

HOW TO SPOT A PHONY

by Ray C. Stedman

I was wondering this week what would be the reaction here in PBC, if, this summer while I was away on vacation, some visiting speaker came in and began to suggest to this congregation that I was a religious phony, that I had been teaching you false doctrine all of these thirty years, that I have introduced some rather strange and unbiblical ideas into the congregation, and that I was out to feather my own nest.

- Some of you would say, "We knew that all along! We're just surprised to hear you admit it like that!"
- Others, perhaps, would say, "Let's give him a chance, at least, to answer these charges."
- Hopefully, some of you might say, "Well, let's check the Scriptures and see if they're true."

That would be but a faint picture of the situation that existed in Corinth when Paul wrote this Second Corinthian letter.

Now I am not trying to compare myself with Paul. The more I read these letters from his hand the more humbled I feel, the more unworthy I am to even loosen the latches of his shoes. But I confess that if something like that occurred here, I would have a hard time trying to answer it. I would feel uncomfortable about defending myself. I would have difficulty believing that people whom I had worked with, and loved, and lived with all these many years would fall prey to that kind of an approach.

Yet that is what Paul feels as he is writing here to these Christians in Corinth. A small band of men had come down from Jerusalem and were charging the apostle with various things. It is evident from this that they were claiming, for one thing, that he was a self-appointed apostle. They claimed that, because he was not one of the original twelve, perhaps his whole story about having encountered Christ on the Damascus Road was made up. They were suggesting that his teachings were not in line with the other apostles, therefore he was not to be believed. Furthermore, they suggested that he was a moral coward, that he could write tremendous letters which could scare them, but that when he came in person he was as meek as a lamb. They suggested that he taught a frightening kind of freedom which set Christians free from any obligation to keep rules or guidelines to behavior. All of these charges were made plausible by their pointing out that Paul evidently had trouble getting churches to support him. Wherever he went, unlike these "super apostles" from Jerusalem, he did not have the support of churches but had to make tents for a living. This was proof, they said, that Paul was not really a validated apostle.

In Paul's answers to these charges here, there emerges for us a very clear picture of what a true servant of Christ ought to be like. After all, there is a sense in which we are all called to be servants of Christ, if we belong to him. Every one of us has a ministry which Christ has given us. This is a very helpful passage, therefore, to recognize what are the evidences of a truly God-authenticated ministry and, contrariwise, what are the marks of a counterfeit ministry.

When false teaching appears, when we encounter wrong philosophies, and claims to truth that are not in line with Scripture, how do we answer them? Last week, in the first six verses of Chapter 10, we looked at the weapons which we are to employ. We saw that we are not given the usual weapons of the world to use. We are not to use pressure groups, coercion, manipulation. Rather, we are given spiritual weapons, of faith, love, truth, righteousness, prayer, etc.

Now, here, in this section we come to today, we see the credentials we require in order to use these weapons in a rightful way. Chapter 10, Verse 7:

Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him

remind himself that as he is Christ's, so are we. For even if I boast a little too much of our authority which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame. I would not seem to be frightening you with letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence weak, and his speech of no account." Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. {2 Cor 10:7-11 RSV}

It is apparent here that the apostle is asking these Corinthians to take a look at the situation, not to simply believe these men without checking up on them. I submit that this is one of the greatest needs of our day. So many Christians turn on the television and, because some colorful personality is using the Bible and speaking in the name of Christ, they blindly follow this person. When they are asked to send in money they do so, sometimes sending huge sums without asking any questions. They will even forsake meeting with other Christians in order to follow these programs. This is creating some tremendously difficult problems in the church today.

But Paul says, "Look at what is right in front of you. Here are certain marks of authentic Christian ministry."

The first credential, obviously, is that one must belong to Christ. As he says here, "If any one is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that as he is Christ's, so are we." That is absolutely fundamental. You cannot be a Christian minister and not talk a lot about Jesus Christ, revealing that you have a relationship with him. That seems rather obvious to us, but it is a strange fact that there are teachers in the churches today who really set aside the ministry and the work of Christ. They talk about "God," and what "God" will do. They claim to be led by "God"; they talk much about doctrinal understanding and insight which they got from "God." But one of the sure signs of a phony is that he does not say much about Jesus.

Now these men in Corinth were talking about Christ. It may well be that they were claiming that they had known him in the days of his flesh. Since Paul had not, they were claiming superiority on that ground. But, as the apostle told us earlier in this letter, the important thing is not whether you knew Jesus in the days of his flesh or not, but, "if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; all things are become new," {cf, 2 Cor. 5:17 KJV}. So the first requirement of genuine ministry is that people truly be "in Christ," and it be clearly evident in what they have to say. Paul is not challenging that fact with these men, for in the final analysis only God, who knows the heart, knows that answer. But Paul insists on his own relationship: obviously he was "in Christ," and these Corinthians ought to be the first to know it.

The second credential mentioned here is that of a true authority. Paul speaks of his authority. "Even if I boast a little more," he says, "about the authority which the Lord gave me, I shall not be put to shame," i.e., he would not be exaggerating because his authority is genuine. This is one of the questions we have to ask today: By what authority do these television teachers, these radio broadcasters and these traveling evangelists speak? They all claim to be authoritative spokesmen for God. How can you tell if it is a true or a false authority?

Notice that the apostle gives us a very helpful clue here. He says, "Look at the results." Jesus had said this: "By their fruits you will know them," {cf, Matt 7:20}. Paul is saying, "What is happening to those who listen to these people? Are they being set free? Are they growing into wholesome, happy, loving people? Are they obviously being helped, strengthened, released and delivered? Or are they being turned into critical, narrow-minded bigots, or fearful, anxious neurotics, or perhaps, calloused, indifferent, carnal libertines?" What is happening? That is what you have to ask. Look at the fruits and see what kind of ministry these people have. Are people being supported by their leadership, set free and encouraged, or are they being attacked and destroyed, limited by those in authority within the congregation?

When my wife was a teenager, and a new Christian, she was in a church where she fell under the attack of the pastor. He got upset with her because she was listening to some radio broadcasts which were teaching the Bible. Because these broadcasts were not of his particular viewpoint he called a church trial and threw her out of the church. The scars of that experience are very tender yet in her memory. What kind of leadership is being displayed? That is Paul's question.

Paul's authority was that of a spokesman for Christ, commissioned to deliver what he calls, "a secret and

hidden wisdom of God, which before the ages God ordained for our glorification," {cf, 1 Cor. 2:7}. That is a marvelous verse. It is really saying that though we (mankind) are to live for the glory of God, the amazing declaration of Scripture is that God lives for the glory of man. Did you ever notice that? He ordained certain truth to be given to us which would result in our glorification. Glorifying man means to bring him to the place where God intended him to be, to set him free, to make him king over his life, to rule and reign in all the affairs he touches. Man can only learn to be that when he learns to be a servant, because it is only the servant who can rule as king. God is intent on teaching us this great fact. It is exactly the opposite of the "Defend your own rights, stand up for yourself and insist on what you have got coming" approach. It is to reign and rule by means of serving and loving and responding. That is what the truth is: "The secret and hidden wisdom of God." Paul was commissioned to deliver that, and that he says, was his authority.

When he speaks of his authority he does not mean that he has the right to tell people what to do. Earlier in this very letter, in Chapter 1, Verse 24, he says, "We are not lords over your faith." (We have not come in as your bosses to tell you how to behave.) But rather, he says, "we are helpers of your joy." We stand alongside of you to encourage you, and strengthen you, and to teach you reality as God sees it, that you might be set free. That is his authority. It is not for tearing you down, he says, it is for building you up. That is true authority. That is why, when you watch the ministry of any spiritual leader, you have to ask yourself, what is happening to the people who are listening to him? Are they being set free or are they being destroyed?

I know of churches on the West Coast today where there are men who have assumed a certain prerogative of office. They call themselves "elders." Sometimes they even call themselves "apostles." They claim that their authority deriving from this office is such that they have a right to regulate all the affairs of the people who come to their congregation, even to the point of telling them what kind of work they can do, who they can get married to, where they have to live, and what income they might earn. That is a false authority. Those who are exercising that kind of authority in the church in any age are (unwitting, at least) what Paul calls, "tools of Satan," destroying, not building people up. The church is full of these today. That is why these passages are so tremendously helpful to us.

There is a third credential here, beginning with Verse 12:

Not that we venture to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves.

But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. But we will not boast beyond limit, but will keep to the limits God has apportioned us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit, in other men's labors; but our hope is that as your faith increases, our field among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's field. "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord." For it is not the man who commends himself that is accepted, but the man whom the Lord commends. {2 Cor 10:12-18 RSV}

That rather extensive paragraph is summarized by a little phrase in Verse 13, "the limits God has apportioned us." What Paul is saying is, "It is God who gives you a ministry." Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you [the word means, "I strategically placed you"] that you might go and bring forth fruit and that your fruit should remain," (John 15:16 {KJV}).

What he is saying is that he is the head of the Body, and it is his business to set people in the Body where he wants them. All of us are in the ministry. We have been learning that afresh through these Corinthian epistles. All of us who belong to Christ have been given gifts of the Spirit that are our equipment to use in the ministry God has given us. Christ has already set you where he wants you to exercise that ministry -- in your home, among your family, among those who work with you, in the contacts you have throughout your life. He has given you the equipment and he is teaching you the resources and the power by which you are to work. He has set you right where he wants you to be. Therefore, do not object; do not wait for some other circumstance to come your way. That is where he put you. Paul recognizes that about himself. He says, "How did I get to

Corinth? Well, God led me there."

Now there are four things in this paragraph which are the marks of a ministry that is authenticated by God:

The first one is in Verse 12: It is not a self-commending ministry. Whenever you hear somebody boasting and bragging about what he has done for Christ, be careful, beware. I am amazed at the tremendous pile of promotional literature for somebody's ministry that crosses my desk every week. When I look at it I discover that it was sent out by the man himself. I am sure he would not be crass enough to come to me and boast about himself. But he allows extravagant words and phrases to be used about him and then sees to it that they are mailed out to everybody else. That is what Paul says he would not do: "Not that we venture to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding." They are utter fools, he says. Yet how much of our current Christian life today consists of floods of literature in which somebody commends himself.

You quickly learn to recognize some of the terms that are used over and over: "dynamic speaker," "world renowned preacher," "internationally known," "universally acclaimed." I regret that kind of thing is happening. To me it is a mark that a man has not understood that his ministry is given to him by God, and only God's commendation counts.

A number of years ago I was at a great meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, where Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the speaker on *The Lutheran Hour*, was introduced. The man who did so gave him a rather flowery introduction, which he concluded by saying, "And now I give you the famous Dr. Oswald Hoffman." Dr. Hoffman stood at the pulpit for a moment. Then he said, "I'm not the great Dr. Oswald Hoffman. I'm a nobody ... just like you." It was refreshing to me to hear somebody take that approach to his ministry.

You cannot help what other people say about you. It is not wrong if praise and commendation comes from them, but it is a deadly thing in the church to allow literature that you have approved of to go out commending yourself. Men who commend themselves, the apostle says, are lacking in understanding.

Now there is a great difference between information and promotion. You can give out information that simply identifies who you are, what your name is, what you are coming to do, or something like that. That is perfectly right. But to promote something, to publicize it, to propagandize and to blow it up in extravagant terms is absolutely out of order for a God-authenticated ministry. As some man once said in response to an overblown introduction "There are no great preachers. There is only a great God." That is what Paul would recognize.

Then the second mark, in Verse 13 and on, is that a genuine ministry enters the doors which God has opened. That is how Paul got to Corinth. You can trace this in the book of Acts. It started back with that Macedonian call, where Paul had a vision one night from a man in Macedonia saying, "Come across into Europe and help us," {cf, Acts 16:9}. In response to that, Paul landed in Philippi. There he got into trouble and ended up in jail. When he got out he went to the next, city Thessalonica. Again, his preaching of the Word aroused opposition, and he was driven out of town. He went to the next city, which was Berea, and once again there was trouble and a riot. He had to leave there by night and was taken down to Athens, which is only 50 miles to the east of Corinth. He preached on Mars Hill in Athens, but they did not receive his message. So he shows up in Corinth, all alone in the dust of the road, armed with nothing but the power of the Spirit of God, and begins to preach the gospel throughout this city. Out of this came the Corinthian church.

That is what he means when he says, "We are not overextending ourselves as though we did not reach you." God had marked out Corinth for Paul, and had sent him there. This was clearly evident to all these people. He did not have to go around and work out extravagant ways of opening doors that were not opened by the Lord. I contrast this with the practice of many today who arrange elaborately contrived "invitations" to come. They send a team of men out first to get an invitation. It appears that they have been invited to come, but they actually have not. They have arranged it themselves. But Paul would have nothing to do with that. He was simply entering doors that God had opened to him.

Then a third mark is found in Verses 15-16, where Paul makes clear that a genuine ministry always seeks to

reach out to the unreached: "We do not boast beyond limit, in other men's labors; but our hope is that as your faith increases, our field among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's field." He is saying that as these Corinthians learn the truth, as their faith increases, and they begin to bear a more open, obvious witness for what Christ has done in their lives, the whole church will be strengthened. This will enable Paul to leave that place and go on to another place that has not been touched yet, perhaps supported by the ministry that has been brought into being in Corinth.

I am always distressed by these squabbles that arise, sometimes, between churches which get into terrible quarrels about what they call "sheep stealing." One Christian may leave one church and go to another and the first pastor gets terribly upset and accuses the other one of "stealing his sheep." What a terrible thing, when there are thousands of unreached people all around us from which many new converts could come if we were reaching out to them!

The mark of an authenticated ministry is, it is always reaching out. It is never content with merely having its own little private flock, but it is hungry with the hunger of the Spirit of God himself to touch the lives of those around who are hurting, and dying, and being destroyed by the forces at work in their lives.

The final mark is in Verses 17-18. Whenever anybody boasts, Paul says, it is to be in what the Lord has done: "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.' For it is not the man who commends himself that is accepted, but the man whom the Lord commends." How that wipes out with one stroke all the proud evaluations you see men making of their own ministries. You never hear that from Paul. In the very next section he will tell us some of the things that happened in his ministry, but he does it with the most abject apologies. He is distressed that he has to talk about what he has done. He only does it because that is the kind of argument these Corinthians have been listening to from these false teachers because they seem to think it is important.

You get, for instance, a brief example of Paul's approach in First Corinthians 15:10, where he says this about himself:

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, ["Well," you say, "that certainly sounds like boasting, doesn't it?" But notice what he says] though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. {1 Cor 15:10 RSV}

Paul everywhere recognized that the only thing that counts is what Christ does in him, not what he does for Christ. I have sometimes seen on the wall of Christian homes a little plaque that says,

Only one life, 'twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.

That sounds very pious, and it has certainly a germ of truth about it, but it always bothers me because I do not think it is very accurately expressed. What I would like to see is,

Only one life, 'twill soon be past.
Only what Christ does through me will last.

But that doesn't have the right meter, you say. Well, it doesn't, but it has the right theology, and that is what I am interested in. It is not what I do for him that makes any difference at all. That can be utterly wasted time in God's estimation. It is what he does through me. It is what I expect him to do and what he promises to do that counts. Therefore, the true evaluation of a ministry is to look back and say, "Well, thank God for what happened. But I didn't do it. God did it through me. I am grateful for the privilege of having the opportunity to be an instrument in his hands." That is true evaluation.

So how do we spot the phonies who are all around us?

- They commend themselves, for the most part.

- They are always boasting of their accomplishment, printing it and spreading it around so you can see.
- They do not let others speak for them, but they talk about it themselves.
- And they are not concerned about reaching the unreached. They are concerned only with having a little group of their own supporters, building that to the highest number, and paying no attention to the lost around.
- They manipulate and try to get meetings and try to set up various open doors instead of following those which God opens for them.
- Most of all, when they boast they make it clear that God is mighty lucky to have them on his side.

That is the mark of a counterfeit. He may not be a counterfeit Christian, but he has a counterfeit ministry.

I trust that God will help us evaluate our own ministries in the light of this, that we will judge ourselves in this manner, and give up any attempt to try to enter spiritual beauty contests to see who has the best looking ministry around.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that in the Body of Christ there is no competition. Each one is given a special ministry and each one is responsible to use his gifts to fulfill that ministry. Grant to us therefore, that we will not be filled with jealousy and envy toward each other, but be content to labor at what you have given us to do, knowing that the fruit and the harvest will be of your making and not ours. We thank you for this inestimable privilege of being called to be co-laborers together with God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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