

2 Peter 1:16-21

Transfiguration Sunday

February 23, 2020

I'd like a new cell phone. I guess my current phone is still fine; it can handle email, texting, GPS, light web browsing and if anyone still makes phone calls in 2020, I guess it could do that, too.

But it's 3 ½ years old! There are shiny new phones out there! The one I want has 4 GigaBytes, it has more GigaHertz, it can do 5G so that's 5...giga...somethings. It has more Gigas; more Gs. Gs are good.

I *want* a new cell phone, and that means that I'll eventually convince myself that I *need* a new phone. The manufacturer sells it for about \$300, but Amazon sells it for \$250! That's a great deal...but half the goods sold on Amazon are counterfeit. I guess that's why Amazon is cheaper. So I have to learn how to distinguish the fake Motorolas from the real Motorolas.

The First-Century Church in Rome doesn't have to deal with Amazon, or fake cell phones. But it has been accused of fake teaching. The Jewish reform movement that is Christianity is becoming more popular among the Gentile population, but some of its Jewish features are limiting its popularity. More specifically, the insistence that Jesus will return as judge and saviour is an embarrassment. It's 80 or 90 AD; anyone who

knew him personally, all of his followers, are either dead or very, very old. If Jesus is coming back...where is he?

So some would-be evangelists are asking, "Look, can't we just admit that we were wrong? Can't we just admit we made that part up to prop up the other embarrassing thing about Christianity – its insistence on Jewish morality and ritual taboos that prevent Christians from fitting in to society? Because if Jesus isn't coming back to check up on us, where's the compelling need to follow all these stuffy rules? The Epicureans are asking, 'Why not kick back and have fun like the rest of us?' They've got a point. Let's ditch some of this Jewish baggage so people stop laughing at us. If we did that," they say, "we'd get more converts."

But the Jewishness of Jesus, and his return, were significant aspects of Peter's teaching. Peter is dead, but it's an accepted practice in the first century for a disciple to write in their teacher's name, especially when their teaching needs to be remembered or reinforced. So someone writes this letter, reminding us that the values of the Gospel are not primarily having a good time, but rather goodness, self-control, mutual affection and love, and living your life in harmony with God. And to do that, you have to have your theology right.

The Reverend Janet Gear demonstrated this in her workshop yesterday. Janet discussed five streams, or implicit theologies, in the United Church of Canada. While

each of these streams bleeds into and informs the others, everyone lives primarily in one or another of these streams. For example, the Ecclesial stream sees the purpose of the Church as forming communities of love and grace. To nurture and house these communities, it needs to survive as an institution. The Ecumenical stream, on the other hand, hears God's call to enact radical social transformation in pursuit of justice. The Church as an institution is *less* necessary for *this* project.

So, imagine a Church Board constituted half by Ecclesial people and half by Ecumenical people. Imagine they've received a \$50,000 bequest, and they have to decide how to spend it. The Ecclesial people want to spend it on the Church building, so that it can better house God's family and its ministries of love and grace. The Ecumenical folks dream of tree planting; of educational campaigns; of funding for social justice initiatives. How much positive change could we effect with that money?

As Janet said, "If a vote is taken, someone will lose more than an argument." Values will be transgressed; the Gospel as some understand it will be lost. Theology matters; beliefs matter. They determine what we stand for, and what we won't stand for.

Now, Janet made it clear that all of the five streams are equally legitimate expressions of faith and the Gospel. But what happens if you follow bad theology, or as our reading puts it, "cleverly constructed myths"?

Counterfeit cell phone batteries have been known to overheat, catch fire, or explode. A fake battery can kill.

Fake Gospel – beliefs that only masquerade as the Word of God – lead to all sorts of discreditable goings-on in First-Century Rome. Fake Gospel leads in the 21 century to the exploitation and destruction of the natural world. Fake Gospel leads to hatred of queer folks and their murder and suicide. Fake Gospel tells the rich that they deserve to be rich and the poor that they deserve to be poor. A fake Gospel can kill.

That is why, says 2nd Peter, “you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ....For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.” A true and faithful Gospel gives life.

Okay. So here's the big question. If I've convinced you that you need a genuine cell phone battery, and genuine Christian teaching, *how do we distinguish the true from the fake?*

If you're looking for a genuine product on Amazon, you're advised to look for typos, especially in lists of ingredients and in the French text, if it has any. You're encouraged to consider whether the price is too good to be true. You're encouraged to do some research on the seller.

As for genuine Christian teaching, 2nd Peter says that prophets do not interpret their visions on their own, "but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." However, he then goes on to say that "False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you."

But how do you tell the difference? How, for example, does one determine whether the teaching about Jesus' return is true or false? Our writer gives three criteria. First, it is divinely inspired. Peter, James and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus' transfiguration. God pulled back the curtain, as it were, to see Jesus' glory as the Son of God. The Word of God conferred authority on Jesus, in language reminiscent of a king's coronation. 2nd Peter takes this as evidence of Jesus' authority to judge, and that he will return to life after his death.

Second, it stands in continuity with the rest of the faith tradition. The presence of Moses and Elijah demonstrate that, like them, Jesus is a servant of God who saves and judges God's people. This vision is, similarly, attested to by Peter, James and John, three respected leaders of the community.

Third, the fruit it bears in the life of the believer is life in the kingdom of God.

Janet has demonstrated that our deeply held beliefs affect our actions, and both Peter's teachings and the Gentiles who oppose them see that belief in the Transfiguration and in Jesus' return have implications for how we live out our faith. The Epicureans think it makes us no fun; 2nd Peter sees it as integral to a life of Christian discipleship.

As someone in the fifth of Janet's five streams, the Spiritual, I would suggest a fourth criteria: does the article of faith in question speak to your heart? Does it make it leap? Does it make you cry tears of joy and beauty? Or does it leave you cold? I think that is the Spirit speaking to you - or failing to do so.

We are called every day to distinguish the counterfeit from the genuine. Sometimes it is a trivial matter. Sometimes, it is a matter of life and death.

Counterfeit batteries can burn and scar you body.

Counterfeit Christian teachings can scar your soul.

But the truth of the Gospel brings life.

In the movement of the Spirit, in the Word of God, in the testament of our tradition, in the fruit of the Gospel, we are given the tools we need to see the truth.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

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