

LATTER-DAY PROPHETS

Most of us who lived during the 1970s have heard about the mass murder and suicide of the followers of Jim Jones in Guyana, South America. One newspaper article about this tragic event stated, “Jim Jones’ converts saw him as God, a divine father who would lead them to heaven on earth.” They would follow him anywhere—through the jungles of South America, even through the darkness of death. We admire their zeal, but we deplore their ignorance, an ignorance that led to their tragic destruction.

Jones claimed latter-day revelation from God. Of course, the apostle Paul tells us, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5.19-22).¹ But by what measure should we test the claims of those who profess to be latter-day prophets? Scripture itself, the written word, testifies that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10.17). And, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4.12). This written word from God through his eyewitnesses to the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ (see 2 Peter 1.16-21) provides a reliable testimony to “our common salvation” which is “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Peter says it like this, “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1.20-21).

¹Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (2001).

This word of God by the work of his Holy Spirit through apostles and prophets, who performed signs and wonders, confirmed the veracity of what they were proclaiming about Jesus of Nazareth. The apostle John ends his gospel, his testimony about “the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1.14), with these interesting comments:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. . . .

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (John 20.30-31; 21.24-25).

This word of God, which provides testimony to the living Word of God (that is, Jesus the Messiah), was written down and has served as an adequate and true witness to the faith of Jesus for subsequent generations. We have God’s revelation to us in writing, and it is these “sacred writings” that “are able to instruct [us] for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” This is because “all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3.16-17; NRSV).²

Certainly, this is not to deny or downplay the helpful work of our Comforter, the Holy Spirit of God, in our lives and in the life of the church today (see Romans, chapter 8). But it is to highlight the tragedy of those latter-day prophets, like Jim Jones, who usurp the place of Jesus in the hearts of his people and make void the proclamation of the apostles and the prophets of the first century. As Peter admonishes us, we “should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through [the] apostles” (2 Peter 3.2; NRSV).

²New Revised Standard Version (1989).