

**Many Voices:
Who Should We Listen To?
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“Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1, New American Bible Revised Edition).

Six months ago I began writing articles on my blog on the subject of morality¹. As I continue to write about Catholic moral teaching, I am keenly aware that we hear many different voices with each one offering an opinion on how we should live our lives morally.

Many of the voices we hear are not Catholic, Christian, or from any religious perspective. Of course, there are people who are not religious but still live good moral lives. My concern is with those who do not respect or live by any moral code. Of greatest concern are relativists who say there is no truth and that you can live however you like as long as you do not hurt anyone. This relativistic way of thinking is not what God teaches.

God gives us a moral code through his commandments that are good for us. Living contrary to God's commandments leads one on the path to Hell. Does this not constitute harm? Regarding the qualifying statement by relativists, "as long as you don't hurt anyone," I wonder how they might define harm. I would hope they would include physical harm of any sort but what about emotional, psychological, or spiritual harm?

For example, some say all sexual behavior is acceptable as long as it is consensual. However, even when it is consensual, I see harm in this. Rampant sexual behavior can objectify even the consenting adult as an object of pleasure rather than loving them as a person. It can harm them by diminishing their self-worth.

Even within the Catholic Church, we can hear voices that say very different things about what is moral vs. immoral behavior. How do we know who to listen to?

Here, I am reminded of a class on the prophets in the Old Testament I took while in seminary. The course included addressing how one is to know that anyone claiming to be a prophet is truly sent by God. There are "Five Biblical Tests for a True Prophet." I think the criteria is relevant to our discussion on how we know which voice to listen to regarding moral teaching.

I would like to offer what the five tests are as taught in the class and then apply them to this question of who to listen to today. Before doing this, I offer three caveats offered by the professor.

A. We need to use all five tests together rather than as unrelated tests.

¹ Available on my blog (<http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/>) at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?cat=843>.

- B. We need to look at the whole of what the person says, not just one statement.
- C. The tests are not a guarantee of the person's creditability/authenticity. They are tools to help us decide.

Now, we are ready to begin discussing the five tests:

#1 Future Verification/Non-Verification of the Message

This test is biblical in its origins as Deuteronomy 18:20-22 tells us not to believe anyone claiming to be a prophet whose words do not come true.

With a prophet foretelling what is to come, we can readily evaluate afterwards if their prophecy is fulfilled. However, when a person speaks today about moral behavior, generally they do not do so as a prediction of what will happen (except perhaps to say nothing bad will happen). They are presenting whether a behavior is right and/or wrong. Part of this discussion might include talking about consequences of our behaviors but that is not the same as predicting what will happen.

What we can ask ourselves is, when someone says something is good moral behavior and people live that way, does it make the world a better place. Ask yourselves, is the world a better place than it was fifty years ago? Why is there more violence? Why is there more political division? Why is it considered acceptable by many today to end life in the womb through abortion or to end a life through assisted suicide?

#2 Conformity/Non-Conformity with Tradition

I think this test is very important as people of faith. Is the moral teaching being discussed in line with what our faith has taught for over 2,000 years? If it goes *against* what Jesus taught, it gives reason to question it if not reject it. It is important to note that our *understanding* of what our faith teaches has grown and developed without abandoning or contradicting the “old” teaching.

We see this in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as told in chapters 5-7 of the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not abolish but to fulfill.*” Jesus does not reject what is in the Old Testament. He fulfills it by teaching us what it really means. For instance, in Matthew 5:21-26, He takes the Fifth Commandment, you shall not kill (without changing the commandment) and teaches us what it says about anger.

My point here is that what Jesus teaches is in accord with what God has taught in the past. When you hear someone offer moral teaching that is the opposite of what the Bible says, ask them how they reconcile what they say with what the Bible teaches. If they merely say what the Bible says is outdated, they are breaking with tradition. Others may speak of treating the person with love. We are indeed called to love our neighbor. Love means helping them to know the truth with kindness (see Ezekiel 3:17-21).

#3 Conformity/Non-Conformity with the Wishes, Views, and Expectations of the Audience

Here we ask if the person offering the moral guidance really believes what they are saying or if they are just saying what they think people want to hear. In the Old Testament, one might think

of the “guild prophets” who made their living based on their preaching. They often made more money when they preached what people wanted to hear.

If you read chapter 22 of First Book of Kings, you will see how the king consulted many prophets before going into battle. They all told him to go into battle and he would win because it is what he wanted to hear. He then consulted Micaiah who was known as a true prophet. Micaiah told him he would lose the battle.

In today’s world, there are some people who will say whatever they think people want to hear in order to sell their product or get elected. They go with what they think the majority wants. In a democratic society, majority is a very important concept. However, in morality, human beings whether a majority or not, do not determine right or wrong. Only God determines what is right and wrong. Our job, with the help of the Holy Spirit and a well-formed conscience to apply what God says to the world we live in.

#4 Conformity/Non-Conformity of the Prophet’s Message with What Other Prophets Say

Here we ask, does the prophet say anything new or are they simply repeating what others have said. Again, the agreement of a majority does not make it right. What I said about the events in 1 Kings 22 above shows that the majority was wrong and only Micaiah was truly a prophet of the Lord. On the other hand, having a different message does not necessarily make one right either. This would go against Test #2, Conformity with Tradition. One can see here where this test (#4) demonstrates what was said in the caveats above. We need to look at the context of the situation in light of all five tests.

#5 The Moral Test – Is the Prophet’s Own Life a Witness to What He/she Teaches

Jesus says, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them”* (Matthew 7:15-16).

We must ask is the person living a good life. If not, we must be careful how much we listen to them. They may still speak truth as those described by Jesus in Matthew 23:3, *“Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.”* The people of whom Jesus spoke here are the Scribes and Pharisees who are highly educated in the faith. Yet, they fell short of practicing what they preach, again demonstrating the need to apply all the tests together and to ask the Holy Spirit to help us discern the Truth.

One does not need to be highly educated in the faith to speak as a prophet. Amos is one of the prophets in the Old Testament. He was rejected by Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17) as one who made his living as a guild prophet. Amos replied, *“I am not a prophet, nor do I belong to a company of prophets. I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores, but the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’”* (Amos 7:14-15).

The most important question to ask is whether the person offering the teaching speaks as one sent by God. Or are they offering their own opinion or merely going along with where the general practice of society is going? The role of the Church is not to follow society by accepting what society says. Our Church is to lead society to do what God asks of us.

We do not get to pick and choose what we believe. We need to follow what the Lord commands. Let us pray we listen well and follow Jesus.

For further information see:

- My article, “Do We Listen to Our Conscience” online at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/conscience.html>.
- My video presentation, *Where Do We Go for Truth?* online at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---where-do-we-go-for-truth.html>