

Claiming—and Earning!— Freedom for Our Preaching

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Let your discourses be the fruit of diligent study; for thus only will they bear the review of your own conscience, and receive the approbation of judicious hearers. The incoherent rhapsodies, and occasional flashes of the extemporaneous preacher, please only the feeble minded, and over them they soon lose their power. Endeavour to adapt your discourses to the peculiar circumstances of your people, and to suggest the lessons of heaven that are suited to the different periods, relations and duties of life. Let not the style of your sermons be slovenly and careless, but let it shew that you have studied the best models and know how to seek out and to set in order acceptable words; and let your delivery be earnest. Let your heart be in what you preach...Guard against all affectation. The gesticulations of the theatre and the hard words of pedantry, are as unbecoming in the pulpit as the homeliest phrases, and the most disgusting whine. Never ascend the stairs of your pulpit but as though you were doing it for the last time, nor speak to your people but as if you were to address them no more.¹

Introduction: Speaking of Freedom

Whenever I encounter the word ‘freedom’ in U.S.-American discourse warning signals light up in my skeptical Canadian brain. That’s been happening to me for decades, but in recent years the warning has gone to orange. Associated as ‘freedom’ is today with the image and voice of a certain prominent Washington personality whose every other word is ‘freedom’, I find I can only use that word sparingly and hesitantly. The claim to freedom is easily made by those who have the political and economic power to do as they please. But Christians believe that real freedom rests upon qualities that transcend—and are bound to question—such flimsy foundations.

One of those qualities is knowledge—including self-knowledge, especially the knowledge of how unfree and bound and determined by forces beyond our control most humans are. I am ready to trust what Nelson Mandela says about freedom because I know he knows freedom’s antithesis. The other necessary quality is a heightened sense of responsibility: We are not really free to do this or that until we can demonstrate our capacity for the accountability it demands of us.

So—with apologies to the planners of this issue—I have altered somewhat the title I was assigned.² As Christian preachers, we will be in a position to claim freedom for our preaching only when we have earned the right to do so by manifesting both greater knowledge and greater responsibility than—in my humble opinion—we now, as a profession or guild, manifest.

That is the basic thesis I will argue in this short piece. The real impact of such a thesis, however, can only be appreciated when it is realized that—in terms of the historical context in which, as Christians, we find ourselves today—we *really are free*

to preach the gospel in a way that is exceptional if not unique in the history of the Christian movement. My first point, therefore, will be to articulate my perception of that new contextual potentiality for kerygmatic freedom.

Freedom from Christendom

The effective ending of Christian Establishment in the 'Western' world is the single most significant socio-cultural reality affecting the Christian mission today—and the one most steadfastly ignored, repressed, or inadequately grasped in the actual life of the churches. It makes all the difference in the life, work, and witness of Christians in the present-day 'developed' societies of the planet, including their preaching, when they realize the freedom-from-Christendom that is our real condition today.³ To be sure, this freedom-from is not evenly distributed throughout the formerly 'Christian' nations of the West. In the United States particularly it can appear that Christendom is still marvelously intact—that is, that the church is still obliged to affirm and promote the values and pursuits of the dominant culture; or, to state the matter otherwise, that Christians will not offer any conspicuous *alternative* to the status quo! But wherever the process of dis-Establishment has gone far enough to be unavoidable, as it has in most European contexts, in Canada, and in some once-mainline denominations in the U.S., one can find interesting and sometimes highly evocative instances of the new feeling for Christian freedom that this situation connotes.

At the risk of being chauvinistic, I want to illustrate what I mean by indulging in a somewhat extensive generalization about my own denomination. The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 by the union of three of the historically most important Protestant denominations in the country. This first ecumenical venture of major Christian churches in modern history brought together all the Methodists, all the Congregationalists, and two-thirds of the Presbyterians in Canada. It was resisted by one-third of the Presbyterians, and (many would claim) for reasons not nearly as 'theological' as a few of that denomination's scholars insisted and still insist.⁴

Since my own life only began three years after church union in Canada, I cannot speak experientially for the ecclesiastical situation in Canada prior to 1925; I can say, however, both from personal experience and theological reflection over many decades now, that no Christian denomination in Anglo-Canadian history has been more 'established'—culturally—than was the United Church of Canada prior to about 1975. Throughout the first fifty years of its history, my denomination reflected the dominant English-speaking middle classes of Canada more transparently than any other Christian body—including the Anglicans, who had once made a bid for *legal* establishment in Upper Canada but were stopped by some of the doughty Methodist precursors of the United Church! Thus the history of 'my' church has been that of a religion that resisted (*de jure*) establishment but became more (*de facto*) established than the churches it resisted.

As the largest Protestant denomination in the country, the United Church of Canada was noted for a 'higher morality' than prevailed in the culture generally—especially in the areas of social compassion and reform, criticism of unchecked capitalism,⁵ and vigilance against the exploitation of the public by the beer and whisky barons whose fame was growing in Canada and beyond. There can be no question that this kind of moral concern marked the United Church from the outset, often to the

embarrassment of some of its more 'respectable' groupings; and in its most courageous representatives it may even be said to have prepared the way, in important respects, for the church's readiness in more recent decades to deviate from the cultural norm in yet more far-reaching ways.

In terms, however, of its general ethos, its self-understanding in relation to its cultural and political context, and its basic representation of Christian 'spirituality', the United Church could be seen by most Canadians as a very 'Canadian' institution. While politically and economically 'left' of the society's most powerful policy-makers, our church was perceived by the majority of our countrymen as the most comfortable, most accessible, most predictable, and least 'different' of all Anglo-Protestant forms of Christianity. Its moral demands might seem more stringent in certain areas of behavior, but it could be counted on to baptize, marry, and bury *almost* everyone who showed up for such services; and its theology, never a strong point, made few demands either of the mind or the spirit. Congregations could count on generation after generation obediently filing into the pews, perhaps after a little adolescent rebellion.

But then . . . *something happened*. Or, more accurately, it *began* to happen: it is still happening, and its future remains, of course, to be seen. Like most great changes, it is hard to pinpoint this beginning, and it is by no means possible to distinguish a clear 'before' and 'after'—old and new, as usual, overlap. Well into the 1960s and 1970s the denomination seemed entirely prepared to follow the bouncing ball and accommodate itself to 'the counterculture' while seeking, paradoxically, to sustain its solid, stolid middle-class identity. And there are still many, perhaps even the majority, who would like that to be our permanent *modus operandi*. Yet during the past two or three decades a quite different way of relating to the culture that nurtured and supported us has become increasingly visible. Its visibility is manifested, for instance, in bolder-than-usual ethical decisions that have been taken by the courts of the church. In the realm of personal morality, the most notable of these have occurred in the area of sexuality, specifically homosexuality: acknowledging the full and equal human rights of gay and lesbian persons; refusing to deny ordination to self-declared homosexual individuals on the grounds of their sexual orientation as such;⁶ recognizing the legitimacy and legality of same-sex marriage, etc. And to those who feel that these decisions only reflect the liberalization of sexual mores and laws in the society at large, let it be said that it takes a great deal of courage in a society still rife with homophobia, patriarchalism and male-machismo (a hockey culture, after all!) for a church to embark on such a path—to say nothing of the righteous indignation of many self-declared Christians both in and beyond the denomination.

But the change is visible in other ways besides the knotty sexual questions that have plagued all North American churches. In social ethics, the United Church has been exceptionally innovative during the past quarter-century. For example, it not only issued a formal apology to the 'First Nations' of Canada for its part in oppressing our indigenous peoples, but in the specific matter of making amends for the evils of 'residential schools' (an earlier attempt of the federal government to assimilate 'Indian' children through isolating them from their families in residential schools operated by the churches), the United Church, unlike the other denominations involved, held out for the recognition of the *cultural* abuse this policy entailed over and above the more visible (physical, sexual, and other) forms of abuse. Similarly, the

United Church has been at the forefront of women's rights, environmental ethics, immigration policy, foreign aid, peacekeeping and anti-war protest, multiculturalism, and the frank recognition and addressing of religious plurality in our once-nearly-monolithically 'Christian' country.

The general stance represented by these and similar policies—none of them popular or easily embraced—can only be accounted for by the recognition that a quite new and different understanding of the relation between Christianity and culture has gradually emerged within this denomination. It is evidenced, too, of course, by the diminished statistics in church membership, resources, and influence in high places. Ours is no longer a church that can be counted on to lend social respectability to those seeking such.

The extent to which such a theological and spiritual shift is recognized, let alone comprehended, at the congregational level remains an open question; on the whole, I believe that it is *not*; that, in part, is why I plead here for greater seriousness in preaching. Yet throughout the denomination, reflective groups, both clerical and lay, have engaged in a rethinking of the post-Christendom character and calling of Christians. This process has advanced far enough, in fact, to be expressly articulated at the theological level by a commission mandated to produce a new 'Statement of Faith' appropriate to the contemporary religious situation. A few isolated statements from the "draft proposal" of the resultant document will illustrate my meaning:

The church in Canada and in much of Western society has been moved from the public to the private sphere and rendered marginal to the concerns of civil society. No longer able to act upon assumptions of power and influence, we find ourselves situated on the edges rather than at the centre. No longer enjoying the political and cultural influence we once had, we worry about how to make a difference in the larger society. We may even think back with nostalgia on the era of Christendom. But separated as we now are from the centre of power, the United Church has become aware of its complicity with historic oppressions and abuses (for example, in our relationship with First Nations peoples). The shift to the margins produces anxiety—destructively in terms of worry, constructively in terms of the opportunity to embrace faithful solidarity with the community of earth.

God calls us to locate ourselves in the web of life, of which we are but one strand . . .

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By becoming flesh in Jesus, God enters creation to transform its wasting away and thus to restore its integrity . . .

With sorrow we confess that we have often failed to be the church, . . . living by entitlement rather than by grace. . .

. . . many in our day . . . [preach] a neo-apocalyptic gospel of smug triumphalism and the abandonment of earth. We reject that false gospel, choosing instead to love our enemies and to care for the earth, choosing life.⁷

My purpose in devoting this much space to a generalization about my own denomination has been to show in some detail how the beginnings of a recognition of the post-Christendom context of Christianity can influence not only a church's public stance and ethical counsel but also its theology. Similar observations could certainly be made about significant segments of concerned Christians in 'mainstream' Protestant denominations in the U.S.⁸ Whenever and wherever it is understood that Christianity indeed exists today "on the edges" of mainstream society, and is no longer a prisoner to its own cultural-religious past, a new courage to live and bear witness to a 'different' way of being human begins to manifest itself in quite concrete ways.

What is needed, if this 'beginning' is to achieve the maturity and depth that it promises, is that the teaching ministry of the church at every level should be brought to a greater realization and implementation of this same freedom. This too has become obvious in the life of the United Church of Canada. We have made great strides in exploring the ethical dimensions of our faith—we are (as is sometimes said, rather too smugly) "on the right side of the issues"; but we are not at all clear about how we got there, or how it relates specifically to the Christian faith. And without a greater intellectual and spiritual quest for understanding there is no guarantee that we shall be able either to sustain the moral courage we have shown or recognize what such courage might mean for the always-uncertain crises and opportunities of the future. To employ the action/reflection paradigm that has been adopted in much practical theological training during the past decades, one must say that as a church we've been strong on action and weak on reflection.

Preaching is an important dimension—maybe the most important dimension—of the reflective side of this dialectic, since it is the primary means of ensuring that reflective theological and biblical thinking will be fully shared by the laity. And, in my experience at least, the preaching of the church has failed to grasp the freedom-from-Christendom that is manifested on the 'action' side. As preachers, we are still—no doubt with important exceptions—living with Christendom assumptions. We shall not be able to *claim* freedom for our preaching until we have dispensed with these assumptions and appropriated assumptions and practices more in keeping with our new reality as communities of faith whose disengagement from our traditional role as 'culture-religion' makes it possible for us to exercise this new freedom also in our preaching.

Freedom for the Faith that Comes by Hearing

Among the many assumptions that I have in mind, let me name and discuss briefly four. First, *we assume that we are addressing Christians*. A particularly insidious hangover from our Christendom past is that preachers in the once-mainline churches almost invariably assume that the people to whom they are speaking are already committed Christians—or at least that they must treat them as if they were. What these people require of their preacher, we think, is not conversion but inspiration, encouragement, education. When it is not deemed something worse (moralizing, pep-talking, oratory, etc.) the sermon is generally thought of (to use the old terminology) as edification of the faithful.

To begin with, this is a misperception empirically: in the average mainstream liberal or moderate Protestant congregation today few, I suspect, would be found prepared to apply the term 'committed' to themselves, and a significant number would

admit that they are not quite sure any more what a Christian *is*.

But, more importantly, this assumption marks a theological misperception—a failure not only to grasp what the Reformation meant by preaching, but what it meant by the nature of belief as such. For the classical Protestant tradition, there is no point in the life of a person, even the most pious and informed, when he or she can say simply, “I believe. Period.” The Reformers taught a ‘continuing baptism’, and they thought of the preaching of the Word in as ‘sacramental’ a way as they thought of the two biblically-based sacraments. Christians need the Word as much, and at least as often, as they need the Eucharist. The prayer of the Christian is “I believe, help my unbelief.” For there is that in all of us to which Paul referred when he confessed to a continuous “war” within himself—a battle between faith and doubt, trust and mistrust, hope and despair (Romans 7). It is this battle that, one way or another, the preacher is called upon to engage *in every sermon*. ‘Conversion’ is not a once-for-all matter but an ongoing struggle of the human spirit with the Spirit of God. What the hearer of sermons needs to know, even when he or she does not know that that is what is needed, is that this *human* struggle of his or hers is being joined by a God who understands it and wills its resolution in us.

We ‘mainstream’ Protestants wonder why the pews of the ‘evangelical’ churches are better filled than ours. One of the reasons (there are others, of course) is that the evangelicals understand much better than we do this very human need for help in the basic struggle to overcome life’s negations.

Second, *we assume that our congregations already know ‘the basics’*. This is an aspect of the first assumption, but it suggests other dimensions of the problem. There may have been a time—I think that I was part of it—when many if not most people living in our ‘Christian’ societies were somewhat knowledgeable about aspects of the Christian religion. Many could quote verses of Scripture, or recite stanzas of favorite hymns, or tell their children the stories of the patriarchs—Joseph and his brothers, Moses and the exodus, Daniel in the lions’ den. Parables of Jesus were taught to children in Sunday schools, and even public school readers contained allusions to Christian writings and themes. Ordinary people knew the names of Samson, Judas, and Mary Magdalene. The more philosophic-minded adults could even argue about the trinity, justification by faith, and the authority of the Bible.

This is patently no longer the case. There is as much ignorance and misinformation about the Christian faith in once officially or quasi officially ‘Christian’ societies as in the world at large, and in the ‘Christian’ contexts the consequences of this ignorance and misinformation are much more insidious; for too many people *think* they know, and they do not.

What this means for preaching is clear enough; but its clarity, I think, has still not produced the necessary changes in our assumptions. Preaching cannot and should not become a mere synonym for teaching—as if it were a sort of catechetical exercise for those who have already graduated! But it must combine *address* with enough explanation of Scripture and tradition to make the address meaningful. Biblical texts do not speak for themselves. They have not spoken to the preacher herself apart from the historical-critical background interpretation that constituted a large part of her theological education. Doctrinal terms like “sin,” “grace,” “salvation,” “forgiveness,” etc. do not immediately conjure up, in the minds of today’s churchgoers, thoughts and experiences and intellectual connotations that lend them weight. Most of these

conventional doctrinal terms are, for most contemporary churchgoers, like buttons without buttonholes. They need explanation, elaboration. The sermon should certainly not be the only place where such missing links can be provided, but neither should it employ this language without at least passing attempts at elucidation.

Third, *we assume that there is no offense in what we are called to preach*. But there is! And it's not incidental, or occasional, or reserved for certain difficult times only! According to Paul, the *scandalon* of the kerygma is of its essence: "The religious ones demand signs and the learned ones seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to the religious and folly to the learned. . ." (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).⁹ The offense is there at the heart of the Christian message because none of *us*, at heart, wants to be struck by the two-edged sword that is this 'gospel'—that is, that while we are unacceptable, really, we are accepted by the sheer grace and love of a God who shares the burden of our almost-impossible creaturehood.

The recognition of this offense, which is central to the classical Protestant understanding not only of preaching but of every other aspect of the faith, was always downplayed in popular Christianity in the North American mode, because it is so thoroughly out of sync with the general ethos of our culture. Especially in its middle-class expressions, Protestantism has wanted desperately to claim continuity with the positive outlook of the dominant culture; and even where it has not descended into a maudlin kind of mimicking of Madison Avenue it has avoided the radical anthropological and ethic of a gospel that begins (though it does not end) with the recognition of the depths of human estrangement, alienation, wrongness—in short, 'sin.' We are still, I fear, living with that need to approve, that fear of offending.

And therefore we are failing to speak to the real depths of contemporary human and societal experience, which is no longer just upbeat and starry-eyed (if it ever was!) but fearful of things undreamt of by our sin-obsessed puritan forebears (like the meaningless destruction of the planet by its own inhabitants!) and waiting—almost palpably waiting—for someone it can regard as being both truthful *and* hopeful to offer it hospitality.

Fourth, *we assume that preaching can occur without suffering on the part of the preacher*. The current ideal image of the preacher seems to be that of a folksy, conversationally 'cool' personality, whose words flow as effortlessly from his or her lips as from those of our favorite television personality. An Oprah or Doctor Phil of the pulpit! Thanks in part to the marvels of sound technology, the pulpit oratory of the past has given way to bedroom-voiced chattiness. We think this is an improvement, but at bottom we are still allowing the world to set the tone for what we say and how we say it.

I have heard some very moving sermons in my nearly-eight decades. In fact, I am a Christian (so far as I am that!) because of some of them. Some were preached by the most learned or the most prophetic or the most eloquent voices of our epoch—Tillich, Niebuhr, Scherer, Visser t'Hooft, Niemoller, Newbigin, Soelle, Buttrick, and others; some were preached by unknown country pastors, or by young seminarians, or by laypersons who never went to university. But all of these sermons—the ones that made a difference—had one thing in common: they gave clear evidence of the fact that they had not been born without birth pangs as acute, in their way, as those of a mother. They were the consequences, not only of a lot of sheer hard work—hours and hours of exegetical study, diligent searches for the right words and arresting illustrations¹⁰—

but of a spiritual struggle within the soul of the preacher himself or herself. I remember one sermon, for instance, in which—having come almost to an impasse—the preacher looked straight at his people and confessed, “I know how little I know, and I know even more how little I believe.” But even those who never came that close to failing right there in front of us, and even those who were able to impress us with their erudition, and even those who made us laugh sometimes—all of them who made a difference made it, at least in part, by letting us glimpse their own spiritual warfare, their precarious existence on the boundary between belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, hope and despair, love and hate. They showed us enough of their *humanity* to incline us to trust their witness to that which transcends the “human, all too human” (Nietzsche).

To be honest, I do not find that kind of preaching very often today. No doubt there has always been a streak of ‘performance-mode’ and ‘display personality’ in those who take up preaching; but in addition to the usual allure of an office that seems to guarantee center-stage to a certain kind of human, the contemporary world has seduced us with its models and ways. Television, that Great Educator of the postmodern West, has put before us the model of the talk-show host, the stand-up comedian, the celebrity. We are all searchers after the best one-liner, the most electrifying ‘sound bite’, the sexiest language in the shortest possible time. Our sermons have been reduced in length to what the producers of such homilies in the past called ‘sermonettes’, and Paul Scherer was right, I think, when he told his classes in homiletics that “Sermonettes make Christianettes”: they are too short to engage anyone deeply, too glib to matter much.

Again and again I think of Milton’s line, “The sheep look up and are not fed.”

“The sheep,” I believe, really do “look up” still, dumbed-down and incurious as they may appear. They may be there in the pews for all kinds of extraneous reasons; they may have the ‘short attention spans’ that we’ve been endlessly assured they have; they may be satisfied with tidbits and crumbs of godly information, or the occasionally charming or titillating illustration, or the usual, predictable exhortations to *improve*. But underneath it all they are still . . . “poor little sheep who have gone astray.” Their world is chock-full of words but pathetically empty of meaningful words. They seldom feel called to anything special, unusual. Consciously or unconsciously, they are all waiting to be beckoned by transcendence, spoken to, *addressed*. *Waiting for Godot*, said the unbelieving Samuel Beckett, who mourned the death of God; *Waiting for God*, corrected the believing Simone Weil, who feared the death of humanity.

The conclusion to which I am driven, therefore, cannot differ in essence from those words of the unnamed cleric two hundred years ago with which I began, when he told those now-long-dead ordinands,

Never ascend the stairs of your pulpit but as if you thought
you were doing it for the last time, nor speak to your people
but as if you were to address them no more.

The only difference today, I think, is that we have a greater freedom to do just that than preachers enjoyed two hundred years ago or throughout most of the history of Christendom. Are we up to it?

Notes

1. Author unidentified, "An Ordination Charge," *The Christian Repository and Religious Register, Second Volume, 1817*, no. vi (Edinburgh: Balfour and Clarke, 1817), x.
2. "Claiming Freedom For Our Preaching."
3. I have written and spoken about this subject so frequently over the past thirty years that I am a little embarrassed to introduce it once again; but it seems to me so pertinent to the theme of this volume of the *Journal* ("Claiming Freedom for Our Preaching") that it cannot be avoided. I believe that we *have* such freedom, in terms of what our cultural context both allows and demands. But as preachers we appear reluctant to grasp hold of the freedom that is there. Instead, we seem to lumber on into the future, carrying with us patterns and assumptions and styles of address that only the remnants of a moribund Christendom ask of us. For a more complete discussion of what I mean by 'Freedom from Christendom', see Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002).
4. For one thing, the decision about the Union was finally left up to Presbyterian *congregations*, thus defeating the *presbyterial* ecclesiastical basis of that tradition. I grew up in a village in Southwestern Ontario where there were only two churches—United and Presbyterian. At the time of the Union, the Presbyterian congregation voted to stay out: they liked their nice old building and they *didn't* like the (perceived) moralism of the (avowed) tee-totally Methodists. So in 1925 one family moved over to the formerly Methodist church, which changed its name to 'United', and the comfortable conventions and prejudices of the village's life continued uninterrupted.
5. The socialist party in Canada, currently the New Democratic Party, owes a great deal of its initial and continuing fervor to clergy and theologians of the United Church who have been profoundly influenced by the Social Gospel and other (including 'neo-Orthodox') movements.
6. At the General Council of the Church in 1988, after years of wrestling with this question ('The issue' it was dubbed in ecclesiastical circles), two consecutive motions were passed which effectively resolved the matter and allowed the church to get on with more pressing social concerns: "A. That all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, who profess Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, are welcome to be or become full members of the Church. B. All members of the church are eligible to be considered for the Ordered Ministry." For a detailed report, see "United Church of Canada and Homosexuality," www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ucc.htm.
7. "A Draft Statement of Faith for Discussion and Response," prepared by the Committee on Theology and Faith of the United Church of Canada, January 2005. (See the responses to this Statement by several theologians, including myself, in the Winnipeg based journal *Touchstone* 23, no. 3 (September 2005).
8. What is especially interesting about the United Church of Canada, however, is that these changes have been sufficiently extensive to be taken up officially by the whole denomination.
9. It is time, I think, that this verse ought to be rendered in some such way in order to avoid the 'false scandal' that its original form has occasioned by attributing the offense in question to Jewish and Greek religious and philosophic traditions. Paul himself was thoroughly trained in both. His quarrel here is not with either Jerusalem or Athens but with that in all of us which refuses the 'logic of the cross' because we demand something more obviously triumphant.
10. George Buttrick used to tell us in his homiletics classes that he found it necessary to spend at least one hour in preparation for every minute that he preached. His twenty-to-twenty-five-minute sermons showed it! They were just the tip of a huge iceberg, but the hearers of such sermons knew that they were kept afloat by the volume of their submerged preparatory substructure.