

*Easter Preaching as Peculiar Speech**

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When I emerged from seminary and began to preach, I thought that about the worst fate which could befall me as a preacher was not to be heard. It was my task, through the homiletical, rhetorical arts, to bridge the gap, the great communicative gap between speaker and listener. I now know that I had been taught to misconstrue the gap. The gap, the evangelical distance which ought to concern the preacher, is not one of time — the time between Jesus and us — nor is it one of communication — the space between speaker and listener. The gap that is the main concern of the evangelical preacher is the space between us and the gospel. Contemporary homiletical thought has focused upon style, rhetoric, or method when theology ought to be our concern. Our problem as preachers is not that we must render strange biblical stories intelligible to modern people but rather that these biblical stories render a strange God.

There are many reasons why we fail to communicate as preachers which have to do with our limitations as preachers. We don't communicate because we lack certain homiletical skills, because we don't prepare, because we don't know enough about the gospel, we misunderstand the human condition. But there are also many excellent reasons for our failure to communicate.

In sermon preparation, I quickly learned that some of my most unfaithful preaching arose in that moment when, after having studied the biblical text, I asked myself, "So what?"

That's where the trouble starts, in my homiletical attempt to answer the "So what?" question. Trouble is, I will invariably misconstrue the communicative gap between my people and the gospel. My answer to the "So what?" question will be limited by my present horizons, by conventional ideas of what can and cannot be. Evangelism, unlike apologetics, seeks transformation on the part of speaker and hearer.¹ Evangelism expects, promises transformation. Refusing to traffic in the conventional epistemologies of the present age and its beneficiaries, evangelism says that we will never know anything worth knowing without conversion.

...put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and...be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and...clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The images of stripping off clothes and throwing away our past are surely baptismal. Everything starts and ends with baptism. If our speech doesn't move uninformed people outside the church toward baptism, or at least move jaded, tired, unformed people inside the church to a renewal of their baptism, our talk is not evangelical. Apologetics is what we do when we don't want to risk being transformed. Apologetics is Campus Crusade's Josh McDowell coming to campus to talk about sex, then, in the last five minutes of his speech, dangling out Jesus as the answer to everything that ails us, including our sick sex. All that proves is that sex is more important than Jesus. We start with sex, bowing to its dominance in our lives, and then, after having established an intellectual community on that basis, slyly move our hearers to think about Jesus. Apologetics gives up too much intellectual territory

before the battle begins seeking mere agreement rather than transformation, intellectual detoxification.

This is my major disagreement with Leander Keck's *The Church Confident*.² Realizing that mainline Protestant Christianity is in big trouble, Keck calls upon us Protestant preachers to be more confident about what we have to say; to assert, ever more skillfully and confidently, fairly much what we have said before. Keck's is a justification, albeit a very skillfully done justification, for business as usual in the American church. The faith that he would have us assert more confidently is the pre-1940's faith that Americans (if church numbers are to be believed) appear to have relinquished. The mainline Protestantism which Keck defends fared quite well during times of American cultural confidence; after all, it was the faith engendered by that culture, the faith of mainline Protestant liberalism which so hoped to be of service to the culture. However, as the seventies began and increasing numbers of Americans realized that something was wrong in their nation, in their marriages and families, the self-confident liberalism of the mainliners wilted and people either deserted us in droves or greeted us with a yawn. As the culture disintegrated, a church which found its main justification for existence in keeping that culture afloat seemed pointless.

Besides, there are excellent reasons why we don't communicate. People bring many things with them in their listening to a sermon. Having been preconditioned, their ears are not in tune with the message, their understanding is blocked by metaphors which enable them to participate in the culture but which make it difficult for them to hear the gospel. We evangelists ought to throw the mantle of forgiveness over some of our homiletical failures. Desiring too desperately to communicate, at any cost, can lead us into apostasy. The odd way in which God has saved us presents a never ending challenge to those who are called to talk about it.

Recently, a woman who was a practitioner of something she called "deconstructivist art" spoke to my freshman seminar. Deconstructivist art involves, at least in her case, throwing hydrochloric acid on a canvas, while viewers watch the canvas rot due to the eating away of the canvas by the acid. This is alleged to be some sort of statement about our cultural situation.

After she showed the class examples of her art, some of the class said "this is the most wonderful thing we've ever seen."

However, the majority of the class felt totally excluded by her communication. Many of them were angry. "This is not art!" they blurted out. "This is demeaning to the whole notion of art. If this is art, anybody can do it."

She responded, "Anyone could do it, but the important thing is that *I* did it. The other important thing is that you don't know what I am doing."

She responded to their questions with grace and good humor. However, by the end of the class, most of the students were still unconvinced, uncomprehending of her work.

What impressed me as a Christian communicator was her absolute willingness to have them not understand her. She was utterly willing for them to walk out of the class, as befuddled by her art at the end of the class as they were when the class began.

"There are good reasons for not understanding this art. Don't be so hard on yourself," she reassured them. "This art is very demanding on the viewer. If I am really making a critique of the present structures of society, then if one is caught in one of those structures, or benefitting from those structures, there are good reasons why one should not be able to understand this art. In a way, your inability to comprehend this art is, in itself, a validation of what I'm claiming to be the aims of this art."

Can we preachers respect the gospel enough to allow people not to understand it? We are not responsible for all failures of communication. The gospel itself, in collision with the corruptions engendered by life in a democratic, capitalist society, bears some of the responsibility for people not hearing.

We preachers so want to be heard that we are willing to make the gospel more accessible than it really is, to remove the scandal, the offense of the cross, to deceive people into thinking that it is possible to hear without conversion. This is the great lie behind most of my apologetics, the deceit behind the current enthusiasm for “inductive” preaching—that it is possible to hear the gospel while we are still trapped in outmoded, culturally conditioned patterns of thought and hearing. How are we extricated from such patterns? How does the gospel manage to work such power among epistemologically enslaved folk like us?

I don’t know. It’s a miracle.

The Listener As King

In this respect we are heirs of Charles G. Finney, a lawyer called by God from his law practice in 1821 by “a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause.” Finney invented the “protracted meeting” for revivals, introduced the “anxious bench” for sinners, and developed the team approach to planning for a revival. “Revival is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophical [i.e., scientific] result of the right use of the constituted means,” said Finney in his 1835 *Lectures on Revivalism*. Today, we have forgotten that there was once a time when preachers had to defend their preoccupation with listener response to their Calvinist detractors who thought that the gospel was more important than its listeners.

I am here arguing that revivals *are* miraculous, that the gospel is so odd, so against the grain of our natural inclinations and the infatuations of our culture, that nothing less than a miracle is required in order for there to be true hearing. My position is therefore closer to that of the Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards, than to Finney. Edwards labored as pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts, for an uneventful seven lean years until his congregation experienced a series of what Edwards called “surprising conversions.” Edwards, who is one of the greatest minds American has produced, was wonderfully befuddled by this outbreak of religious vitality. In 1737 he wrote an account of the affair, delightfully called *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and Neighboring Towns and Villages*. I like to think that Edwards was such a great mind, had such an understanding of the peculiarity of the gospel, coupled with an awareness of the cognitive intransigence of his people, that he was therefore genuinely surprised when anyone heard, really heard and responded to his preaching. We ought also to be surprised.

The homiletical future, alas, lay with Finney rather than Edwards. The logical culmination of Finney’s theological weaknesses, the “new measures” for our day, are to be found not only in the inductive preaching proponents who measure all preaching on the basis of listener response, but also in the new genre of church marketing books typified by the work of George Barna, church growth strategist. In popular books for clergy with names like *Marketing the Church* and *User Friendly Churches*, Barna tells us that,

Jesus Christ was a communications specialist. He communicated His message in diverse ways, and with results that would be a credit to modern advertising and

marketing agencies. Notice the Lord's approach: He identified His target audience, determined their need, and delivered His message directly....He promoted His product in the most efficient way possible: by communicating with the 'hot prospects.'

Don't underestimate the marketing lessons Jesus taught. He understood His product thoroughly, developed an unparalleled distribution system, advanced a method of promotion that has penetrated every continent, and offered His product at a price that is within the grasp of every consumer (without making the product so accessible that it lost its value).³

In *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Stanley Hauerwas and I suggested that there was much atheism lurking behind some of our preaching, pastoral care, and church administration. Atheism is the conviction that the presence and power of God are unessential to the work of ministry, that we can find the right technique, the proper approach, the appropriate attitude and therefore will not need God to validate our ministry. If Jesus was the "communications specialist" which Barna claims him to be, why in the world did he waste so much time teaching "in parables" which few understood? Above all, if he was so good a communicator, why on earth was he crucified?

We must learn to preach again in such a way as to demonstrate that, if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is doomed to fall upon deaf ears. Our preaching ought to be so confrontive, so in violation of all that contemporary Americans think they know, that it requires no less than a miracle to be heard. We preach best with a reckless confidence in the power of the gospel to evoke the audience it deserves.

I find myself agreeing with Robin R. Meyers when he says,

"Preachers are too eager to make sure that everyone understands, that everyone gets it. This inevitably means that too much of the obvious is explained, and too little of the mysterious is described."

Yet I part company with Meyers when he contends that, "We are not using symbolic language to achieve some sort of conceptual precision, rather we are using metaphors to generate the insight that comes from recognizing common human experience."⁴ "Common human experience" doesn't exist and, even if it did, it should not be confused with the gospel. There are only different stories which evoke and engender various kinds of human experiences. The gospel is one of them, a story which we believe to be not only mysterious and interesting but also *true*. Church is the human experience evoked by the gospel. Preaching is not a means to evoke certain "common human experience" through the artful use of metaphor and simile. Preaching means to engender experience we would never have had without the gospel.

In Meyers' book, *Ears to Hear*, he speaks about preaching as if our challenge were mainly a problem of our inadequate use of rhetoric, a problem of style, delivery, method. His book is rather typical of the tendency within modern homiletics to fixate on communicative method rather than theological substance, a tendency which I pilloried in *Peculiar Speech* (see pp. 49 ff.). There is certainly much to be learned by preachers about rhetoric and method and Meyers' book is helpful. However, I am arguing that failure to hear is also based upon the nature of the gospel. Easter, as a divine assault upon human thought dominated by death, provokes misunderstanding. When Kierkegaard observed that "Truth is not nimble on its feet... it is not its own evangelist," perhaps he was indicating how large a task we have in communicating the

gospel in a culture of lies. The gospel itself shares some of the “blame” for our communicative failures, contending, as the gospel does, that the solution to what ails us lies somewhere out beyond our selves.

G.K. Chesterton once said that, if one is trying to communicate something to another person and the person says, “I don’t understand,” you will reach for some metaphor. You will say, “Well, it’s like....” Then, if the person still responds, “I don’t understand,” you will try another metaphor. If the person still does not understand, then you must say, “You don’t understand.”

More than that, I am arguing that bad preaching, as Meyers describes it, preaching so anxious that “everyone gets it” that it ends up expecting too much and saying too little, is often a factor of bad theology. We have so little trust in the power of the gospel, to evoke the listeners the gospel deserves, that we either simplify, simplify, reducing the gospel to a slogan for a bumper sticker, or else we poetically describe, describe, obfuscating the gospel with some allegedly “common human experience” which is not unworthy of Easter. People live in the grip of stories which are not the gospel, stories which cannot generate the life for which they deeply yearn. Therefore I agree with Walter Brueggemann when he says that “evangelism means inviting people into these stories [the gospel] as the definitional story of our life, and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways.”⁵

Easter As the Basis for Christian Preaching

The gospel is an intrusion among us, not something arising out of us. Easter is the ultimate intrusion of God. The gap between our alliances with death and the God of life as revealed on Easter is the ultimate gap with which gospel preaching must contend. The muddle of different ways of describing what happened at Easter within the gospels and epistles themselves is testimony to the cognitive dissonance created by a God who came back. Early Christians preachers groped for some language adequate to the task of telling what happened on Easter.

Easter is the embarrassment the church can’t get around. Yet in this embarrassment is the engine of our preaching. It is only because Jesus has been raised from the dead that I have confidence in preaching. It is only on the basis of the Risen Christ’s return to his disheartened followers after Easter that I presume that he has made me an agent of gospel subversion through preaching. If God did not triumph over Caesar and all the legions of death of Easter, then God will never triumph on Sunday in my church over *The Wall Street Journal* and Leo Buscaglia.

I don’t preach Jesus’ story in the light of my experience, as some sort of helpful symbol or myth which is helpfully illumined by my story.⁶ Rather, I am invited by Easter to interpret my story in the light of God’s triumph in the resurrection. Only because we worship a resurrected Lord, can we risk preaching. Our claims for preaching have little to do with a savvy utilization of various contemporary rhetorical insights, rather our claims arise from our very peculiar convictions about a very particular God. The essential patience required of preachers, freedom from homiletical anxiety over the reaction of our listeners, is possible only if in fact Jesus did rise from the tomb.

As Rowan Williams says,

...the Christian proclamation of the resurrection of the crucified just man, his

return to his unfaithful friends and his empowering of them to forgive in his name offers a paradigm of the “saving” process; yet not only a paradigm. It is a story which is itself an indispensable agent in the completion of this process, because it witnesses to the one personal agent in whose presence we may have full courage to “own” ourselves as sinners and full hope for a humanity whose identity is grounded in a recognition and affirmation by nothing less than God. It is a story which makes possible the comprehensive act of *trust*....⁷

I wish that I might preach in such a way as to require a miracle, a resurrection in order to be heard. I wish that I might preach in such a way as to demonstrate my outrageous trust in the continuing reality of Easter, my utter dependence on God’s inclination to work the unexpected. So many of the Easter narratives end with the command to “Go, tell.” We may go and tell, not only because we now have, after Easter, some news to tell, namely, that Jesus shall reign, but also because, after Easter, we have the means to tell principally because the Risen Christ continues to work life out of death in us wherever this story is faithfully told.

NOTES

*Portions of this article are adapted from my *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1994).

¹ See Stanley Hauerwas’ criticism of apologetics in William H. Willimon and Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers: Evangelism in Today’s World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 1-15.

² Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993). Keck dismisses my book (with Stanley Hauerwas) *Resident Aliens* as “inappropriate for the mainline churches,” 76. In this book, I continue to bet that Keck is wrong in his belief that the mainline churches are “tone deaf to such a summons,” 75. In this respect, I am more confident about mainline American Protestantism than Keck. I really do believe that we are capable of being so faithful (rather than so confident in the theology and style of our recent past) that Americans might again find us to be interesting.

³ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1988), 50. For an extensive, evangelical critique of Barna and the entire church marketing movement, see Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992). Walter Brueggemann’s corrective on Barna’s type of “church growth” is helpful here:

“...evangelism is related to church growth, related but in no way synonymous. In speaking of evangelism, one must speak of church growth, but only at the end of the dramatic process, and not any sooner. Evangelism is never aimed simply and solely at summoning people to new, liberated obedience to the true governor of all created reality. The church is a modest gathering locus for those serious about the new governance. There must be such a gathering...because the new governance is inherently against autonomy, isolation, and individualism. The church grows because more and more persons change allegiance, switch worlds, accept the new governance and agree to the unending and difficult task of appropriating the news in practical ways. ‘Church growth’ misrepresents evangelism, however, when the church is allied with consumerism, for then the church talks people out of the very obedience to which the news summons us.” Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 45.

⁴ Robin R. Meyers, *With Ears to Hear: Preaching as Self-Persuasion* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 79. The problem with Meyers’ book is not simply its overreliance on Fred B. Craddock’s *As One Without Authority*, but its rather shocking thesis that, “Self-persuasion theory rests on one very simple but central premise: the messages we generate for ourselves are more authoritative than those from an outside source. This clear and decisive break with classical rhetoric locates persuasion at the ear of the listener, not at the mouth of the rhetor. And there exists a substantial body of research to back up the claim that when it comes to authority, the holiest of trinities is Me, Myself, and I,” 49. As a wonderful statement of the uphill battle to be waged each Sunday by the evangelical preacher, I can do no better than this. As

a basis for homiletical theory, such a thesis must be rejected on the basis of the peculiarity of trinitarian faith.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives*, 10.

⁶ I fear this is what David Buttrick comes close to in his description of preaching Mark 16:1-8 as “symbol.” *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 399-404. Yet Buttrick’s discussion of the resurrection and preaching on pp. 450-451 of his *Homiletic* certainly seems to confirm what I am claiming about preaching’s linkage to Easter.

⁷ *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 49.