

Role of Prophets

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Deuteronomy 18:15-
22

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

If Jesus wasn't privy during his earthly ministry to know the time of his return, why would anyone else have the inside track?

William Miller announced Jesus Christ would return on October 22, 1844. He arrived at this date after studying the book of Daniel. Thousands of followers, called Millerites, began their Great Preparation for Christ's return. They sold their houses and businesses, gave away their possessions and flocked to the hills, outfitted in white robes to await Jesus' return. When Jesus was a no-show, this Great Preparation became a Great Disappointment. Some of Miller's followers established the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which continues to anticipate Jesus' return but no longer sets an exact timetable.

Charles Russell was introduced to Miller's predictions but calculated 1874 as the year of Christ's return. When nothing happened, Russell claimed Jesus returned invisibly to begin his "harvest of souls" reign before the consummation of history. Russell sold his five clothing stores to invest in a movement called Jehovah's Witnesses to prepare for the imminent end of the world.

Joseph Smith, of Mormon fame, dismissed Miller's idea of Christ returning in 1844. He agreed that Christ's coming is "nigh" but determined that "56 years should wind up the scene."

His prophecy affixed the date for 1891. That's why Joseph Smith's followers adopted the name The Church of Latter Day Saints. When 1891 came and went, Mormons backed away from further predictions.

If Jesus wasn't privy during his earthly ministry to know the time of his return, why would anyone else have the inside track? (Mark 13:33). Paul said Jesus would come like a thief in the night.

If Jesus is coming on a day no one expects, November 30, 2008 would be an ideal time. Maybe he'll come during the Redskins/Giants game. Nobody looks for Jesus' return today. Jesus instructs his followers to ready themselves for his return by doing God's work. The bumper sticker I saw recently, "Jesus is coming, look busy," doesn't quite cut it.

Biblical prophets aren't frumpy old men wagging their boney fingers at people. Nor should we lump their prophecies into the same category as fortune tellers and psychics. Foretelling the future isn't their primary mission; forth-telling would be more like it. If they announced the future, it concerned the immediate circumstances of their day. God gave them X-ray vision to see what no one else could see.

There are 17 prophetic books in the Bible. Sixteen of these oracles are written during a narrow band of

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history, stretching from 760-460 BC. God raises up prophets during this time period to call people back into covenant relationship.

Let me orient you to where we are in God's Big Story. We are created for relationship with God and each other. Sin, however, destroys these relationships. So, God seeks to restore the relationship through a covenant: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The Ten Commandments stipulate what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. When the people disregard the covenant, God raises up prophets to call people back into covenantal relationship.

In our Scripture lesson in Deuteronomy 18, we are told, "The Lord will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people" (15:18). While priests are typically called by God, God "raises up" prophets as the need arises. They act as God's spokespeople. "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command." (18:18).

I would liken their role to a White House Press Secretary. President-elect Obama recently named Robert Gibbs as his new White House Press Secretary. Gibbs' role isn't to click his tongue about what he thinks is best for America. His job is to faithfully represent the current administration's views on the issues.

We read in verse 16 that the people are all too happy to have Moses in the role of chief mediator. They want Moses to broker

their relationship with God. They tell Moses, "Speak to us and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (Exodus 20:19).

I can't say that I blame them for wanting a buffer between themselves and God. If ever I was all alone at night and heard the voice of God, I might freak out too!

The foolproof test for determining a genuine prophecy is the prophecy must come true. "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true; it is a word that the Lord has not spoken" (18:22). To be a true prophet, the prophecy must be accurate 100 percent of the time.

There will be false prophets who will come along to curry people's favor and play the crowd. Jeremiah warns about deceitful prophets "who dress the wound of my people as though it is not serious, saying, 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace'" (6:14; 8:11).

True prophets tell people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. They serve as God's covenant enforcers. Honor the covenant and blessings will follow. Disregard the covenant and there will be hell to pay.

Abraham Heschel said the prophets always sang an octave too high. Prophets were never satisfied with the status quo. They were always looking beyond the present reality to the way things could be.

Biblical prophets sometimes resort to novel, unconventional ways to get God's point across. They're the inventors of street theater, Marcus Borg said. Hosea married a prostitute to prove his point about

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Israel's infidelity (Hosea 1:2-3). Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke around his neck to dramatize Israel's approaching bondage (27:1-11). Ezekiel ate a scroll to depict Israel's loss of appetite for God's Word (Ezekiel 3:1-3). Isaiah preached in his birthday suit to illustrate the plight of Israel in captivity (Isaiah 20:2-3).

No wonder the prophets aren't popular! It also explains why no one aspires to the role of prophet in the Bible. There isn't much future in it, I suppose.

Peter provides in his sermon in Acts that Jesus will fulfill this prophecy in Deuteronomy (3:22-23). He interprets Jesus in the role of God's ultimate prophet. This is precisely where Christians and Muslims diverge. Muslims assert Muhammad is the final prophet for having delivered God's final message in the Qur'an. Christians contend Jesus is the ultimate prophet and mediator.

Who speaks for God today? There are plenty of prophets today who purport to speak for God. How will we know who is telling the truth?

This was a question people asked in Jesus' day. How will God's people discriminate between legit and fraudulent itinerant prophets?

An early church catechism, the Didache, helps us here. It dates back to the late first or early second century AD, making it the oldest known document outside the New Testament. It was accidentally discovered in 1873 in a dingy library basement in

Constantinople. Didache, as the word suggests, means teaching and serves as a handbook for the early church.

One section in the Didache discriminates true from false prophets. "If a prophet asks for money, he is a false prophet. If a prophet stays more than three days, he is a false prophet." As Ben Franklin used to say, "Guests, like fish, begin to stink after three days."

There are two tests for whether a prophet is genuine. True prophets are those whose life and message are congruent with each other. The Didache declares, "Every prophet who teaches the truth but does not do what he teaches is a false prophet." Jesus warned his followers, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-16). Paul identifies the fruits of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). You'll know them by their fruits.

There is a second test for whether a prophet is genuine. True prophets are those who exalt Christ in their lives and ministry. We read in the first epistle of John, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: 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"

We need prophets in the church today....

(1 John 4:1-3). Is that person filled with self-importance or does he exhibit the love of Christ?

We need prophets in the church today who have the courage “to speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:16). As long as there are still monarchs like Ahaz so blind to the things of God that they are willing to build altars to whatever gods suit their fancy. As long as there are rulers like Jeroboam who are more concerned with wealth and success than the suffering they inflict on others. As long as there are despots like Herod willing to sacrifice whoever is necessary to secure their own comfort and survival. We need Christians who dare to speak the truth in love, who will not gloss over injustice or oppression, who will not be silent in the face of bigotry, prejudice or false pride.

We need people who tell the truth. Gordon MacDonald writes about speaking in Japan, accompanied by a close personal friend. His friend was considerably older and known for his candor. They were walking in Yokohama, Japan, when the name of a mutual friend came up in conversation. Gordon said something sarcastic and cynical about their friend. It was a put down. His friend stopped, turned to Gordon and said with measured words, “Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not say a thing like that about a friend.”

Gordon writes, “He could have put a knife into my ribs and the pain would not have been any less. He did what a prophet does. But you know something? There have

been a thousand times in the last twenty years that I have been saved from making a jerk of myself. When I’m tempted to say something unkind about a fellow Christian, I hear my friend saying, ‘Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not speak in such a way about a friend.’”

Prophets have a way of doing that. They tell us the truth about where we are falling short. We need prophets willing to tell us the painful truth.

