

WHO GETS TO SPEAK FOR GOD?

GALATIANS 1:11-24

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We live in a culture of specialization, and *in* this culture of specialization, we are always seeking to know the credentials of those who do things for them.

If my van is making strange noises, I want an auto technician who's peered under the hood once or twice before.

If I am having health problems, I want to see a doctor who has spent years studying the human body to have a look.

If my dear friend the office printer/fax machine isn't working, I want an expert to come in and fix it.

We trust people who have devoted themselves to learning about a specific area and who have the knowledge and insight required to diagnose and solve problems.

We do this in the church, too, right? We check references; we run people through national offices for licensing and interview processes.

We expect that those who claim to speak for God have at least *some* credentials for doing so.

I was snooping around my office this week for evidence of what I might produce in response to the question (hypothetical, of course!), "just what gives you the right to stand up here each week and presume to tell us about God?!"

Well, I have a nice piece of paper on my shelf with my name on it that says I have “diligently pursued the course of study and performed all the exercises prescribed by the Senate” and that the “authority of conferred by the legislature of the Province of British Columbia” is pleased to grant me a “Master of Arts (Theological Studies).”

Perhaps you have serious reservations about whether the person standing before you could accurately be described as a “master of anything.” 😊 (If so, I’d invite you to keep your views to yourself!).

Maybe you aren’t impressed by things like degrees.

Well, I also have this little “minister’s card” granted to me by the Vital Statistics Department of Alberta and Mennonite Church Alberta. It has a very official-looking number on it and it says that I’m legally allowed to marry people in the province of Alberta.

Nothing confers respect like an official-looking card signed by government representatives, right?

Or perhaps I could appeal to my writing credentials. I have here a book that I recently contributed an article to. This is a collection of essays from folks across North America seeking to engage the issue of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons and how the church might respond to it.

Surely this demonstrates that my words about God have appeal in the broader church and the wider world.

If these things don’t convince you, well, I’m not sure what I have left. *I’m a reasonably nice guy?*

(In all seriousness, I think it’s interesting that these are the sorts of things that people look to for credentials in church... and that these are the justifications that I naturally gravitate towards. I recall very few questions when I was doing my interviews with Mennonite Church Canada about my prayer life, for example... But that’s another sermon for another time.)

The point is, when someone opens their mouth and speaks about God, some perfectly fair questions are, *Why should we listen to you? Where does your authority come from?*

Why do you get to speak for God?

That's the question that Paul is dealing with in our text this morning.

Recall, the Galatian church is in trouble of undoing some of the good news of Easter and Pentecost.

In place of a new body no longer defined by Jew and Gentile, some are seeking to re-establish Jewish dietary laws and the rite of circumcision in order to be a follower of Jesus.

In place of Paul's announcement of freedom for all in Christ, some are returning to their chains.

And, in order to discredit Paul's message, some of these troublemakers are seeking to discredit Paul himself.

They've been putting it in people's heads that Paul has no authority, no long history with Jesus as the apostles did. He's just, to borrow N.T. Wright's phrase, a "junior member of the Christian team of wandering preachers."¹

Worse still, he's watering things down, lifting restrictions of the Jewish rituals to make it easier for non-Jews to swallow.

In their view, Paul *doesn't* get to speak for God. He doesn't get to change the rules. He wasn't there with Jesus. He's just some guy who had a vision once upon a time and is now stirring up trouble with all his talk about how the law no longer applies!

In response, Paul launches into a rather blistering response which amounts to something like his spiritual CV:

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 10-11.

He appeals, first, to his direct encounter with Jesus Christ: “I did not receive [the gospel] from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

He then moves to something like a negative argument for a positive point—he talks about his earlier life in Judaism, about how he was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it and about his zeal for the traditions of my ancestors. He’s saying, *look, if anyone would be predisposed to finding a way to harmonize the demands of the Jewish law with following Jesus, it would be me! But this is not what I received from Christ!*

He then appeals to God’s call on his life from before he was born – he was chosen to be God’s voice to the Gentiles: Paul understands that he is playing a unique role in the story of God.

Then Paul wears his relative isolation as a bit of a badge of honour: *I did not confer with any human being! I didn’t go to Jerusalem where all the theological heavyweights were (v. 17); I stayed in Damascus; I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea—all they knew about me was that the one who formerly was persecuting the church was now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.”*

And because of this, they glorified God.

Taken together, Paul is making the claim that the utterly bewildering nature of his trajectory could *only* be accounted for by the fact that he had had an unexpected, life-transforming encounter with the risen Christ and had been sent forth to proclaim freedom for all in this name!

This is where Paul’s authority came from. This is why he got to speak for God. Not by virtue of his learning or his preaching skills or his writing ability. Not even because he was a nice guy (by most accounts, it seems he was a rather prickly character!).

He got to speak for God because God spoke to him in a way that he could never have imagined or predicted or even wanted. But once he heard, he was never the same.

So where does that leave us? Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, good for Paul. He had this amazing experience with God and had this unique role to play in the birth of the church. What does that have to do with me, aside from being an interesting bit of history?"

It seems to me that there are two relatively well-trodden paths that we take when we come across a story like this Paul's that relies heavily on personal experience.

1. We can take Paul's experience as prescriptive and use our own personal experience as a trump card for all manner of claims about God.
2. We can take Paul's experience as utterly unique (and not prescriptive in any way) and never open our mouths about the ways in which we believe we have personally encountered God.

In my experience, Mennonites are far more inclined to the latter than the former. 😊

And there are good reasons for this. We're all familiar with preachers or others throughout history who have claimed that God told them *x* or *y* and it turned out to be pure nonsense. Or worse.

Most of us have probably encountered people in our lives who claimed some pretty wild things because "God spoke to them."

We are, I think, rightly suspicious of theological claims rooted primarily in one's own personal experience. We would prefer some kind of alignment with Scripture, tradition, and rationality. We would like to see claims about what God is saying tested in community. This is all good and appropriate.

But I wonder if we've crowded out even the *possibility* of God speaking to us directly, personally, unexpectedly.

I wonder if we sort of think, "well, God speaks through the Bible... and through sermons (maybe) and spiritual books... and through nature... but beyond that? Well that's the dangerous realm of *emotions* and feelings and who knows what else?!

And perhaps if we were to take things even a step further, we might detect a hint of longing or even resentment. Perhaps some of us *wish* we could point to life-changing experiences like Paul's.

Heck, we don't need a blinding light on the road to Damascus! We'd settle for a hint or two or a few obvious open doors to walk through. But they just don't seem to come.

I can't answer the question of how and when and why God speaks through direct, unmistakable personal experiences.

But I do think that very often the question we need to be asking is where and how are we looking? Are we even attuned to the ways in which God speaks through our own stories?

Because for every amazing story like Paul's, there are *literally* countless "ordinary" stories where God did *not* speak this way.

So how can we be emboldened to give language to our own experiences with God?

We don't need fancy "credentials" or a spiritual CV like Paul's to talk about how we've seen God in our lives. But we're often hesitant to do this!

We think God-talk is only for the "experts."

I can't count how many times I have been asked to pray at various social or churchy gatherings because I'm "the pastor." As if every Christian isn't qualified to offer a few words of gratitude for shared food and time together.

A few years ago, I remember our worship committee decided to attempt to create space in our worship services for a season where people would share stories about where they had seen God at work in their lives.

Nothing elaborate or densely theological—just a few words about where people had noticed traces of God in the course of their everyday lives. An experience of beauty... a deep encounter with someone in pain... a truth from Scripture that was validated in daily life. Anything!

We found that it was difficult to get people to share. Some people just hate standing in front of a microphone. That's fair. Some people are private by disposition and don't want to open their lives up for public consumption. That's also fair. To a point. 😊

But my sense it that many people said “no” because they didn’t feel “qualified.” *Who am I to speak for God?*

Yet it doesn’t take much. Just open eyes. And minds. And hearts.

I’ll give you an example. On Friday afternoon, Nicholas and I were here at the church practicing a song. As we were here, Susie Harden and her daughter were here at the church cleaning.

I asked them how they were doing after Susie’s brother and Elizabeth’s son’s passing.

They said they were doing ok. And then the little girl said, “I saw a vision. It had lots of light and a stairway up to heaven.”

I asked her if she thought God was speaking to her. “Yeah,” she said.

Could a skeptic poke all kinds of holes in this statement? Sure. She was conditioned to see such things by media or popular religious notions. She had indigestion. Whatever.

Or.

God was speaking to her. Comforting her. Letting her know that her uncle was safe.

I asked myself, “Does it seem out of character for the God that I know to be revealed in Jesus Christ to provide comfort and strength to a hurting girl?”

The answer was no. Maybe that’s enough to go on.

The title for my sermon this morning is: “Who Gets to Speak for God?”

The answer in the ultimate sense, of course, is Jesus. Jesus gets to speak for God.

Paul seems to be going to great lengths to defend his turf, but he is in the end simply defending the gospel of Jesus Christ as was revealed to him in an utterly unique way at an utter unique and crucial point in salvation history.

Paul is stating his credentials, certainly, but he's not saying that his own personal experience trumps everything. Remember from our text last week what he said in Galatians 1:8:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!

Paul's overarching concern is to preserve the gospel of **Jesus Christ**, the one that met him on the road to Damascus, the one who changed *everything*.

But Paul also knew that the God he followed was a God who encountered and spoke *to* and *through* ordinary, unlikely people.

The answer to the question, "Who gets to speak for God" is also *us*.

We get to speak for God.

We don't have to always get it exactly right. We don't have to precisely calibrate every word. We will make mistakes and get things wrong.

We're not perfect (neither was Paul! I doubt Jesus would have been thrilled by Paul's "go castrate yourselves" response to his theological enemies!).

We will not always speak perfectly correctly for God. God knows I've probably said a thing or two from this pulpit that God might have looked at and said something like, "Well, nice try... But not really."

But the fact that we don't speak perfectly for God doesn't mean that we don't have an obligation to give voice to our convictions, our questions, our surprises our doubts, our fears, our hopes, our encounters with God along the way.

Actually, maybe "obligation" is not the best word. How about "privilege?" We *get* to speak for God.

God has entrusted himself to us. God has in some ways pinned his hopes to us in a world that often wants nothing to do with God. God has allowed his character and purposes in the world to be sent out in ordinary communities and ordinary human beings like you and me.

People who aren't always sure what they have seen or heard or even experiences. People who make mistakes and sometimes represent God badly. People who often don't have impressive spiritual CVs like Paul.

But people who are determined, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, to cling to Christ. Because we, like Peter, can only say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

God has said to his church, "You are my body. Speak, act, think, love like Jesus. And I will be with you always."

We get to speak for God. May God help us do it with joy and confidence.

Amen.

