We Believe! Therefore, We Speak

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In an article published last year in the Christian Century, a United Methodist minister expressed his opinion concerning recent calls for a renewed commitment to evangelism by the United Methodist Church (coinciding with the 200th year anniversary of John Wesley’s death). Characterizing those calls as simplistic and naive, he concluded that “Evangelism in the United Methodist Church will not work.” It will not work, he said, because in its present state it lacked some of the essential elements from the past, chief of which was a sense of urgency and passion. Several developments were cited as evidence of this void — from the “softened language” of “churched” and “unchurched” to replace the older terms of “lost” and “saved” (as well as other “powerful, biblical metaphors”), to a general disbelief among members in any kind of eternal judgement (certainly not eternal condemnation), and finally the kind of ambiguous values and lifestyles that render believers indistinguishable from unbelievers. In short, he contended that the evangelism of the past could not be recovered in the present because the beliefs that supported it had changed so significantly as to undermine its content and power to motivate. As I reflected upon his comments I realized that, despite the fact that his experience was not exactly parallel to ours in the Churches of Christ, his observations did raise one disturbing question: How much of our diminished fervor and commitment to evangelism in the Churches of Christ is attributable to our changing beliefs?

We Believe

In II Corinthians, chapter 4 the apostle Paul reflects upon the difficulties of being a Christian evangelist in spite of rather formidable obstacles. Paul is well aware of the criticism by others that he is too weak and unimpressive to legitimately claim to be an evangelist, but he counters that that is precisely what validates his ministry since his preaching proceeds from faith and not his eloquence or wisdom. He quotes, in verse 13, from a line in the Septuagint version of Psalm 115 — “I believed and so I spoke” and applies this principle to himself and others who, despite opposition and weakness, faithfully proclaim the gospel. Indeed, they do so precisely because of the content and intensity of their beliefs. His point in this passage is actually a corollary to Romans 10:17 (a very familiar verse to the evangelist). Just as faith is created in response to hearing the gospel proclaimed, and thus is not possible without such a proclamation, so the proclamation itself is motivated by the beliefs of the evangelist. It is precisely that relationship between believing and speaking which captures Paul’s attention and provides a helpful insight for us as well. For Paul, both the content of what we proclaim and the motivation to
proclaim it are bound up in what we really believe. I emphasize "really" because in our context it is too easy to presume that since we all use the same Bible we must all share the same basic beliefs about the message of the Bible or, at the very least, we believe all that the Bible proclaims. Because I share Paul's assumption that our motivation to proclaim is inherently linked to the content and depth of our own beliefs, I am persuaded that if we are to faithfully and enthusiastically proclaim the gospel we must continually re-examine our own beliefs.

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So What Do We Believe?

Any astute observer of society knows that rapid changes in philosophies and ideas are occurring constantly. As Shaun Casey observed in the last issue of Leaven, pluralism is here to stay and with it comes an influx of new perspectives and philosophies concerning the Bible and its message. Preachers and congregations alike struggle to evaluate and confront the ever-changing field of theology, from process to feminist to liberation. Theological education by its very nature is about re-evaluating what we already believe, with the inherent danger being that in the process of re-examination we sometimes jettison some of what is fundamental to the gospel message or, more subtly, undermine it with suspicion. One example of this is the general perspective on miracles in many scholarly circles today. Under the theological microscope the miracles of Jesus have been subjected to constant scrutiny and general suspicion for the last century. The result is that for many scholars, often some of the most prominent ones, the significance of Jesus' miracles are largely symbolic or theological as opposed to historical. By characterizing them as theological one can affirm their importance to the gospel message without having to comment or commit on the more personal question of whether or not they actually happened. In other words, it is not important whether Jesus actually had power over nature, but whether his followers believed that he did. Thus the miracle stories become dramatic, literary touches to enhance and reinforce the teachings of Jesus rather than "proofs" in any form. This explanation is very appealing to our rational mind since, after all, the miracle stories of the Bible do suspend the natural laws as we observe them.

It should come as no surprise then that this kind of scrutiny and suspicion should be directed against the greatest miracle of all — the resurrection. Increasingly, scholars have reinterpreted the resurrection of Jesus, choosing to emphasize, again, its profound theological significance while side-stepping the question of its historical reality. Thus, for many, the resurrection becomes no more than saying that the "cause lives on" (in much the same way one might say that the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. lives on in the fight for civil rights).

Obviously, to my way of thinking, there are serious problems with this perspective, the most obvious of which is that the resurrection was not proclaimed this way originally. In I Corinthians 15 Paul reminds his readers of the host of witnesses (over 500) who saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion and burial. For Paul this was not the mythical illusion of devoted followers, but an historical fact upon which he and thousands of others had staked their very lives. It is inconceivable to me that the disciples who walked with Jesus and witnessed the events of his life, including the death, burial, and resurrection might, after his tragic death, invent and spread the rumor that he was raised from the dead to enhance their own status and continue the movement. However, when persecution and threats of imprisonment and death ensue, it is inconceivable to me that these "eyewitnesses" would willingly suffer and die to perpetuate what they knew to be untrue.

Yet, nineteen centuries later the church, and particularly those who pursue higher education in theology, are continually confronted with the challenge of such an alternative interpretation which allows one to support and encourage a general belief in the resurrection and in Jesus without having to confront the specific challenge of affirming and defending the historicity of Jesus' resurrection to an increasingly skeptical church and society. This is too appealing to our rational instincts.

These are not the only challenges to our beliefs and thus our proclamation. They are but a broader paradigm shift in our society that significantly affects the message and proclamation of the gospel. A professor of theology at the graduate school I attended first enlightened me to this shift when, on the last day of an advanced course he imparted to those who would leave his class to preach one day this insight. He advised us to remember that for nearly nineteen hundred years after the birth of Jesus the world has lived by the question: "If God is just how can any be saved?" However, in the last century that question has changed to: "If God is love, how can any be lost?" If we hoped to effectively preach the gospel, he maintained,
we could not presume that our audience shared the same assumptions as those to whom the gospel was first preached. Nor could we presume that our audience understood the vocabulary and concepts of the gospel without some incisive interpretation by the preacher. Although our insistence in the Churches of Christ has insulated us somewhat from this shift, or at least slowed its progress, we have certainly not been immune to it.

It is evidenced in our increasing uneasiness with any preaching of “judgement to come” and specifically with its corollary terms, “lost” and “saved.” This reticence is understandable given some of our history of sectarian arrogance characterized by the notion that “we” were the only ones going to heaven. Embarrassed that too often our preaching shifted from following Jesus to following us many of us have tried to compensate for that error by avoiding all talk of future judgement, often prompted more by our insecurity than humility.

Thus we have uncritically embraced the terminology of the Church Growth movement to categorize people as either “churched” or “unchurched” in order to avoid the imprecise and often damaging presumption that those who attend a church other than the Church of Christ are automatically “lost.”

Unfortunately, while attempting to reject one uncritical assumption we may have fallen prey to another. That is the assumption that the terms “churched” and “unchurched” are but a “kinder, gentler” equivalent of the terms “lost” and “saved.” Let me point out that many who use these terms do so fully aware of the distinctions and do not regard them as equivalent. However, increasingly preachers, elders and church members are using them as equivalents while failing to appreciate the erosive effect this has on the proclamation of the gospel.

The terms “churched” and “unchurched” are primarily sociological. They reflect the social implications of a theological truth. Inherent in our salvation is our relationship both to God and the church. But both relationships have reference to what it means to be saved, not what it means to be “churched.” The call to the gospel is to those who, despite some degree of faith in God, have yet to translate that belief into a committed relationship to God, what Paul would call the “obedience of faith” (Romans 16:26), and therefore are “dead in their trespasses” and “blind” to god’s saving grace and wisdom. In short, they are “lost.” I raise this issue not to prompt some ill-conceived, sweeping call to return to the “old paths” of “hellfire and brimstone” preaching (a call that I find foolish and distasteful, but as a reminder of the serious and ultimate implications of what we believe and proclaim. As God’s “ambassadors” we are called to remember that however much we may try to address such personal and social problems as stress, money management or codependency from a Biblical perspective, our fundamental concern is the alienation of human beings from God, an alienation that without Jesus Christ will be eternal.

In recent years it has been distressing to me how often the Bible has been commandeered in bits and snatches of practical advice (through an endless succession of books, seminars, and videos) with less attention paid to addressing our culture with the fundamental claims of the gospel. There are times and places where one might reasonably assume that the basic problem of being alienated from God has become secondary or even irrelevant. As one minister said to me recently, “People just won’t buy it!” (an interesting metaphor). Thus the bits and snatches of practical wisdom from the Bible, divorced from the larger context, are gathered together to take their place as one more program of “self help.”

Properly understood, the reality of judgement is not simply a distasteful subject that people will not hear. In fact, I believe we do not speak of judgement for the same we reason we do not speak of death — in our hearts we know it is real but would rather not face it. It is curious to me that in a time when thousands of people are discovering true freedom from a variety of life-threatening addictions through the support of “anonymous” groups which emphasize accountability, we are silent on the subject of judgement. In these groups individuals who have failed miserably in various forms of professional therapy and “self-help” programs discover a power beyond themselves and recover a sense of purpose and direction in their lives through the support and accountability these groups afford. They do so, in part, by admission and through being made personally accountable for their failures. Who can help but be reminded of Romans 3:23 — “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

As I deal with the problems in my life and in the lives of others I do not find the notion of some accountability for our actions in the form of judgement to be the least bit unrealistic. What I do find amazing is the grace of God that reconciles us, in spite of our failures, and makes us both responsible and redeemed. Maybe
if we could recover the balance of judgement and mercy that is inherent in the gospel we would be more motivated to proclaim it, and others might recognize it as “good news.”

Finding Our Voice

Thomas Long has described evangelism as “faith finding its voice” (Preaching In and Out of Season, p. 77). If we are to find our voice we must continually struggle with the challenges, problems, and demands of faith in our own lives. We must speak from our beliefs. Ironically, this means that we must face our own doubts if we are to help others struggle with theirs. To face the fact that the miracles of faith, including the miracle of the resurrection, are outside our realm of experience and, therefore, at some level beyond comprehension is to better understand the nature of our faith.

Years ago, as a college student struggling through a crisis of faith, a professor helped to relieve my fear that all my doubts and questions would lead to the complete loss of my faith. He simply pointed out that rather than assuming I was losing my faith perhaps I should realize I was finding it. This was a breakthrough which gave me a completely different perspective on doubt. As Frederick Buechner once put it, “doubts are the ants in the pants of faith” (Wishful Thinking, p. 20).

This is not meant to enshrine our doubts, but to face them squarely. Facing our doubts will require us to analyze their nature, whether they are intellectual (“I’ve never actually witnessed a resurrection”) or emotional (“How could anyone be lost eternally”) or even volitional (“I believe in prayer, but I have not prayed for weeks”). Ours becomes the confession of the frightened father in the gospel who confessed to Jesus, “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Only then will we be in a position to “receive mercy and find help” in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Perhaps if we who preach would have more courage and confidence to face our own struggles of faith our preaching would sound less like “expert testimony” and more like that of an “eyewitness.” This gives our “voice” integrity.

As we are vigilant about the integrity of our own faith, so we must be vigilant in our interpretation and proclamation of our beliefs. It would be easy to conclude that since theology confronts us with so many challenges we must avoid theological inquiry. Theology, however, is simply the exercise of reflecting upon the nature and will of God. To dispense with theology is like throwing away your eye glasses because your perscription is wrong. What is required of us, especially those of us who preach, is not less theological inquiry, but a more faithful and precise inquiry. Because evangelism is inherently communication, language is a vital component in that endeavor. As my mother often said (in a different context), “Watch your language!” The language and metaphors of the Bible, particularly of the gospel, powerfully communicate the message of God’s grace and salvation. If we are to be proper stewards of this grace (I Pt. 4:10-11), we must be extremely precise in our interpretation and communication of this message as well. This will not allow us either simply to parrot the words of scripture with little attempt to help our audience understand those words nor to “simplify” the gospel in such a way that it is robbed of its truth and power.

Finally, we must resist the popular notion that certain aspects of the gospel are not relevant or must be reinterpreted in order to make the gospel more palatable to unbelievers. Although this idea promises to make evangelism easier and more successful, the end result is not the “kingdom of God.” As Rheinhold Niebuhr once wrote, “The practical difficulty of preaching the gospel is that it seems relevant to those people and to those generations to whom it is most relevant” (Judgement and mercy, p.132).