

A TRUSTWORTHY MESSENGER **A Sermon on John 1:19-42**

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

For my home e-mail, I use a no-fee internet service. The idea is that you provide the service with information about your hobbies and interests, and they display ads on your computer screen that match your demographic profile. A few months back, I received word from my internet provider that they were going to start a new program. Whenever my computer is not being used, they will use the processing power of my computer to perform various calculations and number crunching. Then the next time I log back on, my computer will send the results back to the home office. The company hopes that they will be able to contract out the computing capacity of millions of computers across the United States. Even though the program is entirely voluntary right now, a careful read of the fine print shows that they reserve the right to implement this program on my computer at any time without advanced notice.

Apparently this move has attracted a lot of attention because privacy rights advocates oppose it vehemently. Immediately I think about the issues of trust and information in our culture. When we go on the internet, websites we visit are able to follow our every move. This tracking helps build massive databases that researchers can use to market to us more effectively. This information can be used for our benefit, or for our ill. And the question that lingers in the back of my mind, and I suspect in the back of many of yours, is, "Can I trust them?" Can I trust them not to sell my information to telemarketers? Can I trust them not to leak my information out to identity thieves?

If we have such nagging inner questions about those who hold our demographic information, how much more then should we have inner questions about those who are our spiritual messengers? How trustworthy are they? By what criteria do we judge them? How do we sort through the parade of spiritual icons presented to us every day? We see ads for L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics, we see Dr. Phil on Oprah, we see Deepak Chopra on PBS. All of them seem to have sensible and cogent things to say about our spiritual lives. But how can we know whether we can trust them to be right on matters of truth – real hard truth about what is and what isn't?

Our passage for today gives us some insight into how we can discern trustworthy spiritual leadership. To put this passage in context, last week we saw how Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. Due to this dual nature of Christ, we can fully expect to have an encounter with Christ in our own spiritual lives. Today's passage tells us about John the Baptist whom God sent to lead people to Jesus Christ. We see a few key points here: John proclaims he is not the

Christ; John points others to the Christ; and John prompts others to follow the Christ. That said, let's dig into the text.

JOHN PROCLAIMS, "I AM NOT THE CHRIST" – John 1:19-28

John the Baptist preached a radical message of repentance and faith, and he baptized people in water. In the Jewish mindset of that time was a sign. The Old Testament links water baptism with the coming of the messiah and with the repentance and renewal of the people of Israel:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezek. 22:25-27).

In this section of Ezekiel, the prophet described God's restoration of Israel through his anointed one, his messiah. So, when John the Baptist came on the scene and started baptizing and calling people to repent and be clean, he made the eleven o'clock news. It was only natural that multitudes would go out to see this man who was making huge claims. It was only natural that the priests and the leaders of Israel in that day would send out a delegation to examine his sincerity. The temple leaders needed to know if they could trust him.

Notice how John the Baptist responded to the questions: “I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah who was expected to come at the end of the ages. I am not the prophet like Moses whom God promised to provide. I am a voice crying in the wilderness.” He identified himself with this image from Isaiah 40; he was simply a preparatory voice.

Few contemporary figures have the audacity to claim to be Christ. Only the imbalanced like David Koresh or Jim Jones, or the diabolical like Charles Manson make such claims. However, this sin appears more frequently in the messenger's self-exaltation. This sin appears when the messenger claims attention and glory for himself and for his actions rather than for the God who formed him and inspired his actions. This sin appears when style and panache are more important than character and commitment.

While an undergraduate, I performed in many University theater productions. In a performance of a play, all attention is rightly focused upon the actors onstage. As an actor, I felt an incredible rush that arose from having the audience focus their attention and energies on me. I could literally feel if the

audience was with me or not. Believe me, it's an exhilarating experience to have hundreds of people emotionally involved with every word that comes off your tongue. The actor faces a great temptation to perform in a way that will "impress" the audience. We've all seen actors that act angry by using wild gestures and loud voices. But the best actors can be angry and convey that to the audience in utter stillness. The constant challenge for the actor is to stay real and authentic in the character.

Similarly, the message about Jesus Christ is compelling – it attracts people to hear. The great temptation of the messenger is to use that attraction to draw attention to himself. The temptation, and it is subtle and insidious, is to act the way we think a great preacher acts, or how a great bible teacher acts, or a great deacon or a great elder or a great Christian. The challenge is continually to say, "I am not the Christ."

Comedian Jack Benny's radio debut was on the old Ed Sullivan Radio Show. His opening line was, "Hello everyone, this is Jack Benny. There will now be a brief pause for you to say, 'Who Cares?'" When the messenger is functioning in his role as a message bearer, that should be the attitude: "Who cares who I am – I am not the Christ."

Then notice John's humility when he said that the one who is coming is one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. You see, in that time a student was required to do everything for his master – except remove his sandals: feet were dusty and smelly and stinky. And yet John said that he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who was coming. John clearly did not draw glory to himself.

JOHN POINTS OTHERS TO CHRIST – John 1:29-34

Not only did John proclaim that he was not the Christ, but he also pointed others to the Christ. Look at verses 29-34. He identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." This title picks up the image of the Passover sacrifice that was part of Jewish ritual. Look back to Exodus 12 for the whole story of that first Passover. There, God told Moses that he was sending the angel of death to take the firstborn child of all the households in the land. The Israelites were to kill a lamb and paint the blood over their doorposts so that the angel of death would pass them by. Later, In Isaiah 53:7, the prophet Isaiah picked up this same imagery when he described the suffering servant who would take away the sins of Israel. Finally, John the Baptist told the world that the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation had arrived in Christ.

John also explained that he pointed to Christ because of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came to John and made Jesus'

identity clear to him. The other gospels don't focus on this facet of John's testimony. I think the apostle John focuses on this little detail because he wants us to understand the role of the Holy Spirit in our encounter with Jesus: when we encounter Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit that prompts us to respond. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, reveals Jesus to us. This is a theme that John comes back to repeatedly, but we see it in seed form here.

My friend and mentor Steve Brown has a great way of picturing himself as a preacher. He simply says, "I'm just a beggar telling other beggars where he found bread." There's a sense of dependence there that I also hear in John's testimony. It's the sense of dependence upon the Holy Spirit to empower us to point to Jesus Christ.

JOHN PROMPTS OTHERS TO FOLLOW CHRIST – John 1:35-42

John not only proclaimed that he was not the Christ, and not only pointed to the Christ, but he also prompted others to follow the Christ. John had already been teaching his disciples about the one who would come after him, and when he saw Jesus he identified him as "the Lamb of God." By identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God to his disciples, John indicated that Jesus was the one they had been waiting for, and that it was time for them to start following Jesus instead of John. Look at what happened: the disciples followed Jesus, and then Jesus himself turned to invite them; John's disciples became Jesus' disciples. The passage ends with Andrew bringing yet another disciple to Jesus.

The point is that we should look past the teachers to the Christ to whom the teachers point. Through this passage, we see that John gradually diminishes in prominence until he is completely absent. His task was to make himself obsolete. John was a living illustration to us that it's not about the teachers we follow. Christianity isn't about Billy Graham. Covenant-First isn't about Russell Smith. It's about what Christ is doing in the midst of you.

I encourage you not only to look for trustworthy messengers, but also to help out your messengers by not expecting more of them than they can reasonably give. Any Bible teacher is still fallible and human. I encourage you to be like the Bereans of Acts 17 who searched the Scriptures to check out the veracity of their teacher's statements.

My Old Testament professor Bruce Waltke, who is a brilliant Old Testament Scholar and a humble, devout believer, once said in class that the genius of the Protestant faith is that we have no popes. He meant that no one mediates Scripture to us anymore; we all have access to it and to the tools that will help us interpret it. When he said that, I couldn't help think that his statement was wrong. We do have popes – we set up our own popes and we call them Billy

Graham, C.S. Lewis, D. James Kennedy, James Dobson, R.C. Sproul. Even local pastors can become popes in their own congregations. Pick any popular bible teacher, and I guarantee that person will have a slavish following that is ready to accept any word from that teacher as truth. But I also guarantee that in their best moments each of those teachers I just mentioned would proclaim that they are not the Christ, would point you to the Christ, and would prompt you to follow the Christ.