

## The Letters of John: Practicing Discernment

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Good morning! Have you ever been the victim of a forgery? In one of my early jobs pushing grocery carts for customers, I noticed in passing one of our cashiers being called to task by our manager for accepting a forged ten dollar bill. How did she know it was a forgery? One side of the bill was blank. Someone had made a colour photocopy of a ten dollar bill without even bothering to copy both sides. Once the forgery is revealed, it is easy to say that the cashier should have noticed right away. But, in fact, it is easy to be deceived. Perhaps the bill was slipped in at a busy time of day with a long line of customers. A cashier has to do a lot of multitasking, including recalling numerous codes for various items, operating the cash register, handling price checks, etc. A moment of inattention is all it takes. Apparently some Chinese manufacturers have created fake iPhones that are, at first glance, quite convincing. They function on a surface level, but once you get into their nuts and bolts, you discover a vastly inferior product. But sometimes apparent functionality is all that is necessary to make a sale.

In our Scripture reading for today, John is warning his audience against false prophets. At this point, the safe thing for me to do is to pretend that all of us have a

good grasp of what a prophet is and, therefore, what a false prophet is. However, we will not move forward in our understanding of what Scripture teaches if we play it safe. So, I'm going to go ahead and ask the question, 'What exactly is a prophet?' knowing full well that I am opening a can of worms. The Bible we accept as 'God-breathed' does not include a glossary with a listing for 'prophet' and 'false prophet.' Instead, we have to piece together evidence from Scripture to the best of our ability. And, unsurprisingly, scholars disagree about how to piece this evidence together. But, since the reading for today is rather short, we have time for an excursus.

In the Old and New Testaments, a prophet is a man or woman whom God uses to communicate with his people. And yes, I did say a man or a woman; there are prophetesses in both testaments, including Moses' sister Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah, who was also a judge over Israel (Judg 4:4), Huldah, whom King Josiah consulted upon finding the book of the law (2 Kgs 22:14), and Isaiah's wife (we don't know her name) in the Old Testament, and, in the New Testament, Anna, who worshipped and fasted in the temple day and night (Luke 2) and Philip's four unmarried daughters who prophecy, mentioned in Acts 21. You are already familiar, I trust, with the prophets whose writings bear their names in the Old Testament, and, if you look closely, you will also find some not-as-famous male prophets in the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts.

So far, we have established that God uses prophets to communicate with his people and that they can be of either gender. But what sort of messages do they communicate? How do they function in relation to God's people? Dare I raise the question as to whether or not there are prophets among us today? One question at a time.

The word prophecy in our contemporary society conjures up images of figures like Nostradamus—people who are supposed to be able to see into the future. In the Bible, it is God who reveals the future through his prophets to his people. There are stories and passages in the Old Testament where prophets predict future events. For instance, before Saul is proclaimed king, Samuel prophecies a series of signs to be fulfilled in one day, and they are! In the New Testament, the prophet Agabus in the book of Acts predicts a famine (11:28). As a result, the disciples “decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea” via Barnabas and Saul. This sort of prophecy is dramatic; it grabs our attention—but it is also quite rare. Furthermore, it is not obviously related to our Scripture reading for today.

In both the Old and New Testaments, prophets confront those in power when they are unjust or hypocritical. For example, speaking through the prophet Amos, God says, “Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land . . . The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget

any of their deeds” (Amos 8:4). The Gospels record Jesus calling out the Scribes and Pharisees on numerous occasions for hypocrisy in everything from traditions to tithing. But again, this does not seem to be what John is concerned with in our passage.

So what *is* John concerned with? What are these false prophets pretending to be? Paul gives us a clue in 1 Corinthians 14, where he is encouraging the Corinthians to “eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” Why is prophecy so important to Paul? “The one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort,” he writes. “The one who prophesies edifies the church.” Later on in the same chapter, Paul says, “if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” Still further on, Paul writes, “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.”

Reading someone else’s mail two thousand years later, we might be frustrated that Paul does not give us a fuller account of the content of the prophecy

he is discussing here, but God has given us what we need, not necessarily everything we would like to have. Here's how I put the clues together. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 14, prophets publically addressed the church for its strengthening, encouragement, comfort, and instruction. But if prophecy includes instruction, how do we distinguish between it and teaching? Some scholars argue that teaching involves interpreting Scripture while prophecy is strictly limited to a revelation from God. However, when we read speeches in the book of Acts, many of which are spoken by apostles filled with the Holy Spirit, they inevitably refer to Scripture. Are they prophetic? Are they strictly teaching moments? Could they be both? While it might satisfy our desire to divide things into tidy categories, I think an interpretation that tries to draw a clear line between prophecy and teaching goes beyond what is warranted in Scripture—especially since it is based on inferences from the text and not on what the text explicitly says. But that's a matter for another time.

It should be clear in any case that prophecy includes instruction, even if the content of this instruction is disputed. And this brings us back at last, a good way into my sermon, to the text we are supposed to be looking at. 1 John 4 opens with John cautioning his audience against naively believing “every spirit” on the grounds that “many false prophets have gone out into the world.” According to John, spirits are speaking through both the true and the false prophets; there is a

Spirit that comes from God, but others do not. Some prophets, while claiming to speak for God, are in fact governed by the spirit of the antichrist. An antichrist, you will recall from chapter 2, is someone who “denies the Father and the Son.” It is not good or wise to naively believe everything someone says, especially if they claim to be speaking on God’s behalf. Instead, John calls on his audience to “test the spirits” and then he provides criteria.

“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.” In John’s time it appears there were teachers who denied the humanity of Jesus. We can infer this not only from what John says here, but also from 2 John 1:7, which says, “many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world.” These deceivers may have been influenced by strands of Greek thought that denigrate the body, that denigrate matter in general. According to such thought, spirits are encumbered with bodies, which are more of a hindrance than a help. From such a perspective, it would be unthinkable that the Divine would willingly take on flesh. No one today—at least that I am aware of—argues like this, yet Jesus remains a controversial figure.

I know I have already touched on this in previous sermons, but it bears repeating. Who Jesus Christ is stands at the very center of our faith. He is the key to understanding the Gospel and he is the one that consistently separates the

Gospel from all religions and ideologies. The false prophets John was dealing with had issues with the humanity of Jesus, but today many people lurch to the opposite extreme by insisting on a merely human Jesus. They call him a good moral teacher, and place him next to the Buddha and other enlightened figures. These people also find ways of stripping away things from Jesus that they find offensive, such as the supernatural, or his claim to be the only way to God. This Jesus is pulled down to size so that he becomes one among many. Just another human being, no one to fear or to worship. Still others are OK with an inspired Jesus, or even a divine Jesus, with the proviso that everyone else is divine too. People are generally OK with Jesus once they round off his edges and explain away the bits of the New Testament witness they don't care for. And we have to be ever vigilant so that we don't do the same. But if we proclaim a watered-down Jesus to the body of Christ, the spirit that speaks through us is not from God.

This brings us back to a question that I raised, but didn't answer a few minutes ago: 'are there prophets among us today?' Some would argue that the gift of prophecy ceased after the time of the early Church. Scripture, they argue, made the gift of prophecy superfluous. They point to texts such as 1 Corinthians 13, which talks about prophecies coming to an end. But it is important to read things in context. Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 13, starting at verse 8:

<sup>8</sup> Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. <sup>12</sup> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Note that Paul connects the cessation of prophecy, the stilling of tongues, and the passing of knowledge to completeness, to seeing things as they are rather than depending on intermediaries. We do not yet know fully, nor are we fully known. Therefore, it does not follow that prophecy—or tongues or knowledge for that matter—have disappeared forever. Yet we also need to be reminded that God does not always speak to us in sensational ways. In 1 Samuel 3, for example, we read, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” I don’t think we can rule out the possibility that God can speak through someone to give a message to his Church. Some people will undoubtedly be concerned that this puts the canon of Scripture into jeopardy. Yet the fact is that much of what prophets and prophetesses prophesied at the times recorded in Scripture was never



written down. If we accept prophecy in the Church today, we are not automatically required to add it to the Canon.

That being said, if someone comes to us saying, “Thus says the Lord,” we have the right to be skeptical, especially if that person says something like, ‘It’s God’s will for you to marry me,’ or ‘God wants you to give me financial support for my project.’ Uh-huh. If someone were to say, ‘I feel God wants me to tell you X,’ and it so happens that their message speaks to our situation, we still have the right to be skeptical, but we might not want to dismiss it out of hand. If I can offer advice on an inference, it appears to me that prophets in Scripture consistently demonstrate good character and trustworthiness throughout their lives. So if someone does say something to you that touches on your life, consider the source. Consider Scripture. Pray. Seek the council of others who live godly lives. And if you are the one that feels that God is moving you to speak to someone, or to speak to the church, make sure you also consider what you have to say carefully. Consider Scripture. Consider your motives. Pray for wisdom. Seek council. Then act according to the wisdom God gives you.

Even if we are uncertain that the gift of prophecy is active among us today, I think we can be fairly sure that the Church still encounters false prophets. If we take Scripture seriously, in fact, we should expect to encounter them. Peter writes, “For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human,

spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you” (2 Pet 1:21-2:1). In today’s age of multimedia, they find numerous ways of speaking to God’s people, and to the world.

The ones that are easiest to identify abuse whatever influence they have over others to gain wealth and power for themselves. Claiming to speak for God, they brainwash others into living under their authority. Such people lead cults. They cut off their followers from other influences and inevitably end up working things for their own benefit. To my mind, such an example is fairly obvious. Anyone who approaches you claiming to have a message from God that entails giving them absolute authority over your life is clearly a false prophet.

Other false prophets are more subtle. As we have already seen, anyone who tries to water-down Jesus in terms of his humanity or his divinity is a false prophet. There is a great deal of pressure from our pluralist society to make Jesus one moral teacher among many. The exclusivity of the Gospel has always been offensive. At the time of the early church, there were numerous mystery cults worshipping a wide variety of deities that were, more or less, tolerated by the Roman Empire. If Christians had added another god to the mix, no one would have minded in the least. The trouble goes back to the Jewish roots of Christianity. God declares through the prophet Isaiah, “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me

there is no God” (45:5). When Christ takes precedence over even the Emperor, you can no longer go on your merry way, so to speak. You are confronted with a choice: you must either accept Christ above all else, or reject him. In our pluralist society it is shocking and offensive to claim to know the truth, to say one way is right while all others are wrong. Yet when we give in to this pressure, we surrender the truth of the Gospel. Sadly, some Christians have come to doubt whether Jesus is who he claims to be in John’s Gospel, where he says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:26).

Several prominent figures in Western Christianity are not necessarily claiming to speak on God’s behalf, but are beginning to question whether the whole of Scripture speaks on God’s behalf. They argue that portions of the Old Testament should be set aside as merely human because they do not think they are consistent with the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and they think that certain minor portions of Scripture are historically inaccurate. In other words, they emphasize the human elements of Scripture while expressing doubt about whether God approves of all it contains. I can see where they are coming from. There are portions of Scripture that I wrestle with; there are some bits that make me squirm, there are difficulties I do not know how to resolve. For instance, the conquest of Canaan or God’s command to wipe out the Amalakites do not make for easy reading. But my comfort or discomfort has nothing to do with the truth. And just

because I do not see a ready solution to an issue does not mean it cannot be resolved. When Christians undermine the inspiration of Scripture, they undermine our trust in it. Andrew Wilson writes,

Luke, to take the most obvious example, stakes the reliability of his witness to Jesus on his meticulous historical research (1:1-4), and if we happily reject things which he affirms, like the historicity of Adam (3:38), the descent of Jesus from Nathan via Heli (3:23, 31), a census which brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (2:1-3), Judas' death by falling headlong (Acts 1:18), Herod's death for accepting idolatrous worship (Acts 12:20-23), and so on - all of which are connected to the witness to Jesus - it is hard to know where to stop. Was Jesus actually rejected at Nazareth, or was the source who told him this as unreliable as the source who told him the other things? Did he really raise the widow's son at Nain? Or weep over Jerusalem? Or ask forgiveness for those who crucified him, or pardon the dying brigand, or appear on the road to Emmaus? Did people really speak in other languages at Pentecost? Was Stephen really stoned, or might he have died of something else? And if he didn't, and if the other early Christian writers were similarly blighted by sloppy historiography or a penchant for invention, then...what?

Wilson makes an excellent point, and gives a good response. Many alleged contradictions are not quite so daunting when we take them on one at a time. There

is actually quite a bit of archaeological corroboration for the nations, cities, and even historical figures mentioned in the Bible. We don't need to be intimidated or cowed by those who allege a multitude of errors in Scripture. Many of the issues critics bring up have been capably addressed by scholars. Even issues that give us trouble should not frighten us. A scientist who cannot figure out an explanation for a certain phenomenon does not give up on the scientific method or the predictable nature of reality; rather, they look forward to the day when someone (they hope) will work it out. In the same way, we must not give up on the parts of Scripture we have difficulty coming to terms with because we are not entirely satisfied with the answers we presently have. Just as a scientist has developed faith in reality and the scientific method through practice and the history of science, so we can have confidence in Scripture when we see God at work in the course of history and in our own lives.

These are some of the concerns I have about the Christian church in the West. Those who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ are without question false prophets. Yet I hesitate to call all who question aspects of Scripture false prophets because this is not a criterion used in Scripture itself. Furthermore, it is sadly the case that some are all too quick to stick labels like 'false prophet' and 'heretic' on anyone who dares to disagree with them. Capable and knowledgeable scholars question aspects of Scripture without denying the person and work of Christ. At

the same time, I believe they are playing with fire. Every time Jesus uses the Old Testament he assumes its accuracy and authority. In my view, if we begin to undermine Scripture, we also risk undermining our understanding of who Jesus is. The discernment John asks his audience to apply to prophets addressing the early church is also the discernment we must use when we walk into a secular bookstore, a Christian bookstore, or browse a webpage addressing some aspect of our faith. We don't need to be afraid of what we might find, but we must also take care to immersing ourselves so much in the work of skeptics that we begin to see their view as the only plausible option. Like Saruman in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, if we spend too much time trying to understand the enemy, we risk being ensnared by him.

Now that we've examined how John's warnings against the instruction of false prophets apply to our own time, we finally get around to the encouraging bit. "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them," John writes, "because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." False prophets will not ultimately prevail against God's people. They will succeed in leading some away; Jesus says in Matthew 24, "False messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (24). The spirit of this age is strong. There will always be pressure to compromise our message, to deny some aspect of who Jesus is, to back away from

claiming that we have the truth. But as we heard in last week's reading, "The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them" (1 John 3:24). As long as we are living in God, and he is living in us, the spirit of this world—the spirit of the antichrist—will not prevail against us.

"They [the false prophets] are from the world and the world listens to them," John writes. And indeed, those who take the edge off of Jesus will often find a ready audience. Those who subvert foundational teachings of the Church are often hailed as daring 'progressives.' Yet they also often find their momentary flash of fame to be quite transitory. A gospel with an inadequate view of Christ is hardly worth getting up on Sunday morning for.

"We are from God," John boldly writes, "and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us." We have to be careful at this point. As John Stott points out, "No private believer could presume to say: 'whoever knows God agrees with me; only those who are not from God disagree with me'. But if we go back to the beginning of 1 John, we find in the first chapter that the 'we' John uses refers to the apostles. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life," John writes as his opening. In other words, if we agree with the apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ, we know God. If we disagree with this testimony, we are not from

God. Whenever we pick up a Bible, we hold the apostolic testimony in our hands.

“From this,” John concludes, “we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

This morning I opened a can of worms, and hinted at other cans of worms, and I fear some will continue to wriggle around even after I have tried to tidy things up. Prophecy is not something that fits neatly into a box, let alone how we do Church. In the process of expounding on John’s warnings against false prophets, I have also brought to attention the possibility of legitimate ones. But the main thing I want you to take away is to be wary of those who would seek to draw you away from the fundamentals of our faith, namely, about who Jesus is and what he has done. At the same time, don’t be afraid; if you are following Jesus, God is living in you and you are living in him; and nothing in the world is stronger than the One who is living in you. Submit to God’s authority revealed in Scripture through the faithful testimony of his prophets and apostles and he will enable you to persevere to the end. Amen.