

VISIONS AND DREAMS, WHO NEEDS THEM?

Dealing with people receiving “messages from the Lord”

Have you noticed how many religions got started by visions? Out of the blue someone had a vivid dream or a dramatic out-of-body experience, claimed he or she was receiving direct instructions from God and, hey presto, another religion was born.

People keep popping up today, too, claiming they’ve been given “messages from the Lord” through visions, dreams and voices in their heads.

What amazes me is how convinced they are it’s God speaking to them. But is it really God?

It’s a well-known fact, for instance, documented brilliantly in the movie ‘A Beautiful Mind,’ that the human mind can create people and events that seem utterly real, that aren’t real at all.

A person claiming a hotline to God, then, could in fact be a schizophrenic, whose premonitions, proclamations and prophecies are caused by nothing more than a chemical imbalance in the brain. Knowing that’s possible, can anyone say with certainty his visions are supernatural when the cause could be quite natural, like medication, mental illness, intense stress, or simply eating too much before bed?

The mind is a tricky thing, and it can be easily manipulated. A hypnotist, for instance, can also create visions in a person’s head and make people think all kinds of crazy things. And none of them are from God, either.

How can anyone state with absolute authority, then, that his visions are from God, when visions can be created without God being involved at all? There’s an element of doubt, surely, and good reason to be cautious when someone claims he’s had a vision or a message from God.

If you challenge a person who thinks he’s hearing messages from God, it gives good cause for doubt, too. Try it; ask him, or her, how they know for certain it’s God speaking. Don’t be surprised if the only answer they give is, “Because I know” - as if “I know” is the only authority needed!

But the question still remains: How do they know? Pushed a bit they’ll probably say, “Well, I know it’s God by the fruits.” But that’s no answer, either, because the fruits of all these so-called revelations from God are a confusing, differing mass of religious cults and self-proclaimed prophets, all of them a law to themselves in deciding what God’s will is.

The result is a tragic mess of warring religions, denominational splits, wild speculation, failed prophecies, arrogant know-it-alls, chronic self-deception and all too often, horrible disillusionment. I know, I spent 20 years in a cult led by a charismatic visionary who claimed he was receiving direct revelation from God. When it became obvious he was talking through his hat, it was devastating for me.

Fortunately, God himself provided the means for detecting a real message from him. He sent Jesus Christ with all the messages we’d ever need, and then confirmed his choice of messenger personally by bringing him back from the dead. So all we need do when someone says he or she has a vision or a message from God is compare it to the message of the one messenger we know for certain came from God, and if it agrees, great; if it doesn’t, ignore it.

Claiming visions and revelations from God won’t stop, of course, it’s a popular pastime. It’s a great attention-grabber and it gives average folks centre stage and the chance to create their own adoring groupies, or even a world-renowned religion. Unfortunately, visions and voices can also end up consuming a person’s imagination, leading to great pronouncements of one’s absolute authority as a prophet and dire warnings to those who “dare challenge the Lord’s anointed.” Talk about delusions of grandeur.

And when it comes to visions, dreams and hearing voices, who needs them anyway? We've already got all the messages from God we need, delivered in person by God himself when he was here on earth with us. The only vision we need, then, is a clearer vision of what he's already told us in his word. And to aid us in that quest, God promised us a Spirit helper who would teach us all we need to know (John 14:26). No spooky premonitions or wild prophecies, just plain, clear understanding of what Jesus taught.

Understanding this has freed my life up wonderfully. I have a clear guide for detecting if a "message from the Lord" really is of God, or not.

I can also tell when a charismatic visionary, or a self-proclaimed prophet, is talking through his hat.