habits of daily life, but also in the very Temple of God, that is, with regard to the sacerdotal [priestly] office. (Jer. 23:11)<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Vol. III, 452.

<sup>144</sup> Vol. III, 177.

<sup>145</sup> Vol. I, 212.

<sup>146</sup> Vol. II, 418.

<sup>147</sup> Vol. III, 169-170.

<sup>148</sup> Vol. III, 158.

<sup>149</sup> Vol. III, 159.

### **How true pastors minister**

- **Being armed with God's Word, true pastors should preach with courage and boldness.**

God ascribes the highest authority to His own word, though its ministers were men of no repute, poor and despised, and having nothing splendid connected with them. True prophets and teachers should take courage and thus boldly set themselves against kings and nations when armed with the power of celestial truth (Jer. 1:9-10).<sup>150</sup>

Jeremiah knew that the king was his enemy, as he had already ordered him and Baruch to be slain. As then he knew that the king burned with so much rage and hatred, how could he be so bold as to exasperate him still more? The Prophet, no doubt, trembled, but as he felt bound to obey God's command, he disregarded his own life, when he had to make the choice, whether to refuse the burden laid on him, or to provide for his own safety. Thus then he offered his own life as a sacrifice, though he was not free from fear and other infirmities. King Jehoiakim was restrained by the hidden power of God, so that he could not do any harm to Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch; and that in the meantime the magnanimity of the Prophet and also of his scribe remained invincible; for it was God's will to fight as it were hand to hand, with this impious king, until he was ignominiously [shamefully] cast from his throne. (Jer. 36:32)<sup>151</sup>

Though the Prophet dreaded the sufferings of the prison, though he also feared death, he yet overcame all these feelings, and presented his life as a sacrifice, when he openly and boldly answered the king, that the Chaldeans would shortly be conquerors, and make him a captive. (Jer. 37:17)<sup>152</sup>

We are not thoughtlessly to cast pearls before swine; but until we try every means, we ought to hope for the best, and therefore to act confidently. (Jer. 38:15)<sup>153</sup>

- **True pastors fight manfully against sin and Satan.**

Jeremiah was called to manfully fight. Jeremiah, relying on God's aid, was not to hesitate to set himself against all the Jews, that whatever might be their fury, he might still be courageous.<sup>154</sup>

- **True pastors pray for the lost and even for those who persecute them (Matt. 5:44).**

Jeremiah went forth as the herald of God's vengeance, he thundered against the ungodly and the despisers of God; but at the same time he humbly supplicated pardon in behalf of lost and miserable men; for had he not been concerned for the salvation of the people, had he not diligently prayed, it would not have been necessary to prohibit him to pray.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Vol. I, 45.

<sup>151</sup> Vol. IV, 360.

<sup>152</sup> Vol. IV, 379.

<sup>153</sup> Vol. IV, 403.

<sup>154</sup> Vol. I, 68.

<sup>155</sup> Vol. II, 96.

Since Jeremiah humbly prayed for the salvation of the people, how great was their savageness and inhumanity in persecuting him (Jer. 18:21).<sup>156</sup>

**Why does Jeremiah sometimes refer to false prophets as simply “prophets”?**

As they were held still in esteem by the people, as though they were prophets, the Prophet concedes this title to them, derived from their office and vocation. We do the same in the present day when we call those bishops and prelates and primates and fathers, who under the papacy boast that they possess the pastoral office, and yet we know that some of them are wolves and some are dumb dogs (Jer. 2:8).<sup>157</sup>

**False pastors test the sincerity of those who claim to follow Christ.**

Doubtless we shall find that to be ever true which is said in Deuteronomy 13:3, that when false prophets come, it is for the purpose of trying God’s people, whether they from the heart love God. It is then His object to try our religion, whenever He gives loose reins to impostors and false prophets, for every one who truly loves God will be preserved by His Spirit from being led away by such deceivers.<sup>158</sup>

The Jews were instructed not to receive thoughtlessly everything presented to them under God’s name; rather they were to exercise discrimination and judgment. The devil has ever falsely assumed God’s name; and for all the errors and delusions which have ever prevailed in the world, he has not obtained credit otherwise than by this false pretence. (Jer. 27:15)<sup>159</sup>

**When people are deluded by false teachers, it is their just reward on account of the hardness and perverseness of their hearts.**

When, therefore, ignorant men are deluded, it is certain that they are justly punished for their neglect and contempt of God, because they have not been sufficiently attentive to His service; yes, because they have wished for impostors, according to what has been also often said by the monks, “The world wishes to be deceived, let it be deceived in the name of the devil.” These impostors have become so shameless, as to boast that they are the ministers of Satan to deceive men. However, that common saying has been found true; for the world is never deceived except with its own consent, and willingly; for those who are the most ignorant close their eyes against clear light, and shun God as much as they can, and seek to hide themselves in darkness, according to what Christ says, “Whoever commits sin hates the light.”<sup>160</sup>

**Christians must exercise *discernment* in order to test between true and false pastors and true and false teachings.**

God reminds us that we ought to beware of every appearance of falsehood, that we ought not easily and rashly and without discrimination believe all prophecies; for not

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<sup>156</sup> Vol. II, 423.

<sup>157</sup> Vol. I, 84.

<sup>158</sup> Vol. I, 311.

<sup>159</sup> Vol. III, 372.

<sup>160</sup> Vol. I., 311.

everything boasted of as being divine is really so. God reminds us that we ought to exercise judgment as to prophecies, so that we may not be inconsiderately led away by anything brought forward under the pretext of His name. (Jer. 14:14)<sup>161</sup>

**There are certain marks by which true and false pastors may be differentiated:**

**Test #1. Have they truly been called by God to the ministry of His Church?**

When the Old Testament priests became degenerate, God, in order to reproach them, raised up other prophets from obscure villages and from the common people. It was then sometimes an interior call only; but when the Church was properly formed, a regular outward call was also necessary.<sup>162</sup>

Let this, then, be kept in mind, that wherever there is a controversy about religion, we ought ever to ask whether he who speaks has been sent by God; for whatever he may babble, though the most acute, and though he may talk things which may fill with wonder the minds of the simple, yet all this is nothing but smoke when his doctrine is not from God.<sup>163</sup>

**Test #2. Do they faithfully deliver God's Word in its purity and simplicity?**

God testifies that no credit is due to the prophets, except insofar as they faithfully deliver, as it were from hand to hand, what has been committed to them. *If then a prophet mingles anything of his own, he is proved to be false and is not worthy of any credit.* Prophets are not endued with any other power but to deliver faithfully what has been committed to them from above.<sup>164</sup>

As soon as men depart even in the smallest degree from God's word, they cannot preach anything but falsehoods, vanities, impostures, errors, and deceits.<sup>165</sup>

Those only are *sent by the Lord whose doctrine is according to the rule of the Law, and of the Prophets, and of the Gospel.* If, then, we desire to know whom the Lord has sent, and whom He approves as His servants, let us come to the Scripture, and let there be a thorough examination; he who speaks according to the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, has a sure and an indubitable evidence of his divine call; but he who cannot prove that he draws what he advances from these fountains, whatever his pretences may be, ought to be repudiated as a false prophet. (Jer. 28:15)<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Vol. II, 224.

<sup>162</sup> Vol. II, 225.

<sup>163</sup> Vol. III, 408.

<sup>164</sup> Vol. II, 225-226, emphasis added.

<sup>165</sup> Vol. II, 226-227.

<sup>166</sup> Vol. III, 408-409, emphasis added.

### **Test #3. Do they submit to God and His Word?**

God's prophets bring nothing but what He has delivered. God allows men no power of their own to rule in His Church; but He will have obedience to be rendered to Himself, so that their duty is faithfully to declare what He has committed to them. It was not lawful nor right for prophets and teachers to bring forward anything but what they had received from heaven.<sup>167</sup>

All true Christians must seek discernment; God commands us to "press on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1); His will is that we consume "solid food," having trained our senses "to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

#### **How Christians can discern between true and false pastors.**

God never leaves His faithful people destitute of the spirit of discernment, provided they offer themselves cordially and sincerely to be taught by His true and legitimate servants. The Jews ought to have examined all the doctrines and all the prophecies by the rule of the Law. But if the Law was difficult to be understood, they ought, as I have said, to have sought of God the spirit of wisdom and discernment. (Jer. 29:9)<sup>168</sup>

God ever supplies His own people with the spirit of discernment, provided they humbly pray to Him (Jer. 28:10-11). If we allow ourselves to be ruled by God's Spirit, He will ever give us wisdom, which will enable us to distinguish between true and false prophets. (Jer. 27:15)<sup>169</sup> Therefore religious people who have no discernment are without excuse. All who thoughtlessly give credit to men, without considering whether they have been sent by God and faithfully deliver what He has committed to them, willfully perish.<sup>170</sup>

Christians ought to study the Scriptures, meditating upon them day and night, and seeking diligently to tie it all together: So also at this day, every one who wishes to distinguish with certainty between various doctrines, by which the world is agitated, no, shaken, can without difficulty attain his objective, provided he *offers himself as a scholar to Christ*, and connects the Law and the Prophets with the Gospel, and makes use of this rule to prove all doctrines; and provided in the meantime he trusts not to his own acumen [intelligence], but *submits himself to God and seeks of Him the spirit of judgment and discrimination*. In the same way the false prophets can be abundantly exposed when we thus show that they are not sent by God; and *we further convince them of vanity when we prove their doctrine to be inconsistent with the Law and the Gospel*. (Jer. 29:9)<sup>171</sup>

#### **There were false pastors and teachers preaching a false gospel, and conducting false worship in the Protestant/Evangelical/Reformed churches in Calvin's day!**

Two evils must be carefully avoided in the Church if we desire to continue entire in our obedience to God. One evil is when truth is openly turned into falsehood, when men are

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<sup>167</sup> Vol. II, 226.

<sup>168</sup> Vol. III, 426

<sup>169</sup> Vol. III, 374.

<sup>170</sup> Vol. II, 227.

<sup>171</sup> Vol. III, 426-427, emphasis added.

drawn away into idolatry and filthy superstitions, or when the ancient people, as Jeremiah says, forgot the name of God through Baal. But *the other evil is more hidden, and therefore more dangerous, that is, when some appearance of true religion is retained, and men are yet insidiously drawn away from the fear of God and His true worship and from pure doctrine* as we see to be the case at this day in the Churches, which profess to have separated from the Papacy that they might embrace the doctrine of the Gospel; *there are many among them who deceptively corrupt the simple and genuine doctrine of the Gospel.* We see how many curious men there are at this time, who disturb all things *by their own inventions*, and how absurdly many seek refinements, and how confidently also do *many propound their own inventions as oracles!* It is necessary then for us to be watchful, not only that we may shun open abominations, but also *that we may retain the pure and true word of God*, so as not to allow false workers insidiously to corrupt and vitiate anything. (Jer. 23:26-27)<sup>172</sup>

**We must stand on guard, for there are many false pastors, elders, and teachers in the churches today!**

As it thus happened formerly, neither the Pope nor all his masked bishops can show any reason in the present day why we ought not to dread wolves. For the apostle Peter teaches us that “There were formerly false prophets, so also there will be false teachers among you” (2 Pet. 2:1). He shows that at this time no less than formerly we ought to beware of false bishops, of false prophets, and of false teachers, however high their titles may be.<sup>173</sup>

Our ears must not to be open to impostors, who boldly pretend the name of God, but we must distinguish between the true and false teachers. We ought to see and to inquire whether God has sent them; and whether they teach as coming from His school, and bring anything but what they have received from His mouth.<sup>174</sup>

**How should Christians respond to false pastors and teachers?**

Calvin admonishes us to “shun them as the plague” (Jer. 23:32).

**We must humbly listen to true pastors but firmly reject false pastors who lead us away from God’s law.**

True prophets of God who are faithful interpreters of the Law deserve to be heard without controversy as the angels of God; but they who lead us away from the Law ought to be firmly and boldly rejected.<sup>175</sup>

When God addresses us by His servants, we ought immediately to render obedience to Him; let us learn to fear when He threatens us and learn to entertain hope when He offers His favor to us. (Jer. 40:1-4)<sup>176</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Vol. III, 195, emphasis added.

<sup>173</sup> Vol. II., 418.

<sup>174</sup> Vol. III, 178-179.

<sup>175</sup> Vol. III, 183.

<sup>176</sup> Vol. IV, 443.

**True Christians ought to courageously defend true pastors and teachers.**

Ahikam, the defender of Jeremiah, is a model of courage and perseverance: Ahikam the son of Shaphan was slain by the ungodly and the wicked, but there is nothing related of him except what is honorable to him. It was indeed an extraordinary act of courage that he dared to oppose the fury of the whole people and to check the priests and the false prophets who had conspired to put the holy man Jeremiah to death. Here, then, is set before us an example of courage and perseverance; for it is not enough for us to defend a good cause when we may do so with safety, except we also disregard all ill-will and despise all dangers and resist the fury of the wicked and undergo contentions and dangers for God's servants whenever necessary. We are also taught at the same time how much weight belongs to the influence of one man when he boldly defends a good cause and yields not to the madness of the wicked, but risks extremities rather than betray the truth of God and His ministers. (Jer. 26:24)<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Vol. III, 346-347.