

No Past Tense Faith

Jason Byassee
Toronto, Ontario

There is a verbal tic we have in mainline Protestantism. Once you notice it, you'll see it's omnipresent, and aggravating. Pointing it out is, I hope, not just being a grammarian diva. I think it shows something rotten in our root system. I hope we can rip it out without harming the good fruit.

When we write or preach, we usually speak of Jesus in the past tense. This makes some superficial sense. The Bible does it at times. Modern biblical scholarship has been maniacally dedicated to the task of discerning "what really happened." If you're in a more liberal institution, you're after what the biblical writer concealed, trying to unearth the truth. If you're in a conservative one, you're trying to defend the historical veracity of the text, since it's the means by which God spoke.

In either case, the verb tense is all wrong.

Jesus isn't just a long ago figure far, far away. His words and deeds are not just set down for the historical record. He is alive. He did not just do these things once upon a time. He still does them, present-tense. Christian sermons exist to point out how God works now, ongoingly. Jesus did not just stand up for justice once. He stands up for justice now. He did not just raise the dead, heal the sick, restore sight, forgive sins, die on the cross, rise from the dead, or inaugurate a new creation in the inaccessible recesses of the past. He does those things now.

If I'm wrong about this, we'd all better pack up and go home. Or else find a more lucrative and socially valued line of work. Or maybe start a religion in which chicken is the prohibited food. Anything but be Christian.

It is a very old charge that we are overly scrupulous with mere words in the church. St. Basil the Great in the fourth century responded to the charge of oversensitivity as he insisted that the Spirit is God *with* the Son and Father:

Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary, together with the attempts to search out the hidden meaning in this phrase or that syllable, but those conscious of the goal of our calling realize that we are to become like God, as far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and without lessons there can be no knowledge. Instruction begins with the proper use of speech, and syllables and words are the elements of speech. Therefore to scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task.

Sure, tell me I'm hairsplitting. See you in hell.

While we are scrutinizing, the verb "remind" should be struck from Christian vocabulary. Once you have it in for this verb, let me warn you, it will suddenly

appear absolutely everywhere. Preachers remind people. Jesus reminds people. Authors remind people. Remind remind remind.

What's the problem?

It's a Christendom verb. It suggests that hearers already know everything that needs knowing about God and the world. They may have just temporarily forgotten it and so need a gentle, benevolent reminder from the person at the mic or keyboard. As a preacher I can only think of several thousand more appropriate verbs. Declares. Shows. Gestures. Demonstrates. Suggests. Insists. You can keep this list going. "Remind" also has a whiff of the Platonist about it as well. For Plato, learning is almost like being reminded of something you already knew. Socrates shows this by "teaching" complex math to an unlearned peasant boy. Perhaps we were all once gazing on all knowledge and beauty and only fell into these unfortunate material bodies and forgot our erudition. Platonism has been a great help, and sometimes a great hindrance, to the church. In this case it is the latter. Often, we need to learn something for the first time. Never use "remind" again, or risk being thrown into a very non-Platonic sort of hell.

While we're ranting, once a writer puts something to the page, it ought not be referred to in the past tense either. The verb tense rule #1 above does not just apply to Jesus, the living Lord. It also applies to any poor schlub who managed to get anything published any time in human history. Basil didn't wrote. He writes. I know he's been dead a long time. But his words have not. That's why you're reading them and writing about them now. This is not just true historically. It's true theologically. The communion of the saints means that our hallowed ancestors go on writing, thinking, praying, encouraging, miscommunicating, blessing, and harming us to this day and until the coming kingdom. And not just the saints, but also every sinner who managed to sneak into your local library or Google search.

When I engage students' or colleagues' work, I nearly always make a reference to one or more of these three theological-cum-grammatical rules. The fact that I have to write them at all shows there is something deeply problematical in our educational and churchly institutions. Surely it is not controversial to suggest that the Lord Jesus lives, that we don't all know everything, and that literature speaks to us anew. But since these data seem to have slipped from our human consciousness, I declare them afresh.

And now, having repaired our language both English and Christian, I shall retire into oblivion. Remember me, and what I wrote.