

## Authentic and compelling voices

By [James Sledge](#)

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Diana Butler Bass was the preacher at the worship portion of a recent meeting of the National Capital Presbytery (the local governing body made up of pastors and elder representatives from congregations in D.C. and the surrounding areas). Prior to our meeting and worship, she also gave an extended presentation, "Where Is God? Spirituality, Theology, and Awakening," followed by a time of discussion.

During the discussion, she made a comment on how the priesthood of all believers is morphing into something else. This priesthood was an outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation and its ideas that all believers had direct access to God via scripture, a move away from notions of a church hierarchy controlling this access. But thanks to social media, we're now seeing a "priesthood of everybody." I suspect this notion is as frightening to Protestant institutions as the ideas of Luther and Calvin were to the church institutions of their day.

If you've spend much time on social media, you know that the quality of the priests there varies wildly. Of course that's true of all priests, the formally ordained sort and the all-believers sort. There are a lot of different versions of God and Jesus floating around on the Internet, not to mention all other manner of spiritual "helps." The same has long been true in churches and temples. Social media has simply given every single person who wants one a pulpit.

This cacophony of voices must surely be confusing to people hoping to hear a genuine word from God. How is one not firmly grounded in a particular tradition to make sense of the competing and sometimes totally antithetical voices? At that recent meeting, our presbytery voted "Yes" on changes to our denomination's constitution allowing for same-sex marriage, a somewhat anticlimactic event because the required majority of presbyteries have already voted in favor. Meanwhile Franklin Graham, the somewhat less kind and gentle version of his famous father, has said my denomination should no longer be able to call itself a church because of our willful sin.

Meanwhile the Internet priests weigh in. Many of the voices, both left and right, are more notable for their shrillness than anything else. How is God/Jesus ever to be heard through such mouthpieces? How is an authentic and authoritative word to be found amidst all these words?

These are difficult and troubling times for religious institutions, for denominations and congregations and seminaries and more. Sometimes it seems everything we've developed and counted on is coming apart. Not that this is a novel experience. Imagine what it must have felt like to be a church leader 500 years ago in the aftermath of Luther nailing his list on the church door. The church was splintering into countless churches, often in connection with political and nationalistic movements. The whole thing got so nasty and bloody that it also spawned the deist movement that gave rise to modern Unitarianism. You might say they got so disgusted by all the competing and arguing voices that they became their day's "spiritual but not religious."

But Christian faith not only survived. It changed and grew and thrived. Cherished ways of doing church did disappear, but faith in Jesus and the church, his body on earth, did not. I do not know just how Christian faith will change and grow and thrive this time, but I have no doubt that it will. Cherished ways of doing church will disappear, but the living body of Christ will persist.

And so the question for me is how those of us who love Christ and his living body on earth are to offer an authentic and compelling voice amidst all those other voices. The Gospels may offer a hint. They tell us that Jesus taught "as one with authority, and not as their scribes," a line that might get updated in our day to "and not as their learned clergy."

The Gospels don't really describe how folks recognized this authority. It apparently was an intangible thing that's hard to describe but that people know when they see it. I suspect the appeal of Pope Francis is a little like this. There is something authentic and compelling in his voice, so much so that even non-religious people have taken notice.

I think there's a lesson there. Speaking in a manner that is authentic and compelling won't come from getting all the facts or doctrines just right. It won't come from winning all the arguments or votes. And it won't come from demonizing the other, even when that other is indeed an enemy. But it may just come if we are known more for embodying Jesus than for other things that often define us. Perhaps we're

known for our shrill voice on social and political issues; perhaps we are so hidden behind church walls that we're known mostly for our buildings; perhaps we're so identified by our slick worship that we look like little more than a show. But what if we were known for acting like Jesus?

On that note, a quick mea culpa is in order. No one would be likely to confuse me with Pope Francis. So how do I need to let God work in me in order that I might better model Jesus? It starts there, I suppose.

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