

“What Does This Mean?” “What Shall We Do?” Pentecost, Practices, and Preaching

Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

On a recent ABC News Special, “In the Name of God,” Peter Jennings interviewed John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Christian Fellowships. The first time Wimber went to church, he expected dramatic things to happen. After three Sundays, however, he was frustrated. So, following the service, Wimber went up to an official-looking man and asked him, “When do they do it?”

“Do what?” the man replied.

“The stuff,” Wimber answered.

“What stuff?”

“The stuff in the Bible.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, multiplying loaves and fish, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That stuff.”

“Oh,” the man replied apologetically, “we don’t do that. We *believe* in it, and we *pray* about it. But we don’t *do* it.”

“What Does This Mean?”

The episode related by John Wimber stands in contrast to the circumstances under which Peter began his sermon on Pentecost morning. Rather than having to explain that “we don’t do that,” Peter instead has to defend the congregation against charges of drunkenness. “[People] of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning” (Acts 2: 14b-15, NRSV). This is certainly not the kind of sermon introduction one usually hears from the pulpit of mainline churches in the United States. Indeed, when was the last time a preacher began a sermon with the assertion that, contrary to all appearances, the congregation was not drunk? Yet, this is precisely how Peter begins his Pentecost sermon to the Jews from every nation gathered in Jerusalem: “These are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.”

Peter’s introduction, however, is not just a catchy attention grabber. Indeed, Peter doesn’t even need to get his hearers’ attention; the life of the community of faith has already done that. Peter’s homiletical introduction is a response to the interest stirred up among outsiders because of the dramatic work of the Spirit among the disciples: “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” The work of the Spirit in the church creates a people who are so interesting and perplexing that outsiders come running and ask, “What’s going on here?” Or they respond in the only categories their culture gives them to describe such an odd people: “They’re just drunk.” For many churches, such an occurrence is as unusual as Peter’s “snappy sermon starter.” When was the last time outsiders gathered around one of our congregations and were amazed and perplexed, lacking categories to make sense of the odd events and the strange life

within the community of faith?

Peter's Pentecost sermon is inseparably related to the odd life—the “stuff”—of the community of faith. The pattern runs like this: Initially there is the powerful work of the Spirit creating a peculiar people; there is the odd communal practice of discipleship. Then follows Peter's sermon, which describes what is going on in the community through the work of the Spirit poured out by Jesus. This pattern continues in the following chapter in Acts. On their way up to the temple, Peter and John encounter a man lame from birth asking for alms. Having neither silver nor gold to give the man, Peter heals him in the name of Jesus Christ, whereupon the man begins walking around the temple praising God. The people who saw the man “were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him,” and they all “ran together” to Peter and John, “utterly astonished” (3: 10-11). Then, and only then, Peter addresses the people in order to describe to them what has happened to the man (3: 12-16).

In Acts 3, as in the story of Pentecost, utter astonishment follows the practice of discipleship, and this astonishment becomes the occasion for preaching. The proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ *follows* the odd life of the Christian community and describes the source and nature of that life for all who wonder, “What does this mean?” Whereas most of us usually think of preaching as stirring up congregations to more faithful discipleship, the texts in Acts remind us that the reverse movement—from practice to preaching—is equally important. Peter's sermons embody a “practice-description” model of proclamation.

In this model preaching becomes “description” or, better, “redescription” of the strange life of the community of faith, which has captured people's interest. This is precisely the move that Peter makes in his Pentecost sermon. The people of Jerusalem simply do not discern the categories or the “story” that will rightly describe the odd events that are taking place. Confronted with Pentecost, the cultures of the world can only reply, “What does this mean?” or “They are filled with new wine.” So Peter dismisses these descriptions and provides a counterstory within which the events can truthfully be described: “No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel,” Peter begins. Then he proceeds to tell the story of God's promises to Israel, which lead to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and culminate in Jesus' eschatological outpouring of the Spirit, who is at work in what the people see and hear. Only within this story can the events of Pentecost be truthfully described.

Acts 2 presents an extraordinary challenge for the community of faith: to live in such a way that our life together makes no sense if the peculiar God of Israel and Jesus is not actively at work in the world today.¹ The text also offers a distinct challenge for preachers: to dare to describe the church and the world through the biblical story, which shapes the “peculiar speech” of the church.² Indeed, Acts affirms that this peculiar life and peculiar speech are inseparably related.

Apart from the church's peculiar speech—its distinctive way of describing itself, God, and the world—the church may not grasp the significance of its own strange practices. In fact, the church may already be engaging in odd practices that call for daring redescription through the peculiar story of God in Jesus, the Messiah. One of the significant tasks of contemporary preaching is to redescribe theologically the seemingly “common” practices of the church, usually in contrast to the descriptions offered by the culture. For example, American culture would describe the welcoming of a new member into the church through baptism as the addition of an individual to

a voluntary institution, which is a collection of individuals. All too often the church simply adopts this description when it welcomes new members. The preacher's task, however, is to redescribe the practice of baptism as an episode in the ongoing story of God's active gathering and building up of an eschatological people who carry forward Jesus' story in and for the world. Such repeated redescriptive use of the church's peculiar speech is vitally important for building up "a visible people who have listened to a different story from that of the world."³

Through such redescription of the church's practices, believers also begin to see the character of the world in a truthful light. When the Eucharist is regularly described as a meal where barriers are broken down between races, classes, and genders, Christians can begin to see the world (including, too often, the world within the church itself) as a place of domination where these barriers distort and corrupt human relationships. In this way the redescription of the church's practices inevitably includes a redescription of the world, which shapes the church's service and resistance to the world.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have stated very well the importance of such redescription for the church.

We are suggesting . . . that it is the task of those committed to the theological enterprise to develop the linguistic skills that can help congregations better understand the common but no less theologically significant activities that constitute their lives.

We suspect that much of the difficulty of current church life, and our corresponding theology, is that we have not paid serious attention to how hard it is rightly to understand the common things we do as Christians—such as pray, baptize, eat meals, rejoice at birth, grieve at illness and death, reroof church buildings. Lacking the ability to describe theologically the significance of these activities, we distort what we do by resorting to descriptions and explanations all too readily provided by our culture. Any explanation is to be preferred to no explanation.⁴

Our preaching will become more faithful and empowering when we learn once again, like Peter, to describe church and world, not in the culture's categories, which cannot make sense of Christian discipleship, but in terms of the story of Jesus—the church's "peculiar speech."

"What Shall We Do?"

Acts 2, however, does not end with Peter's sermon. Rather, the disciple's preaching calls forth another question from his hearers: "What shall we do?" Significantly, the question is not, "What shall we believe?" Peter's hearers rightly discern that the Christian faith is not primarily about beliefs or ideas, but about a way of living; the Christian faith is truth that is *done*. Peter's audience realizes that if his sermon is right, life lived according to the customs of the day makes no sense at all. If, as Peter has proclaimed, God has poured out the Spirit on the gathered followers of the crucified Jesus, if the "last days" have begun (2: 17), if God has raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord and Christ (2: 22-35), and if the "pangs of death" no longer hold ultimate sway (2: 24), then life lived according to the presuppositions of the "old

age” is nonsense. “What shall we do?” is the right question for believers to ask in the face of a world turned upside down. It is a question rooted in the awareness that our social practices, our way of organizing life together, are the very “stuff” of faith.

In response to this question, Luke provides the extended description of the life of the community of faith in Jerusalem at the end of Acts 2. Luke intends the readers of Acts to understand the community described here not as a historical anomaly, but as the goal for Christian gatherings everywhere. Luke describes the odd practices that provide the soil in which faithful preaching grows. A careful, ongoing engagement with these practices is critical for a “practice-description” approach to preaching.

The practices Luke describes run counter to the practices of a world convinced of its fundamental alienation from God. When humans no longer trust God or each other, there are certain basic social practices in which we are likely to engage. As the early chapters of Genesis depict so well, our sense of alienation and insecurity leads us to seek our own forms of security, both social and personal. We build walls, both physical and emotional, to protect ourselves from a hostile world, and we engage in acts of exploitation and violence against nature and each other.

The early Christians apparently read the opening chapters of Genesis as a description of the symptoms of the Fall—that is, as a description of the social practices that arise in correspondence with a worldview dominated by the realities of sin, death, alienation, and violence. However, they looked upon the “last days” as the time in which God would restore creation to its intended order. Reconciliation—between God and humankind, between humankind and the created world, and between humans themselves—would be the sign of God’s presence among them.⁵

The early Christians in Jerusalem operated out of this Spirit-empowered, “last days,” Christ-filled imagination. This peculiar imagination is embodied in the practices described at the end of Acts 2. The first practices Luke describes are repentance and baptism, which are tied to the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit (2: 38). Repentance is not merely the renunciation of individual sins, but implies ongoing dissociation from practices congruent with a broken creation. Repentance involves renouncing the power of alienation and sin over us; it involves living no longer in the shadow of death, but in light of the cross and resurrection. We repent of that which we no longer need in order to live, of that which stands in opposition to what we recognize now to be the real truth about our lives, and especially the real truth about God. To use an overused phrase, repentance is a “paradigm shift,” rooted in the recognition that we need no longer spend our lives alone and separated from God, driven to secure our futures through domination and violence. When we know God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, we need no longer engage in the social practices that we relied upon to negotiate a fallen creation. Repentance is the first step, and continuing requirement, for a transformed imagination.

Repentance is integrally tied to baptism. Baptism is the social practice that marks our transition from the world of sin and death, the realm of fallen creation, to the world of a merciful and reconciling God. The early Christians practiced baptism in dramatic ways that marked a clear transition from one social space or realm of existence to another.⁶ Paul regards baptism as an act that issues in transformed relationships, especially in the fellowship that corresponds to God’s original intention for creation (Gal. 3: 26-28). In the world of first-century Mediterranean society, such fellowship was unthinkable apart from the transformed imagination that came with the telling and

practice of the story of Jesus. Baptism was the embodiment of the Christian's participation with Christ in his death and resurrection. It was the very moment of the new creation.

Repentance and baptism are thus the initial social practices into which Peter invites his hearers on Pentecost. Today as well, these practices remain central to the renewal of the church. When the church becomes a countercultural community of repentance and recaptures the radical character of baptism, people may once again come in amazement and wonder, "What does this mean?" And faithful preaching will once again be empowered.

Repentance and baptism, however, were only the beginning of the transformation of the early Christians' life together. The last six verses of Acts 2 (vs. 42-47) describe the daily life of the transformed community. Although many of the social practices mentioned here may strike us as relatively mundane, for the earliest Christians such matters as daily fellowship, breaking bread from house to house, and partaking of food with glad and generous hearts were anything but "ordinary."

The world of the first Christians was wracked by violence and distress. Jewish citizens in large cities such as Antioch, where Paul began his missionary journeys, lived in "quarters," separated from fellow citizens. Even in Jerusalem, the common sense about matters of space and privilege, and especially about the nature of the "household," made it very unlikely that folks from differing households, even Jewish households, would eat together on a regular basis. Households were competing entities, not groups oriented to fellowship. Social engagements between households were occasions for competition and quests for "honor" in which there were always clear winners and losers. The church's practices of fellowship self-consciously challenged the social commonplaces and the typical imagination of the household.

The church's mealtime practices were equally peculiar. In that culture the evening meal, in particular, was one of the more important occasions for social theater in the ancient world. A rich householder would often stage a dinner for those whose favor he was seeking to gain. The meal was designed to display one's own wealth and status ostentatiously, and to honor the guest for the sake of anticipated future rewards. An important element at many of these meals was the presence of persons of lesser honor and status, who would be seated at separate tables and served lesser quality food, all as a way shaming them in order to accentuate the honor of those in the chief seats. All of this was done in dining areas open to the streets, so that passersby could witness and comment upon the affair.

In contrast to this, the early Christians reclaimed the mealtime as the preeminent occasion to honor God (2:46), and apparently dined together in ways that crossed the typical social barriers of the day. Paul's warning to the Corinthian Christians that they were partaking of the Lord's Supper in ways reminiscent of pagan tables, and thus not practicing the Lord's table at all (1 Cor. 11: 7-34), indicates that Christian mealtime was to be a time of social reintegration and reconciliation, rather than a time of alienation and social violence. In other words, the Lord's Supper was an occasion wherein Christians self-consciously took over an everyday social practice—a practice rooted in fallen imaginations—and transformed it into an embodiment of God's new reality. As a form of social theater, Christian mealtime was a radical, embodied form of proclamation (1: Cor. 11:26), which nurtured the church's oral preaching.

Today, mealtime implicitly serves a similar function as social theater. At a recent

workshop on racism, the leaders asked the participants how many times we had eaten in the home of a person of another race. The answers were discouraging: once, twice, never, etc.—all from people who decry racism. If the same question had been asked in relation to class—“How many times have you eaten a meal in the home of a person of a different class from yourself?”—the numbers might have been even lower. As in the world of the early Christians, so today our eating habits reveal and enact our basic convictions even more powerfully than our expressed beliefs.⁷ Racism and classism are alive and well in our table practices. Consequently, as the church today, following the early Christians, embodies an alternative to these practices, people may gather around in amazement and ask, “What’s going on here?” And our preaching may be empowered in the process.

Finally, Luke mentions a social practice of the Jerusalem community that has always been regarded, at least among modern Christians in the West, as disturbing, even embarrassing. “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need” (2: 4-45). Typical strategies in approaching this text include simply reading over it, as if it didn’t exist, or treating it as a historical anomaly (a onetime occurrence necessitated by famine or some other crisis in Jerusalem), or dismissing it as the product of the early Christians’ expectation of Jesus’ immediate return.

Rather than explaining away this peculiar practice, however, it is important to recognize that the sharing of possessions was the logical social consequence of the early Christians’ repentance of the power of this world and their baptism into the Spirit, just as surely as was their radical table fellowship and their devotion to the apostles’ teaching. When Jesus inaugurates his mission in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), he specifically mentions that he has been anointed to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, the Jubilee, when the land would be returned to its original owners, debts would be canceled, and slaves set free (Leviticus 25:8ff). Because the leaders and land owners of Israel did not fully trust God, the Jubilee was never practiced and eventually passed over into the realm of messianic hope and imagination. Jesus, however, proclaimed the Jubilee in reality, and the Spirit-filled Pentecost Christians put it into practice when they engaged in the sharing described in Acts. Without a doubt, this social practice of sharing made waves among the people of Jerusalem.

Similarly, in contemporary American culture, where people view their possessions in private, individualistic terms and will not even disclose their income or their giving to other church members, the early Christian practice of sharing turns our cultural presuppositions on their head. Were the church today to take seriously this practice, people might have yet another reason to look with amazement at the community of faith and wonder, “What does this mean?” Then again, out of this odd practice, the church’s peculiar speech might ring with clarity and vigor.

At a time when preachers often seek to enliven the pulpit through various homiletical techniques—creative metaphors, moving stories, new forms—Luke suggests that power and conviction may return to the pulpit when sermons emerge from peculiar communities of faithful discipleship. Peculiar life and peculiar speech go together. Rather than simply assuming that effective preaching renews the church, we need also to recognize that the transformed practices of the church can renew the pulpit. Repentance and baptism, radical (eucharistic) table fellowship, and the sharing of possessions offer a good place to start today, just as they did in the early church.

Notes

¹ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 86

² The phrase, "peculiar speech" is borrowed from William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992)

³ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, "Embarrassed by the Church: Congregations and the Seminary," *The Christian Century* (Feb 5-12 1986): 120

⁴ *Ibid.*, 119

⁵ Many of the hymns and creeds the early Christians used in their worship assemblies announce and celebrate these very images of reconciliation and restoration. See Ephesians 2:11-22, Colossians 1:15-20. On the importance of the Genesis narratives for the New Testament, see Paul Minear, *Christians and the New Creation: Genesis Motifs in the New Testament* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)

⁶ On the dramatic character of early Christian baptisms and their relation to the new creation, see Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 150-157; William H. Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, A Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1980), 15-21; and Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 35-53

⁷ Thanks to Nibs Stroupe and Inez Fleming, the workshop leaders, for this insight. Their book, *While We Run This Race: Confronting the Power of Racism in a Southern Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), not only provides an important exploration of racism in the United States, but also offers guidelines for ways the church may live as an alternative.