

Who is Really Offending You?

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There is an intriguing exchange that happens in 1 Kings 18:17 between King Ahab and Elijah the prophet. After a nation-wide search for the prophet, when Ahab finally catches up with Elijah, he greets him with these rather curious words, **'So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?'** The irony is so rich you could almost choke on it! Elijah has a reputation for being an incredibly faithful prophet who represented God in a powerful way at a dark time in Israel's history. Ahab, on the other hand, has a reputation for being a weak-willed king who was responsible for most of the widespread idolatry in Israel. So who was really the source of Israel's trouble?

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While the exchange between the king and the prophet is so bizarre that it is tempting to just laugh it off, there is a humbling lesson for all of us in it. The truth is that each of us occasionally miss God's message to us because of our sentiments towards the messenger God uses.

Turning Offence into Reverence

Hearing God's voice requires much more humility and reverence from us than we often anticipate. The most poignant example of this is when the very Word of God took on flesh. Jesus spoke the exact words of God, unmediated, from a human mouth. Nobody since Him has ever spoken words which so perfectly communicate the mind of God, and yet He too was regarded as a 'troublemaker' and the people of God rid themselves of Him.

If we want to hear God's voice and follow Him, we need to make peace with the fact that God's words will often take on human form. Our reverence and humility before God needs to drive us past our misgivings about the messenger and cause us to listen intently for the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through human lips.

Reasons We Take Offence

When we are confronted by people in church, there are many different reasons why we could take offence at what they say to us. It could be because I don't like what they are saying. Maybe it is the tone in which they speak to me. Possibly because my relationship with the person has a checkered history. It could simply be that their personality clashes with mine! These are all trivial things, but they can have massive implications if we dismiss the person as a 'troublemaker' and miss the voice of God speaking through them.

Sometimes God will even test how much we revere His words to us by speaking through a messenger to whom it requires *the most* humility to listen. By rejecting the words of God's appointed messenger (whoever they may be), you can inadvertently reject God's purposes for your life, and even invoke His judgement! (Mat 10:14,15)

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When God speaks words that are difficult to hear, it is only too easy to direct our hurt and pain at the person standing in front of us. It is in these moments that we need to pause and reflect on this question: '*Who is really offending me?*' Are we perhaps misdirecting our resentment towards the person when our issue is really with God?

Discerning God's Voice

One of the most vital skills for a follower of Christ to learn is how to discern the voice of God when it is 'clothed in flesh'. Unfortunately, we instinctively ask the **wrong questions** in these situations, such as:

- Do I agree with what this person is saying?
- How does what they are saying make me feel?

But if listening to God and obeying His voice are my primary concerns, then these questions are unimportant and can distract me from the real issue. The **better questions** to be asking are:

- Is God speaking to me?
- Is there any truth in what this person is saying?

When going through this process, I often feel very conflicted. If I take the time to listen, I may feel a resonance with the Spirit within me saying, 'Yes, it's true'. At the very same time, my heart and my mind can be screaming, 'No! Don't listen to them!' Sometimes I feel such a flood of emotions that I can't even discern the Spirit's voice. At times like these, I find it helpful to take the words I am weighing up to trusted spiritual leaders and to ask for their help in discerning what is true. Ultimately, what will determine how I respond is how much I revere God and how much I am willing to humble myself before Him.

Spiritual Litmus Tests

God has ordained that your spiritual family will be the litmus test which reveals how you truly regard Him. This is true in many areas of our lives. Here are some examples:

- The degree to which you **love your brothers** is the true measure of how much you love God (Mat 25:40, 1 John 4:20).
- The degree to which you **honour human authorities** reflects how highly you regard God's authority (Rom 13:1).
- The degree to which you **forgive others** reflects how much you appreciate everything for which God has forgiven you (Eph 4:32, Luke 7:47).

Ultimately, all of our efforts to discern God's voice when it comes clothed in human frailties will be richly rewarded by God, because we demonstrate how eager we are to respond to His voice. Sometimes the words of God will cut us deeply, but it helps to remember that those very same words will truly set us free.