

A Little Boldness in the Pulpit, Please

Anthony B. Robinson

Congregational Leadership Northwest, Seattle, Washington

A year ago, while teaching in Toronto, I visited a church my students recommended, “The Meeting House.” The Meeting House has Mennonite roots and affiliations. Services happen in a bunch of rented movie theaters in the Greater Toronto Area. It would probably be described as either emergent or evangelical, possibly both. Sermons come to each site via live satellite feed. At a certain point, the preacher took texted questions. The Meeting House puts a huge emphasis on “house church,” groups, trying to get everyone into such a group for weekly discussion, prayer, and service.

When I visited, its preacher, an engaging guy with the improbable name of Bruxy Cavey, was in the midst of a sermon series entitled “Duped: Questioning the Logic of Pop Spirituality.” He was taking on, in succession, the main proponents of New Age thought, including Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dwyer, and Deepak Chopra.

I was struck by Cavey’s willingness to confront teachers he regarded as misleading. I was also struck by how careful and gracious his analysis was. He didn’t resort to ridicule or snarky remarks. He had clearly spent time studying the work of these New Age stars. He acknowledged the positive impulses in their work. And then he offered a straightforward critique, contrasting their claims and methods with Scripture and Christian discipleship. He showed where and how they fell short from a Christian standpoint.

I haven’t heard, nor have I preached, many sermons that explicitly and forthrightly took on religious alternatives alive in the wider culture. Why not? I suspect that part of the reason many of us don’t want to go there is that we have heard some sermons that have done so in ways that are mean-spirited, unfair, and full of ridicule.

It is true that it is possible to hear sermons in my part of the church (mainline Protestant) that decry the Religious Right. I think we actually miss Jerry Falwell. Going after the Religious Right sometimes seems to be all there is to critique of the religious alternatives.

This may be because an unwritten rule in the mainline church seems to be that we should “be nice” (no matter what). I guess it’s okay to say not nice things about the Religious Right because they aren’t nice. Otherwise, we abide by the old saw, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” The problem with this is that it also rules out serious debate among alternative views and proposals.

At the Meeting House the preacher seemed to be aware that the mostly young, urban professional types that sat in the congregation might actually be wondering if Deepak Chopra was onto something, or if Eckard Tolle was indeed showing the way to “A New Earth,” as one of his book titles claims. They might be asking, “How is their spirituality different than following Jesus?”

Admittedly, my exposure to the Meeting House was limited. (I heard one more sermon in the series.) But I wonder if they are onto something, namely, there are a lot of different spiritual and religious schools and persuasions alive in the culture, and the church that has nothing to say about them seems both out-of-touch with the zeitgeist and may be pastorally negligent. The latter because many people are trying

to make sense of a world with a host of competing alternatives and truth-claims, and simply urging people to be open and respectful, while not without value, may offer too little.

To be more specific, it increasingly seems to me important that mainline preachers address the thought and writing of one particular cluster of thinkers and writers. This group includes Karen Armstrong, Elaine Pagels, John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, Bart Ehrman, as well as Robert Funk (now deceased) and the Jesus Seminar. In contrast to the Religious Right, these people are being read and taken seriously by people in the pews of mainline congregations. Their arguments need to be addressed carefully, graciously, and forthrightly by preachers.

Some would argue, of course, that Armstrong, Spong, Borg, et. al. are the good guys, even “our guys.” After all, they present themselves as a progressive alternative to the Religious Right. They challenge various fundamentalisms (many are former fundamentalists themselves). They introduce people to recent scholarship. They are friendly to other of the world’s “great religions.” What’s not to like?

But in some ways, that is the problem. This group of writers and teachers seems to be so appealing, so learned, and so helpful that it’s very easy to embrace their work unequivocally, uncritically, and without question.

Here’s some good news. The well-known Presbyterian preacher and author, Tom Long, in a recent book, “Preaching from Memory to Hope,” gives us a great example of doing just this kind of examination by someone in the mainline. Long devotes two chapters to this group precisely because he knows people in our congregations are reading them with great interest. Long’s approach is both careful and irenic. He specifically disavows the idea of a “heresy hunt,” and credits these writers and scholars with “yearning for what all Christians should desire: an informed, intelligent faith . . .” Nevertheless, Long interprets their work as a return of Gnosticism, or at least, of “a gnostic impulse.”

Long first introduces this body of work and discusses the reasons people find it appealing. Second, he offers a particularly lengthy and careful analysis of the work of Marcus Borg, under the clever title, “Meeting Marcus Borg Again for the First Time.” In the course of his discussion, Long points to four core themes of this group that together constitute “a gnostic impulse.” These four themes are 1) humanity is “saved” by gnosis, by knowledge; 2) an antipathy toward incarnation and embodiment; 3) a focus on the spiritual inner self, the “divine spark” within; and 4) an emphasis on present spiritual reality rather than eschatological hope.

It may not, at first glance, be obvious why any of these four themes are at all important, even urgent. But they are. Each in its way tends to sap the confidence of preachers and the vitality of the church. Each funds the “I’m spiritual but not religious” sentiment that seems to leave many mainline Christians (and clergy) tongue-tied.

Take the first, the idea that we are saved by gnosis or knowledge. Liberal Protestants have long believed in the value of education, as indeed we should. But this takes things a step further. Here’s Long: “Perhaps the most characteristic marker of the gnostic impulse is the belief that human beings, given the proper knowledge, given illumination, can learn their way to wholeness.” One can see how appealing this idea might be where education is prized and where there is great emphasis given to our need for continual growth, as tends to be the case in many mainline churches. We shall grow, by learning, to wholeness or enlightenment. This is appealing, but it

changes the Christian claim in quite fundamental ways.

"The gnostic impulse does not," continues Long, "imagine humanity captive to sin and needing divine rescue." In fact, just such a claim is the "childish" or "primitive" faith that many of these writers and their advocates want to deliver us from. In some respects, that desire is quite understandable. After all, there is something a little embarrassing, especially to high achievers and the highly educated, in speaking of human helplessness and need for salvation. Contemporary gnosticism, with its emphasis on spiritual knowledge gained on one's personal quest, takes away such a stumbling block and removes the embarrassment. We may learn things from Jesus, but we are not saved by him.

But in making such a shift, the human quest is oversold, and God's own quest is neglected. In a recent New York Times review of Armstrong's latest book, "The Case for God," the reviewer makes this point as he discusses Armstrong's argument for "apophatic religion." Apophatic religion, Armstrong's preferred option, is the continuous human search for an ultimately unknowable God. "Apophatic religion," writes the Times reviewer, Ross Douthat, "may be the most rigorous way to go in search of an elusive God. But for most believers, it will remain a poor substitute for the idea that God has come in search of us."

One of the results of the new emphasis on "spirituality" has been to place great stress on our search, our quest, our spirituality, and various spiritual practices we might learn and perform in order to find or access peace or enlightenment or God. The problem here is not only the tendency to create a spiritual elite of those really in the know or who are "more spiritual." The problem is that what God has done and is doing, the "God (who) has come in search of us," is overshadowed by what we are to do. The result is a kind of spiritualist Pelagianism, which imagines an all-loving but inactive God who is the object of our religious search rather than the God who has, in Jesus Christ, searched for us. In the worship of the church, the result of such a theological shift is that it is long on exhortations to "take time for personal renewal," to "deepen your spiritual awareness," but short on news about God.

Not long ago I was speaking at a self-described "progressive," metropolitan church and got a question about the Jesus Seminar. In the past, I have generally been vague in my responses to such questions, perhaps not wanting to appear peevish. I offered the non-committal comment that there may be a difference between the search for the historical Jesus undertaken in reverence and one driven by suspicion. But I found myself going further. I said, "After twenty years of the Jesus Seminar, I have concluded that their influence on the church and its witness has been, on balance, negative. The net result of the Jesus Seminar and similar efforts has been to reduce the church's confidence both in its Scriptures and in its historic confessions of faith. These, we have been told, cannot be trusted."

The man who asked the question looked shocked. He clearly did not expect this. He thought, I imagine, that I would applaud the Jesus Seminar as an alternative to the Religious Right. Why did I say that I had concluded that on balance the influence of the Jesus Seminar had been unhelpful? Partly, it is the earlier point, the idea that we can learn our way to wholeness and the consequent loss of a clear focus on God and God's initiative. But it is also Long's second point about the "gnostic impulse," the antipathy toward incarnation and embodiment.

This shows up when people like Ehrman and Pagels describe the canonical pro-

cess, the process by which the Bible became the Bible. They alert readers to the fact that human beings and human institutions were involved in the process. True enough, but their conclusion, or at least the one that many readers have taken away, is that such a process had nothing of God in it. Rather, it was all about power politics and conspiracies by church fat cats. Though this fits nicely with the contemporary zeitgeist of suspicion, it hardly fits the facts. But the upshot in the church, not infrequently, is a loss of confidence in the Scriptures of the church. As one man said to me, “Well, isn’t the Bible just something human beings created anyhow, and just white, male ones at that?”

Long’s point about incarnation is that the church has long acknowledged the role of human beings in the canonical process, but argued that this does not mean it is any less God’s Word. “Traditional Christianity, while fully realistic about human sinfulness, nevertheless sees human flesh and history as a place that God has chosen to dwell, a place thus made sacred. But for gnostics, human rituals, structures, and institutions are at best unfortunate and accidental necessities, and at worst contaminants. All that smacks of the earthly and time-bound is seen as inferior to the timeless and eternal.”

It’s not difficult to see how such a perspective—the earthly and time-bound as inferior—diminishes people’s enthusiasm for what is often derided as “the institutional church.” The irony, of course, is that this group of teachers and writers largely depend on the institutional churches and related institutions for their audience.

Long concludes, “Given the cultural realities of our time, this story of a highly spiritualized faith that one acquires through knowledge and that puts one in direct and unmediated communion with God is quite appealing to many intelligent people. No one needs to be blamed or excommunicated for embracing it . . . but the gnostic impulse is a spectrum shift away from the gospel, and it should be addressed by Christian preachers.” In many ways, what Long summarizes here is the ubiquitous “I’m spiritual not religious” ethos that is part of the decline of mainline Protestantism.

For those preachers in mainline Protestant congregations bold enough to address such spectrum shifts, Long’s own attempt provides a helpful model. Preachers would not, of course, want to do this kind of thing too often, but a once a year or once every other year series could prove helpful. I am convinced that people in our churches are eager, more than we know, to hear sermons of theological substance, sermons that explore Christian beliefs, compare them to other options, and explore what difference they make.

The larger issue is that we no longer live in a time of Christian, and mainline Protestant, consensus. Rather we live in a time and culture of great religious and spiritual ferment where many different options and interpretations call out to people. That could be viewed as exciting and as creating great opportunities. Preachers that fail to constructively engage alternate schools and claims, whether the new Atheists, the Religious Right, the New Age, or the Gnostic impulse, may be failing their parishioners and missing a wonderful opportunity to do theology and be teachers of the faith.