

## WHO SPEAKS FOR GOD TODAY?

Scriptures: I John 4:1-6; John 16:12-15

I have been doing things the hard way. I did not have to go to seminary to be a minister. I did not need to spend two years learning Greek and Hebrew. I didn't need to pass any ordination exams or be approved by a presbytery. I all needed to do was go to the website for World Christianity Ministries. At World Christianity Ministries all you need to be ordained a mouse and a credit card. In return they promise,

You may start a church, start a ministry and do all the things mainstream clergy do. ... You will be authorized to use a formal title before your name such as Reverend, Minister, Pastor, Evangelist, Chaplain, Deacon, Missionary, Preacher, Elder, or other similar titles. (Here is my favorite part.) You will be entitled to the respect and consideration that is customarily given to ministers of religious organizations.

I could say something right now, but I won't.

Ministers are not the only people doing this. A *Spokesman-Review* article this fall reported,

An unidentified member of the White House staff and employees of the National Security Agency are among 6,000 people who bought on-line college degrees from a Spokane-based "diploma mill" now at the center of a criminal case, a federal judge was told Wednesday. Others who paid thousands of dollars for the bogus diplomas include a senior U. S. State Department employee and a U. S. Department of Justice employee who works in Spokane ... (Bill Morlin, "Federal Employees Bought Degrees," *The Spokesman-Review*).

If you don't want to be a minister, you could be a Ph.D. for less than the cost of a used car.

Which brings me to today's question of faith: "Does God still speak through prophets today?" The answer is yes, but watch out. Not everyone who claims to be a prophet or a minister is sent by God.

Our second scripture lesson makes precisely this point. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." The word translated "test" is the Greek word *dokimazo* which means to prove or to document. John is telling us, "Don't believe every spirit, but certify whether they are from God." How do you do that?

John gives us the first criterion in verses 2-3: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."

This may not seem like much of a test, but in the time of the New Testament this was a very important point. In the first and second century of the church there was a group of Christians called the Gnostics. They believed that God did not become a real flesh and blood human being in Jesus because flesh and blood were evil things created by an evil power. The Gnostics believed that Jesus was spiritual force who only appeared to be human. His purpose in coming was to set our spirits free from our bodies to enter a spiritual realm where the struggles of earthly life no longer mattered.

What would be the modern equivalent of the Gnostics? Maybe those who think Jesus is concerned only with spiritual matters, only with saving your soul and not with feeding the hungry, healing the sick, correcting injustice, or caring for the creation. A purely spiritual Christianity is a Gnostic Christianity, which is no Christianity at all.

Basically, then, the first test, the first qualification for certifying someone as a true minister of the gospel, is his or her faithfulness to the real human Jesus that we meet in the Bible—the Jesus who fed the hungry, healed the sick, died on a real cross, and rose from the dead bodily so that our earthly physical world could be redeemed by God’s grace.

But not all self-appointed prophets or self-ordained ministers are Gnostics. Some of them are what the early church called Ebionites. Ebionites believed that Jesus was only human—that he was a great teacher who cared very much about physical earthly life, but he wasn’t really the divine Son of God who died on a cross to save us. The modern day version of the Ebionites are the purveyors of self-help Christianity—the people who teach that if you follow Jesus’ example, if you think positively and live positively like he did, you can have the full blessing of God in this life, and not just in heaven.

Do you see how the Ebionites are the opposite of the Gnostics? The Gnostics believed that Jesus was not really human. The Ebionites believed he was not really divine. The Gnostics made it sound like Jesus came only for the next life. The Ebionites made it sound like Jesus came only for this life. The truth revealed in the Bible is that Jesus is both human and divine. How we live in the world in this world is important, but it will never save us. We can give people glimpses of God’s Kingdom in this world, but we can never make this world into the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a gift we can only receive by grace at the final resurrection.

The New Testament portrays a Jesus who is both human and divine, who is both a teacher and a savior. Any so-called prophet or minister who does not recognize that in his or her teaching is a fake.

But there is another criterion in our second scripture reading. I John 4:5-6 says about the false prophets: “They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them.” In other words, they are popular. They sell a lot of books and have large congregations. This size of a preacher’s following is not the proof of his or her authority. What is the proof? Verse 6: “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us.” In other words, the true prophet, the true minister, is recognized or certified by the people who have been following Jesus all along.

Which brings me back to how you become a minister in the Presbyterian Church. It is a pain in the neck. It really is. First you have to meet with your home church session. The session of your own home church has to endorse before you even get to square one. These are the people who knew you when you were a rebellious teenager giving fits to your Sunday School teachers, questioning everything and everyone. These are the first people who have to see that God is working in your life.

Then you have to go to school for about seven years, in some cases eight. You have to learn two languages, both of which are written with funny letters. You have to take classes about obscure groups in Christian history like the Gnostics and the Ebionites. You have learn the Bible inside and out, because when you are done you have to pass a comprehensive exam on your knowledge of the Bible. You also have to pass four other exams on theology, worship, Bible interpretation, and the rules of church government.

Meanwhile you must practice doing ministry in actual churches to see if you are any good at it. Then your work is evaluated by instructors at your seminary and by ministers in your home presbytery. After that you are examined twice in front of the entire presbytery: once in your home presbytery to see if you have grown up and learned anything, and second by the presbytery where you are going to serve to see if theological head screwed on right.

After all that, if you are lucky, you get to go to Potlatch, Idaho. And maybe to a place like Hamblen Park. And you get to discover what a precious privilege it is to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Are there still prophets today? You bet there are. But you've got to make sure they are certified. Not all who put "Pastor" in front of their name are sent by God. Not all who claim to have a special revelation from the Lord really got it from the Lord. Not all who stand in pulpits or auditoriums or in front of cameras are faithful proclaimers of the gospel. Test the spirits to see which are from God. You will know them by their faithfulness to the whole body of scripture and the whole body of the church.

- Ken Onstot