

Bible Language, Body Language

There is a lot of confusion these days about the nature and mission of the church. For some, the church is a good forum for political action; for others it's a means to instill family values in their children. For others, it's one among many social service agencies.

None of us would deny the importance of living out faith in the public square, or of serving the poor, or of bringing up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but these are not sufficient reasons to be the church.

The church was born for the same reason each of us was born: to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. Our worship, our programs of outreach and nurture, our ministry to one another and to the world – everything we do, we do to give glory to God and to share the blessings of God's grace.

Being Presbyterians, of course, you all already knew that. Doctrinal definitions are one thing, however. Living them out in a very human institution is another.

I ran across a speech given long ago by Dr. Charles E. Diehl, an early president of what is now known as Rhodes College, my *alma mater*. The speech was delivered in December 1925, the year the college moved from Clarksville, Tennessee, to Memphis. Dr. Diehl closed his speech with these words about the college:

She labors to send out men and women with strong characters and disciplined minds which are to be at the disposal of the world's need for the solution of its desperate problems, for the alleviation of its myriad ills, and for the bringing in of that better day when wrong shall cease, and liberty and love and truth and right o'er all the earth are known as in their throne above.

How's *that* for a mission statement? Here is Calvinism at its very best. The chief end, even of a college, is to glorify the God from whom all blessings flow. Would that today's Presbyterians were as sure about the nature and purpose of the church as that college president was about the nature and purpose of his school.

Here's an unlikely place to find our identity: the eighth chapter of the Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is, I suspect, uncharted territory for many of us. I have a hunch your Bible doesn't open to Nehemiah because you've read it so often. The work itself is not easy to place historically, and its chapters are a bit scrambled. In fact, the scholarly consensus is that much of the contents of the Book of Nehemiah probably belong somewhere in the Book of Ezra.

Let me set the scene for today's reading. Over a number of years, the people of Israel have been trickling home, in dribs and drabs, from exile in Babylon. There have been several attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but all of them have been met with local opposition. "Build a new Jerusalem?" Israel's neighbors have been saying, "Not in my back yard."

At last, under the Jewish governor Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes, King of Persia, the restoration of Jerusalem gets put on a fast track. As the walls go up, however, the prophet and priest Ezra supplies something more essential to the project of rebuilding God's people than Nehemiah's bricks and mortar.

The people, you see, have forgotten who they are.

The people need to hear God's Word. After all, it was God's Word that formed them in the first place. It was God's Word that created the heavens and the earth. It was God's Word to Abraham and Sarah that called them to leave the comfort and security of their old life and venture into the unknown. It was God's Word that promised to make of them a great nation and to use that nation as a blessing to the whole world. Time and time again God had spoken that same Word to Israel through the prophets, calling God's people to repentance and faith.

Now, after all those years of hardship and exile, the people are dying to hear that Word again. There's no point in rebuilding Jerusalem if they've forgotten why.

So, Nehemiah summons all the people together "**in the square by the Water Gate,**" and Ezra comes out with some dusty old scrolls. As near as scholars can figure, what Ezra has in his hands are portions of the Book of Leviticus. God alone knows how that text had survived the sack of Jerusalem and all those years of exile.

Ezra starts reading out loud from this Book of the Law, and all the faces in the square go blank. (Believe me, I know the look.)

The text, you see, is in Hebrew. This is the fourth century B.C. Jews aren't speaking Hebrew anymore; they're speaking Aramaic. For those returned exiles, hearing Ezra read from Leviticus in Hebrew is like us hearing *Beowulf* in the Old English. The point is, the text needs interpreting.

So that's exactly what happens. Ezra reads a bit in Hebrew, then he gives the sense of the text in Aramaic. When he gets tired, some of his associates take over. These are Ezra's fellow priests, the Levites, whose unpronounceable names were left out of this morning's lection in order to show mercy on Morris, our reader.

“So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Do you know what happens next?

The people fall asleep? They ask to wait until the Book of Leviticus comes out on Netflix? They demand that Ezra tell a funny story or write up a little drama so that they can get the point without exercising their intellects?

No. The story says the people *wept*. They broke down and cried. Perhaps they cried because they realized how far short of God's expectations they had fallen. Perhaps they cried because they didn't know their ancestor's language anymore. Or just as likely, they wept for pure joy to hear God's Word to them.

“Do not mourn or weep . . .” Ezra and the priests tell them. **“Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength . . . And the people went their way . . . to make great rejoicing *because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*”**

In this moment the idea of *Bible* is born. Up to this time, Israel had not thought of God's will being revealed in a body of sacred literature. Indeed, it would be centuries before there would be agreement about which writings to include in the Hebrew canon. From this time on, however, Israel began to understand themselves as a people of the Book.

When the time comes for Jesus to declare the purpose of his own ministry, where does he go? He goes to his home synagogue and he opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He turns to the Book.

What is true of Israel is true of the Church. We, too, are people of the Book. We believe that God still speaks God's Word through the reading and hearing of these words from holy scripture.

Sounds quaint, doesn't it – the idea that God's will could be revealed through the Bible? I fear the very notion has become an embarrassment to some of us. We don't want to be thought of as *fundamentalists*. I'll bet not a single person in this sanctuary will drive home in a car with one of those bumper stickers that reads "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."

Well, if Ezra himself had had a car, he wouldn't have had a bumper sticker like that, either. What does the text actually say? "**They read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.**" Ezra was no more a Biblical literalist than you or I. He had to interpret the text. He had to apply his mind and his knowledge of language and his understanding of the needs of his audience.

What's more, the people had to *listen*. They had to apply their hearts and minds. They had to "*hear the Word of God,*" – a loaded phrase which means to give one's whole self to the task. That is what it means today to be people of the Book.

The problem with the Church today is not that we take the Bible too *literally*. The problem is, we don't take it *seriously*. We don't read it with the prayer that it will read us. We don't open ourselves to God's Spirit as Interpreter of scripture. We don't wrestle with the really tough texts until they yield up their blessings as we limp away, wounded but thankful.

Even more disturbing than the partisanship in Washington just now is the way we Christians mirror the same behavior with one another. What's more, Scripture is our ammunition. Christians use the Bible not as a means of seeking God's will, but as a means of enforcing their agenda.

Texts are ripped from their contexts and used as bludgeons to batter the opposing side. Instead of listening, we're trying to shout each other down. We're not being people *of* the Book. We're being people who *use* the Book to our own ends.

As important as it the Bible is, it is not God's only way of speaking to humanity. God's Word "**became flesh and dwelt among us.**" The Bible is not our *Lord*. Our *Lord* is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. For this reason, the Church speaks not only *Bible language*; it also speaks *Body language*. We're not just people of the Book. We're also the body of Christ.

We learned that lesson long ago, when our spiritual ancestors at Corinth were squabbling amongst themselves. The issues back then were not much different than they are now. They were issues of leadership and authority – about who should be included in the community and who should be left out. There were nasty things being said about the motives of people on opposing sides of each issue. Some even claimed that God had given them the inside track on God's will, and they had the gift of speaking in tongues to prove it.

You can't live that way, Paul wrote the church in Corinth. You're not a hierarchy. You're not a debating society, or even a social service agency. "**You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.**" There's not a member among you more important than any other. You need that member with whom you will never agree on a given issue. You can't get along without that member any more than a foot can say to an eye, "Get lost!" or a hand say to an ear, "I have no need of you."

- You're opposed to same-sex marriage. I have no need of you!
- You're opposed to President Trump's wall. I have no need of you!
- You're sitting on the fence and won't take a stand. I *especially* have no need of you!

And while we're so busy trying to squeeze each other into a given mold or out of a given community, the world looks at our Body language and draws conclusions about the Lord we're supposed to be serving.

Oh, they hear our words about love and forgiveness and unity in Christ. And pretty words they are, but our Body language conveys a different message. It speaks of rejection and disunity, and of a God too small to embrace Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, gay and straight. With our Bible language we profess our unity in Jesus Christ, but our Body language – that tells a different story.

It's hard to be the Church these days, but it's no harder than it was back in Paul's day. The key is not to send out mixed messages about who we are and whose we are.

Our Bible language and our Body language must convey the same message: God loves the world. Christ died on the cross to redeem the whole of humankind. The church was born to give glory to that God, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the earth. It is Christ who makes us one – not agreement on every issue that faces us. We're not called to agree. We're called to love and to serve – to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

So says the Bible, and so should say the Body. At least in this little corner of God's kingdom, let's try to keep from sending mixed messages.

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