

Who am I to preach?

By [Bruce G. Epperly](#)

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When I was a college student, I sought a faith I could affirm. I had been raised in a conservative Christian home. I discovered spirituality during the psychedelic '60s, found a spiritual practice through Transcendental Meditation, and returned to church.

I went back to church for the community and for its interest in social justice, but I was still looking for a Christianity that was credible. Then I read Paul Tillich's [Dynamics of Faith](#) and my life was transformed. From Tillich, I learned that faith always exists in relationship with doubt. Questions about faith are a sign of the importance of faith to us.

This interdependence of faith and doubt is affirmed in the contrast between kataphatic ("with images") and apophatic ("without images") theologies and spiritualities. On the one hand, almost any experience and object can reveal the omnipresent God; on the other hand, all experiences and objects are finite, and they both reveal and obscure God's revelation. As H. Richard Niebuhr noted, revelation requires a receiver, and it's the receiver who shapes the revelatory experience.

As far as doctrine and experience go, most postmodern progressives and moderates affirm relativity and limitation. For them the question is this: What beliefs or practices might cause us to condemn anyone who would challenge our way of life and faith tradition? This week's lessons don't call us to pure relativism, but they do challenge us to relativize every position—including our own—before the immensity of the universe, the plurality of faith perspectives and the glory of God.

Jeremiah's ability to speak for God is grounded in its sense of limitation. Like Jeremiah, every faithful pastor asks, "Who am I to tell the people what God wants them to do?" Yet sheer silence is not the answer, not for people who have entrusted their spiritual lives to our care and who need to hear good news.

As a working preacher, week after week I am called to share a healthy theological/spiritual diet: not the only possible diet, but the one that emerges in the weekly interaction of my spiritual journey, the lives of congregants and the local and global worlds which touch them. Perhaps it is enough to preach boldly while recognizing I will always be partly wrong and must listen to the voices of others, including people in my congregation, as I seek to grow in faith and wisdom.

*Additional lectionary columns by Epperly appear in the January 26 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*