

To Whom Are We Speaking when We Preach?

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Two congregations

For many years, during the late 1940's and early 1950's, when I was in junior and senior high school, I was part of two very distinct congregations. One, my home church, was a Presbyterian congregation in an old and affluent suburb of New York City. It would be fairly easily classified as a liberal congregation, filled with members who were cosmopolitan, educated, and involved in some of the largest and most influential corporations of the time. It had about two thousand members. I attended the second church during the summer when we were at the farm in upstate New York where my mother was born. It was a very conservative, rural, independent Baptist congregation. The pastor's daughter was my age and a friend, so I was very involved there even though the rest of my family was not part of it. The membership was probably twenty-five, with an equal number attending with their children who were not members. That congregation would have been classified as fundamentalist in a somewhat naïve fashion. Few members—including the pastor—had any education beyond high school, and many did not have more than eighth grade. Most were subsistence farmers. Needless to say, it would be hard to find two more distinct congregations.

Later, when I have reflected on these experiences from a different perspective, I have recognized that there was a great similarity in these two churches. In both, we in the congregation were addressed by the pastor as individuals. His concern was for what we believed or what we were supposed to do—or not do—in the wider society. The liberal congregation might stress seeing all people as our brothers and sisters. We should be positive toward the issue of civil rights in the wider society. The conservative congregation might stress our personal acceptance of the sacrifice of Christ and in the wider society oppose drinking and movies, etc. In almost every way those two congregations were at opposite poles of the Protestant churches at that time. And yet, both spoke to the congregation as a collection of individuals, gathered for worship, yes, but also gathered in order to get their marching orders for the time they spent outside the walls of the church, involved in some way in the wider society. The pastors might also consider what kinds of pressures and problems the members faced, but the intention still was to speak the word of God to individuals so that they would be comforted or strengthened in their particular lives outside of the church.

The Individualism of our culture

The strong, underlying current of both congregations was the individualism that has been so strong in our own culture and in much of the Western world. I believe it is stronger in Protestant than in Catholic churches, though it was not necessarily part of the Reformation itself. Much can be attributed to the Industrial Revolution that occurred after the Reformation, a development that was initially strongest in Europe in Protestant countries. One cannot imagine the Reformation without the printing press which made the Bible widely available in the language of the people. An unforeseen consequence of the access of Protestant church members to the Bible meant that very rapidly each member could read the Bible—the ultimate authority for

the church—privately. Reading the Bible in private is a very different experience than being part of a group that hears it read out loud. Reading it for oneself means hearing the intonation that one puts into it for oneself. It is possible and inevitable to have one's own interpretation. If the Bible is the ultimate authority, then the individual reading it becomes an authority. Granted some denominations had confessional statements that were supposed to be the lens through which all members understood the scriptures because the pastor preached and taught the Bible through the confessional lens. But fairly quickly, individual laypersons could become their own authority because they believed they had the Bible on their side. (Even today, in many congregations as soon as the Bible is read aloud, each member reaches for his or her own Bible, so that even in a corporate setting, each member has some of the same effect as reading privately.)

Think of the church before the printing press. The only way people heard the Bible was when it was read in the midst of the congregation. Preaching had generally disappeared in the Medieval church, but in the early church, people gathered for the worship service in order to hear scripture read. They heard it together. The preaching then interpreted it for the congregation. For most of the Middle Ages, congregations were in the midst of a relatively static society, most people not venturing far from their birth place. Their position in society was given, and little or no change was anticipated. Then imagine a Protestant congregation in the nineteenth century. There was little that was static in society at that time, especially in this country. Industry was growing, and people moved to the places where there were jobs. The frontier still called many to leave settled communities and move. In Europe and other places, individuals left their traditional societies and came to this country. There was enormous movement. For most people, the extended family was left behind, increasing the sense of individualism. Not everyone participated in this new sense, but the changes in society at large were great. And, as we have seen, the churches also participated in this strong sense of individualism. (An additional interesting support for individualism was the changes in the English language itself. Whereas the Reformation generation and beyond still used the old forms of *Thee* and *Thou*, with *Ye* for the plural, modern English dropped this and substituted *You* for both the singular and plural of the third person. This meant that while the Bible constantly speaks in the plural form, in modern English, reading the Bible alone, we often assume it is addressing us alone, in the singular.)

The emerging new pattern

Society at large remains highly individualistic and in some ways is increasingly so. The growing division of the United States by economic class has exacerbated this. Why worry about public schools if my children will be sent to private schools? Why worry about the local police force if I live in a gated community with its own security detail? Why worry about military personnel and veterans if my children will not need to join the military because they have other options that education and connections provide?

And yet, in the midst of this, there are hopeful signs sprouting in many congregations, signs that point in a very new direction. The two congregations I described at the beginning both were flourishing in the midst of a time when the church—indeed all churches and synagogues as well—were looked upon with great favor by the whole

society. Everyone should be part of the religious establishment of their choice. “The family that prays together stays together” was a constant public-service announcement. It was on the radio, on billboards, and it expressed the sentiment of a large part of society. In many ways, the late forties and early fifties were the last gasp in this country of the old Constantinian arrangement. Earlier, in Europe, the war itself had pretty much the same effect.

But now, though many congregations still live with that Constantinian mentality, it is clear that the wider society has little use for organized religion. Religion is often portrayed as negative, judgmental, irrational, and a major factor in civil strife. There is no need to belong to a church because of social pressure. In fact, in many subcultures in our society, there is clear social pressure *not* to have any part in church life. And yet, there are congregations that are vibrant and developing in a new way. I believe that one characteristic of these congregations is that members are not addressed individually, but rather the sermon, the prayers, even many of the hymns, speak to the congregation as a whole. Who are they? What are they called to be and to do *as a congregation*? How does the Bible address them *as congregation*? Imagine hearing the familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world.” In the two congregations mentioned earlier, individual worshippers would think of how they—personally—were to be such a light. It probably would not occur to them that the words might mean how they—as a congregation—were to be a light in the wider community. Yet precisely that would be the reading in these new congregations.

These new congregation are aware of the lack of support by the wider society. In many ways their situation is more like the early church that lived in the midst of a hostile culture. They have more in common with that early church than with the denomination’s own Reformation founders, who lived in a highly Constantinian situation, except for the Radical Reformation. Such a congregation today may differ extensively from other congregations of its own denomination. It begins to have a glimpse of the early church’s experience of living in the old world and yet also, especially within the congregation, living in a new world, a new creation. In those early church congregations many of the negative characteristics of the surrounding society were overcome: slaves and masters were part of the same congregation, Jew and Gentile were united, women and men related as equals. And yet, when they left the meeting, the old world again held sway. The experience in the church helped them negotiate their way through the old world without losing the experience of the new. These are characteristic experiences of these new congregations in our own society.

It is a different experience for a pastor to read and preach from Scripture assuming the Word is addressed to the gathered community of God’s people and not to individual Christians, that it is a word about their life together and not only a word about how they are to live in the world beyond. Obviously, discipleship implies how Christians live out their discipleship in the wider world. But to lose the importance of how the congregation lives a new life in its own internal experience would be a great loss of a new possibility that the end of the Constantinian era gives us. A pastor who begins to address the congregation *as congregation* may be able to change the members’ understanding of their life as the church. The discipline of seeing how the Biblical text for the sermon could be interpreted in an individualistic way and in a corporate way is a starting point.