

## **Confessing Christ in a Creedless Culture** **Changing the Subject**

By Dr. Joy J. Moore

It is often difficult to enter into a conversation that has gone on long before your arrival. Sometimes it is difficult because we have not heard the underlying concerns that drive the rhetoric and we jump in on an incidental point. Other times it is difficult because we have our own agenda and make assumptions that the other participants are wrong, ignorant, or by chance just waiting for our brilliant and novel ideas. I want to suggest another challenge that doesn't eliminate the previous, but does require an additional risk of responsibility. Today's United Methodists need to recognize that some conversations necessitate a change of the subject.

### **The nature of our conversations**

The opening scene from *The Fellowship of the Rings* includes these lines: "Much that once was, is lost, for none lived who could remember it. Some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History became legend. Legend became myth." So it is with Christian confession today. This is not simply a United Methodist problem. Having forgotten the faith once entrusted to the saints, Christians seek tips toward happiness (*chicken soup for the soul*), techniques for success, and texts that provide rules for life. From mainline denominations to independent communities, Christians today lack the capacity to express the biblical revelation of God's activity in human history as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ.

The way we speak of God has changed. A generation ago, the key spokesperson for Christianity was an evangelist. The success of Billy Graham crusades and evangelistic out-reach led to so-called Christian organizations that provide principles for leadership, guides toward political leadership, and deistic therapeutic moralisms which told us how to live based on the observations of science, sociology, and psychology. The voices of Christian organizations speak in market-driven soundbites without ever describing the activity of God revealed in Scripture. Armed with tips, techniques, and tools, God's transforming presence is overshadowed by human ingenuity and productivity.

*No longer is the key voice of Christianity a witness to the Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Assuming we already know this God but apparently recognizing the failure of our encounter with God to be transforming, we trade the proclamation of God for therapeutic instruction and community formation around political issues. We must change the subject to introduce the world to the Creator of the Universe.*

Because – this is not a test. It is a real life. We have been given more than instructions on what to do and where to go. We must stop quoting texts from Scripture like contestants on the *Weakest Link* and rehearse the revealed activity of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ. There is a need to speak of the particular God narrated in Christian Scripture. And the cloud of witnesses called Church, through the summaries of the ecumenical creeds, in light of the Christ event, have articulated the God made known in Jesus Christ as the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But how do we get to know this God?

Admittedly, we speak to a generation of people who have adopted the Cartesian quest for self-fathering. Descartes believed he could dispense with everything of tradition and begin with his own thoughts. "I think, therefore, I am." In this moment of self-fathering, humanity became orphan without heritage or history. But Descartes was so shaped by a theo-centric reality he immediately thought of God. It is the followers of Enlightenment that have thus continued arrogantly with our own rendering of reality. We speak to a generation far removed from Descartes theo-centric world. Instead, because of this Cartesian quest, we live in an anthropocentric world without tradition, history, or parents. This orphaned generation are seekers whose lives have not been substantially shaped by a canonical worldview. Therefore, our arguments cannot be sustained by principles, techniques, therapeutic or market-driven consumeristic arguments.

The on-going exchange of rhetoric between the right and the left, conservative and liberal, ins and outs, often allows us to think we are doing something to bring the church together. Indeed our consciousness is jarred by examinations of lacking fiscal accountability, political irresponsibility or immorality - whether expressed as abortion or war. But the rhetoric on the right too often fails to speak about racist views of society and the reality of privilege. At the same time, on the left, the discussion minimizes regard for faithful expression of Wesleyan Christianity. Our conversations reflect a theology manipulated by ideological concerns. Seeking to speak as gay Christians or non-North American Christians or Republican Christians (or whatever the adjective before Christian is) has obscured consideration of Christian speech as communication of the Bible as a whole and its particular revelation of God. We make truth claims, which fail to communicate Christian witness because our concern is to be right, rather than bear witness to the God revealed in Christian Scripture.

### **Silencing the Church**

I have said before, the voices most heard are the extremes of our denomination -- through caucuses and publications. But both seem to be heard only as sustaining a discussion of personal preference, political

domination, or profit-driven interests. We speak of civil rights, rather than God's righteousness. We validate engaging in war on the ones who do not know the Prince of Peace, rather than demonstrating God's peaceable kingdom. We design church services that welcome the non-believer, rather than offer opportunities for the people of God to rehearse the acts of God revealed in Christian Scripture. In the loud voices of politics, therapeutic moralism, and market-driven ministry, we have silenced the witness of the church to the Creator God. Nationality, employment, marital status or a host of non-essentials have replaced the tradition, reason and experience of the historical Church.

### **The need for a Christian Witness**

This generation has been shaped by narratives of gender, race, economics, psycho-analysis, scientific rationalizing and nation-state politics. Instead of reading the world through the lens of Scripture, we read Scripture through the lens of modern reasoning. The many stories of our postmodern culture raise questions for the Christian witness. We can no more offer pseudo-moralisms of the 19th century than uncensored expressions of personal experience -- both support an arrogant cultural imperialism, one modern and the other postmodern. Each generation must address the challenge of what exactly United Methodist Christianity proclaims for the existing culture. This is the question that when answered will shape our practices.

Instead of affirming the distorted reality of our post Genesis 3 world, we who have encountered the Christ are challenged to return to a pre-modern proclamation of the gospel for building up the church as agents of change in society. Our task is to counteract the amnesia that undermines so much of contemporary Christian expression. A forgetfulness that the called out community of the church are a glimpse of the reign of God that will ultimately be a reality for the universe.

It is the Christian hope, and a Wesleyan distinction, that holds a confidence that God is faithful to complete the work started when humanity was given the birthmark *made in the divine image*. The lifestyle of Christians is to live the story we tell: The Creator of the universe, the God of the children of Abraham and Sarah, the One who raised Jesus from the dead, is reconciling the world to the original design of a place of justice, righteousness, and peace. Sanctification can be practiced in the habits of holiness; the failures and unfaithfulness of yesterday can be forgiven; and the people of God can live as transcripts of the Trinity – image bearers of God.

### **Reframing the Discussion**

The question for contemporary United Methodists is not does the bible say something about a given issue. The question is how do we live in

light of the witness to God's reconciling work made evident in Jesus Christ so that the world can glimpse the justice of God? The discussion will necessarily include:

- √ In what ways can we support the denominational institution so that ministry happens in the local context?
- √ How does Christian marriage demonstrate biblical holiness?
- √ How do we guard our expressions of faith against the contamination of triumphalist theology that serves a market-driven imperialistic nation-state?
- √ How do we diminish the temptation to continue the modern practices of compartmentalization and division evident in denominational splits, divorce and classism?
- √ In what ways can we demonstrate to the culture that among Christians, distinctions such as race, gender, economic status, educational achievements, political preferences, or marital status are of no consequence?

To have these conversations requires everyone to remain at the table, to intentionally listen to one another, and to speak in a voice that concentrates the discussion to the church practicing a faithful witness to God's reconciling acts made evident in the message of Jesus that the Kingdom has come. It is not a conversation about numbers or diversity. We are a story-formed people. Rather than principles and data we have this revelation as a catalyst for insight which brings coherence and makes correlations happen. Much Christian debate about moral issues makes the mistake of concentrating on what the standards ought to be rather than on how they are to be discerned and implemented. We live out of a perspective that says this we believe, and therefore, so we live.

Interpretation presupposes an engagement with the entire biblical narrative. Our understanding of the world is not best an observation of the distortions of the fall, but the intentions of the Creator.

We are a connective community, in a way that witnesses to God's design from humanity to be transcripts of the Trinity rather than individuals. Bill Bright agrees that if renewal occurs within the United Methodist Church, renewal can occur in the United States. Therefore, we must stay at the table, and change the subject of the conversation. The world no longer finds hope in creeds, confessions, or legal mandates. You cannot glimpse the kingdom from the law. The world needs to see a glimpse of the kingdom in our existence. This will provoke them to join an unending conversation.

A conversation that begins with the revelation of the Creator for a reality that is good. It is a conversation that makes known the testimony of the people of God, that God is good, and God hasn't given up on the world. If we renege our responsibility to tell God's story, where else will it be told? How else can it be heard? I can learn about Virginia Tech,

Middle East politics and racism from CNN live. I can get management strategies and 7 habits for success from the secular market. The only place to receive the revelation of God, the faith entrusted to the saints, is from the people of God telling God's story as rehearsed in Christian Scripture.

Our conversations, now available in forms other than the Discipline, Book of Resolutions and archived journals, are 'heard' in newsletters, blogs, CNN soundbites, and MP3 downloads. The world, which reads the editorials and reports of General Conference, does not need to be entertained by shrill debates between literalists and process theologians. They should be able to recognize a distinguishable perspective from the people called United Methodist. The world will only hear our story if they see it enacted in our own community. We have much to articulate that speaks an alternative to the deterministic, risk-taking, hopelessness so evident in contemporary culture.

By speaking in its own voice, Christianity offers something radically different and fresh in the world of ideas. In the cultural conversation about spirituality and religion, how should United Methodist change the subject?

*Dr. Joy J. Moore is Assistant Professor of Preaching at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky. An elder in the West Michigan Conference, she serves on the General Commission of Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns for the United Methodist Church and the National Steering Committee of the Confessing Movement.*

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