Keeping an eye on our demands (1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

How can people tell the difference between a prophet and a phony?

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Anyone who has done ministry for pay has probably felt some tension. We take money to share something that is called grace—free, unmerited, given by God. Are we charging for the gospel?

Just a few years after the resurrection of Jesus, the preinstitutional church seemed to be grappling with this ethical dilemma. Religious charlatanism was already a well-known phenomenon in the first century. It is such an easy con. We know all the myriad ways that humans grasp for meaning and belonging. Anyone with a good story and a charismatic personality can find someone to buy their product. Shoot, I just bought a lottery ticket, knowing my chances are 292 million to one. For such a cheap price, it’s worth a shot.

The religious huckster is looking for me. A convincing redemption story—one that plays on self-doubt, guilt, loneliness, despair, etc.—is surely worth a buck or two. We know all too sadly how far this can go if the huckster is actually psychotic and believes themselves to be God’s special envoy. Truly, how is one to know the difference between a prophet and a phony?

I was asked this question by a group of church leaders at an East African refugee camp. They described a growth industry in declaring oneself a prophet and leading a group in some distorted form of Christianity. Paul goes to great lengths to convince people he is not such a person. So, we looked at scripture. They all had their Bibles, in either English or Arabic, despite having left nearly everything else behind.

We looked at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians. Does the prophet show love, faithfulness, kindness, joy, and so on? Does the prophet seem more interested in the bottom line than the Beatitudes? Are people being set free, or led into bondage? Are they allowed to think and ask questions, or merely to listen and regurgitate? Can others rise to leadership through holiness of life, or is one person the only and forever leader? And, most importantly, is there one set of standards for the leaders and another for the followers?

We looked at examples from the prophets and apostles, and from their own experience as leaders. Are they willing to give themselves up for others, as opposed to asking others to give themselves up for them?

In 1 Thessalonians and elsewhere, Paul vigorously defends his authenticity, though he sometimes seems to protest too much. Making his own living while defending the right of other apostles and evangelists to ask for support gave him a virtually uncontested integrity. Many who came to believe through Paul’s ministry were elevated to leadership and trusted with the gospel message as he moved on to new places. When Paul made it back to see them, they exhibited genuine love and affection.

When Paul did collect money, it was for the poor in Jerusalem—and he entrusted others to deliver some of it. Rather than exhibiting jealousy, he commends the work of others. He is vigorous in correcting deviations from the message of free, unmerited grace. Whatever arrogance is perceived in his writings, his life provided the balance. His suffering and eventual martyrdom were real.

We 21st-century preachers and prophets, musicians and teachers, counselors and administrators should keep a close eye on our own demands. When we begin to believe we are owed a substantial living, when our salaries start to outstrip those of our parishioners, when we (or at least I) have a generous pension and they don’t—what seems like a reasonable right to a living can come at the expense of integrity and respect. In a shrinking American church that is judged harshly and often rightly for selling the gospel for the benefit of the few, in which celebrity preachers are not just paid but made wealthy, we could use some different examples. Paul might look downright humble in comparison.