

Voices: What our word is worth

October 11, 2017

Matthew 21 tells of Jesus' confrontation with leaders at the temple who asked him about the source of his authority.

What they wanted to say was this: "Who do you think you are?!"

He tells a parable of a man with two sons. The father asks the first to go and work in the vineyard. The first son said no. So the father went to the second son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go. However, the first son changed his mind and went to work for his father.

Jesus asks, "Who did the will of the father?"

Easy question, right?

One says the right things. The other does the right things.

Our moral authority

Jesus links authority with doing what is right. Our authority will go hand in hand with how we live out our faith. The question of authority is central to the identity of the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.

If we love as God first loved us, then that love will be known through us. If we live sacrificial lives — giving generously and forgiving faithfully — then we will gain the faith and trust of people outside these walls. If our faith is a thin veneer over our own selfish interests, we will never have the moral authority Christ's church deserves.

Excuse the cliché: Things are changing. Yet, there are still corners of

Christendom fighting to keep things how they used to be. Some pastors are fighting for their own place of privilege. Some are even working as hard as they can to make sure that other faiths are (as much as possible) silenced in the public square.

People outside our churches are watching. They are watching to see if we not only say what is right but do what is right. When we fail to produce fruits worthy of the kingdom of God, then our word and our moral authority is compromised.

Our witness

The Muslim scholar and Imam Omar Suleiman of Dallas told a story about going to lecture at a university in Florida back in 2010. He was speaking the week after evangelical pastor Terry Jones of Florida announced a campaign to burn copies of the Koran on the ninth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Terry Jones and his group of protesters showed up at the college to intimidate Imam Suleiman. They surrounded his car as he drove onto the campus. They shouted insults at him: “Who do you think you are?” Many held Bibles and demanded that he repent and stop working for Satan. One woman shrieked, “In the name of Jesus may you burn in hell.”

Luckily, he says, they let him speak. There were no hecklers in the lecture hall, but Terry Jones’ son was there to listen. Afterward, a man came up to the Imam and told him, “I don’t want to be Christian anymore. Not after what just happened; not after what they did to you. This makes me sick.”

The Imam pointed to Terry Jones’ son at the back of the lecture hall and said, “Go tell him that.” Suleiman watched as this man went up to Terry’s son to tell him the effects of his “witness.”

One of these religious leaders was preaching peace and working for the common good. The other was working to sow distrust and fear.

Which one is doing the will of God?

Imam Suleiman concluded his story: “The only way that your faith wins is if faith wins as a whole.” In this post-Christian era, we have more in common with the Imam than we may be ready to admit.

Faith is not winning right now.

Our word

Fear of the loss of authority is creating an obsession with control and order. And so our faith becomes more Pharisaic and less an inheritance of the teachings of Jesus.

In the United States, fundamentalist Christians are stalking mosques — standing outside with guns in a fearsome display. In Iraq, Christians are hunted by fundamentalist Muslims. In Myanmar, hardline Buddhist monks are involved in the beginnings of a genocide against the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in the country.

The church of Jesus Christ derives its authority from God. But, that authority is granted only by our willingness to live out what we have seen, known and experienced in the living word of God. If our faith is producing fear and mistrust instead of the fruits of the Spirit, then our faith isn't in God. It's in something else.

The authority of our word is being compromised. Our word will not be worth much if our lives fail to bear fruits worthy of God's kingdom. The value of our word will directly affect what others perceive to be the effect of the word on our lives.

What your word is worth is a reflection of what the word of God is worth to you.

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