



The Gospel Fluency of Christ's Ambassadors

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HOW SHALL THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY THINK ABOUT THE CHURCH'S relationship to the dominant culture? The answer will have considerable significance for how Christians think about the church's mission both inside and outside that dominant culture. For over a millennium in Europe and then also in North and South America since the rule of the emperor Constantine, the Christian church has enjoyed a position of privilege in cultural life—a condition termed Christendom. The church's mission in this Constantinian era has often been described in imperial metaphors. The church sought to subject the dominant culture to God's rule or kingdom and conquer other cultures in the name of the *Lord Jesus*. However, at least a generation of Christian academics and leaders have questioned whether this way of thinking about Christianity's relationship to the dominant culture is still appropriate.

I. REPENT! THE END OF CHRISTENDOM IS AT HAND!

One of the most frequently cited observations in recent theological writing is George Lindbeck's assessment that the Christian community is in an "awkwardly

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Is the end of Christendom truly at hand? Though now a truism, this claim requires another look. A faithful church adequate for our times will require speakers fluent in the gospel and in the popular oral culture of the day.

intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but not yet clearly disestablished" in the United States.¹ Christendom is disappearing, according to a wide variety of observers. Until the Christian community recognizes this historic development, it will not be able to make the necessary changes in its life and mission that the end of Christendom requires.

Three examples illustrate how this assessment is held by widely differing observers. In numerous writings over the past twenty years theologian Douglas John Hall has argued that Christianity, especially the mainline Christian churches, can no longer provide the cultic cement for the dominant culture to hold together its optimistic worldview. Lacking a vital theological center, the mainline churches have become the havens of the marginalized—society's dissidents, discontents, and discards.² Similarly, theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has observed that when religion was banished from public to private life, when the "social and cultural hegemony of generalized Christian presuppositions" was divorced from a particular Christian community, Christian witness lost its power. Christianity has become irrelevant and meaningless to a social order that no longer needs it.³ From yet another viewpoint, church consultant Loren Mead identifies the emergence of the ministry of the laity as the decisive turn in the end of Christendom's mission paradigm. When the possibility that discipleship can conflict with citizenship becomes real, the church is no longer the same as the empire and the parish is no longer identical with the community of faith. The mission "frontier" is not some distant country but the congregation's doorstep.⁴

II. THE NEW COMMUNITY OF APOSTOLIC DISCIPLESHIP

Despite their differences, the prophets of a post-Constantinian Christianity agree that the demise of culturally established Christendom calls for something new. The end of Christendom requires a new countercultural community of faith, a fresh enculturation of Christianity on the sidelines or boundaries of the dominant culture rather than in the culture's public square. Hall would "establish, in and around existing congregations and parishes, small communities of serious Christian commitment," communities of discipleship on the margins of the dominant culture that would seek to find "a gospel that speaks to the deepest spiritual condition of our contemporaries."⁵ Hauerwas proposes Christian formation within a "colony" of "resident aliens." In this church of renewed discipleship, the

¹George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 134.

²See, for example, Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 73-106, and "The Changing North American Context of the Church's Ministry," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22/6 (December 1995) 406-16.

³Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 25.

⁴Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington: Alban, 1991) 22-29.

⁵Douglas John Hall, "The Church and Its Ministry: Responding to the Changing Context in Worship, Preaching, Education, Outreach," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22/6 (December 1995) 426; "A Theological Proposal for the Church's Response to Its Context," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22/6 (December, 1995) 423.

intelligibility of the Christian faith might be regained, for “salvation is a political alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called church.”⁶ Mead advocates for congregations transformed into communities of apostolic discipleship. These transformed communities generate good news, live good news, *are* good news by recognizing and responding to all the needs and pain of the world, the “bad news.”⁷

III. THREE CHALLENGES TO THE CONSENSUS

This consensus among observers of widely varying viewpoints might suggest that the end of the Constantinian era and the necessity of a new community of discipleship are beyond dispute. But I wonder.

1. Is Christendom really over? One error of past historical analysis was to mistake the passing of legal establishment for the end of any kind of establishment. Later historians recognized the emergence of an unofficial cultural establishment of the church with an even more powerful position of influence in society. Is Christendom or culturally established Christianity really ending now or is a new form of Christendom emerging? The evidence is more ambiguous than one might be led to expect, especially outside mainline protestant denominations in the United States. Worldwide the number of Christians is rising. In the United States there is a mix of denominational losses and increases. Some churches that are attuned more to the cultural climate than to a denominational tradition are growing rapidly in numbers and influence.

Might the truth actually be the reverse: what is coming to an end is the sectarianism of the confessionally divided denominations, while non-denominational churches become more culturally established? What if the present “awkward intermediate stage” were not the end of Christendom but rather one more transformation of the relationship between the dominant culture and its dominant religion? What if the cause of the momentous changes being felt were not the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Christendom but something much more prosaic? Specifically, are the last vestiges of *cuius regio, eius religio* (i.e., the religion of the ruler determines the religion of the region) disappearing? Is something as ordinary as the increasing use of automobiles making it both possible and necessary for most Christians to move beyond the “parish,” the ghetto of language, ethnicity, and confession in which most transplanted European churches once enjoyed a denominational monopoly?

2. Are the reasons for pronouncing Christendom’s end polemical rather than historical? The demise of a Constantinian-established church in captivity to a corrupt culture is a commonplace of historical analysis driven by apologetics and polemics. Centuries of protestant and sectarian historiography have supposedly proven the corruption and demise of the religious establishment. That aging,

⁶Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* 35.

⁷Loren Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Washington: Alban, 1994) 31, 41-42.

corrupt church is dying, these polemicists typically say, and the future belongs to something new, specifically, to our particular religious society or movement.

Is the attractiveness of this pronounced end of culturally established Christianity *not* in its ability to account for historical realities but in something else? Is the appeal of this hypothesis its ability to justify one's own estrangement from the popular culture of the communities in which religious professionals live and the cultus of the Christian congregations which call them to service? To say it more bluntly, is "the end of Christendom" a myth that legitimates the fears and hatreds, the demons peculiar to the class of religious professionals that parish pastors, seminary professors, denominational executives, and parachurch consultants constitute?

3. Is the new or transformed community of apostolic discipleship really the post-Constantinian future? Even if the prophets of a post-Constantinian church are correct that the end of Christendom is at hand, the question still remains whether the prescribed repentance is necessary, appropriate, or even possible. The justification for these countercultural communities is some need identified in the dominant culture—whether it be a need for an intelligible or meaningful gospel or for the remedy of human pain. In turn this need necessitates the *counterculture* of a transformed and idealized Christian community.

Is such an idealized community of apostolic discipleship possible in this age? The scriptures clearly envision the Christian church as a mixed community in this age (for example, Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). More to the point: Would this countercultural community really be something new? It would be ironic if the supposedly post-Constantinian disestablished community of apostolic discipleship were nothing more than a renewed attempt to establish a particular, perhaps sectarian, Christian community as dominant or privileged within the culture.

IV. THE GOSPEL IS ITS OWN WARRANT

Having said all this, I would still be willing to concede that some form of Christendom may well be coming to an end and that promoting apostolic communities of both individual and corporate discipleship is a worthy goal. But I am not convinced that the former *necessitates* the latter as a new mission "paradigm" (Mead) or "tactic" (Hauerwas) for the contemporary Christian church. To argue so is a mistake, I think, for those who think about mission evangelically, because of the very nature of the gospel, the *euaggelion*, itself.

Euaggelion is commonly translated as "good news," and the evangel is certainly that. But the gospel is not news in the sense of neutral information like scientific data that the Christian community makes available on the assumption or hope that someone will find it useful, that is, good for some human need. It is an *aggelia*, a message that God has authorized, even commanded to be proclaimed in public, to all people. Whether its goodness (or, in our culture, utility) is recognized immediately, if ever, is another issue. If the gospel was a stumbling block and folly to its first hearers, one ought not be surprised if a supposedly post-Constantinian, post-modern, post-anything culture struggles to discover its utility. In the same

way, the gospel does not require the creation of separated, idealized communities of apostolic discipleship to establish its credibility. The word and sacraments are efficacious in themselves because they are *Christ's Word*, spoken and administered in *his* place and stead, by *his* command. The gospel itself is enough; it establishes its own credibility.

The gospel is its own warrant because it is God's. One could even say it ultimately defines what is truly needful or good. That is why that early Christian preacher Timothy was charged in God's name to preach the word with urgency "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2), that is, whether it seems timely or useful according to a contextual analysis of the culture or not. The necessity for mission comes from the gospel itself rather than any real or imagined need in the culture. Even humankind's very real need for the gospel itself does not necessitate either Christian mission or the content and shape of that mission. To say so would be to admit that the gospel, to be true, would necessarily have some utility as a particular culture understands religion's utility, even when that utility is as compelling as "speak[ing] to the deepest spiritual condition of our contemporaries," the "experience of negation."⁸ What is needed for the fulfillment of God's mission is someone preaching (Rom 10:14), not someone organizing countercultural movements.

V. THE GOSPEL FLUENCY OF CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS

If a counterculture is not necessary to make the gospel message present or credible, then Christians are free to think in other ways about the church's mission in and to the dominant culture. A more faithful and constructive way of thinking acknowledges and respects God's sovereignty in any culture while avoiding the imperialist pretensions of considering oneself a purified "colony" or even "outpost" amidst a corrupt, dying culture.

Such a way of thinking is found in Paul's suggestive metaphor for Christian mission: "We are Christ's ambassadors, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20). Christian mission is like ambassadorial service. The church is an embassy in the old sense of the word. It is engaged activity more than a separated place. A kind of fluency, what I like to call "gospel fluency," is as indispensable to Christian mission as it is to diplomatic service.

Fluency in diplomatic service has several dimensions. First, ambassadors must be true to the government or sovereign they represent. They must know the message entrusted to them thoroughly, comprehensively, intimately. Second, ambassadors must have some facility in, or even better, a gift for oral expression. Preludes to war can be reduced to written condemnations and ultimatums. But an embassy of peace is best served by an ambassador whose living voice speaks with the rhythm and tenor of reconciliation. Finally, wise and faithful ambassadors will enter graciously into the full depth of the host culture's language, not simply its grammar and vocabulary, but its idiom and song. A true embassy of reconciliation

⁸Hall, "A Theological Proposal," 423; *Lighten Our Darkness*, 204-13.

would be ill-served by ambassadors content to leave the message buried in official documents and shrouded in professional jargon.

Christ's ambassadors who serve the gospel faithfully and well demonstrate the same fluency. What follows is a brief and rough outline of what I think that gospel fluency includes.

1. True to Christ's good work

Communicating the true content of the message is essential for fluency. And so insuring the trueness or fidelity of Christian proclamation to the incredible goodness of God at work in the cross of Jesus Christ is essential to gospel fluency. If the message is not *good*, if the message is not specifically *this* good work—Christ crucified—then it is not true to the One who calls and sends Christians as ambassadors of *Jesus*, not some other sovereign. Holding fast to this work, to the good accomplished in Christ, is the classic task of distinguishing God's *euaggelion* from any other message, particularly the law, even God's own torah.

Because what is entrusted to Christ's ambassadors is a message and not simply neutral information, fluency means knowing not only the message's content but also its distinctive grammar, the grammar of promise and faith. The grammatical mood of the gospel message is neither imperative ("do this") nor subjunctive ("if anyone were to do this, then..."), but indicative ("the kingdom of God is at hand"). God is the grammatical subject of Christ's good work ("the Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor"), not the object of human spiritual endeavor. The grammatical case is not some objective, distantly neutral observation stated in the third person, but first-to-second-person address ("I baptize *you*"). Those who proclaim the gospel fluently know this distinctive grammar of promise and faith intimately and speak it regularly.

2. The living voice

Of course, the gospel message sounds in all kinds of grammatical constructions, not only those distinctive to it. That is why Martin Luther called this task of distinguishing law and gospel an art.⁹ This art is not an exact science of constructing error-free sentences of supposedly "pure doctrine." In the crucible of experience, distinctions easily collapse and God's promise for faith is lost. Yesterday's promise of hope and comfort dissolves into today's accusation and demand. There is no escape by intellectual sophistry from this deathtrap, no clever theological solution. Only the *viva vox*, the voice of the living God, will do.

In these moments fluent ambassadors of Christ do not point elsewhere to some written formulation. Christ has called them to *speak* the living voice of the gospel. When Luther detailed five ways that the gospel is ministered, all five are oral, beginning with "the spoken word by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the gospel) is preached to the whole world" and concluding with "the mutual conversation and consolation" of Christian sisters and brothers.¹⁰

⁹For example, in his later *Lectures on Galatians*, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-85) 26:178.

¹⁰*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 310.

Therefore, evangelical proclamation is an event. Written words, even those of scripture, simply lie on paper, but gospel proclamation does something. Evangelical proclamation does more than explain God's word. It does to hearers in the living present what the word once did and so authorizes again.¹¹ Evangelical proclamation breaks death's silence. It cuts through the white noise of the law's accusation. It stops the vain yammering of sin's self-promotion. It raises the community of believers to life.

Fluency means more than having a correct understanding of a message and knowing which words are the right ones to speak. Fluency also includes the skill or gift of actually speaking those words. Gospel fluency is the skill or gift for breaking into the present human conversation on God's behalf and breaking out into God's song. Knowing correct formulations for talking *about* God's breaking into this age is not the same thing. Gospel fluency means having the rhythm, the timing of God's song. It means being able to seize the very moment when interruption is "the right time"—*kairos*. Gospel fluency means singing with the tenor of God's goodness for the moment, whether in solemn unison, ringing fanfare, or sweet harmony.

In other words, messengers with laryngitis are as useless as those with amnesia. Fluent ambassadors for Christ employ both a sound mind and a ready voice. The reason why I am most unconvinced that the times require a new mission paradigm is simply that I do not believe that Christians have exhausted (or ever will exhaust) the power of oral proclamation, of public evangelical preaching in the living present. The church is a mouth-house, Luther once said. It is a mission paradigm appropriate to those who believe that faith comes by hearing rather than by seeing and doing or reading and writing.

3. *In the public square*

This leads to the matter of evangelical proclamation that is truly *public*. Those who sing sweetly in an unknown language may be entertaining, but they fail to proclaim a clear message to a public audience. Obviously it is no more faithful to Christ's embassy that we insist that Spanish-speaking people learn our English than it would have been for the Palestinian Jewish Christians to insist that Hellenists learn Aramaic before they could hear the word of Christ.

But the matter is more subtle and complex than simply identifying and employing the common language of a particular people or public in service of gospel proclamation. Within the realm of a common language's usage, social classes and cultural traditions converse in varying, discrete idioms. More than territory or place determine language, these idioms define the place. The idiom employed will determine whether the place is private and closed or "open to the public."

Two very particular challenges confront Christ's public ambassadors in the traditions of mainline denominations.

- a. Mainline denominations are dominated by "educated clergy" who are

¹¹Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 155.

trained first at colleges and universities and then seminaries. Believing that biblical and theological literacy serves Christian mission, this tradition expects Christ's public ambassadors to have the skills of reading, interpreting, and writing with precision and insight. Preachers are expected to be literate, to be competent with texts, to be facile in the realm of written discourse.

But literacy is more than a tool. It is a culture with its own idiom. Novelty of thought and expression are valued in written or literate discourse. Conventional and familiar expressions are dismissed as stereotypes and clichés lacking in imagination. Repetition is unnecessary for memory when you can "look it up," so it is merely a waste of paper. On the other hand, in a community that lives exclusively or primarily by oral discourse, the use and repetition of familiar and conventional expressions is an aid to memory. Repetition of a conventional expression is an empty cliché in a text culture. In a culture that lives by the varied forms of oral discourse it is the refrain of a treasured song.¹²

In many ways the culture and idiom of Christian congregations as well as much of the American population is profoundly oral. "Educated clergy," who refuse to speak in an idiom other than that of literary culture, who refuse to step outside the private space defined by academia's private code, have abandoned the public idiom, the public place, and therefore *public* ministry. Gospel fluency means not only having the gift or ability for oral speech, but also knowing and employing the idiom of oral culture.

b. A second challenge is a related one. If a significant change has occurred in the American context for ministry in the last generation, I think it is that American popular entertainment has transformed the public language of the national culture. Meanwhile, some Christian communities perpetuate a tradition of Sunday worship whose language is the idiom of nineteenth-century European immigrants. Though once a truly public language, that immigrant idiom is now only a private code. The issue is much more than a matter of taste, as it is sometimes represented. Revulsion at the most crass coinage of American popular entertainment can lead one to reject both the culture and its idiom as incapable or unworthy of receiving and carrying the gospel. One can be tempted to think that only an idealized countercultural community of apostolic discipleship—and presumably some wondrous and untainted language of that community—will do.

Such thinking is naive. A simplistic rejection of culture fails to recognize that Christ was human and that human culture expresses some of the Creator's providence.¹³ One could add that any human community of discipleship, no matter how separated or "apostolic," will always participate in and be a product of the culture of its time. More critical thinking recognizes that these products of culture, including their distinctive idiom, cannot be rejected simply because they are not sufficiently spiritual, religious, or Christian. This creation is still God's, and these

¹²On the differences between oral and literate cultures, see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982); and *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale, 1967).

¹³Richard Niebuhr's analysis of the "Christ against culture" type is a classic critique of such thinking; *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951) 45-82.

cultural products can serve as agents of God's "left hand," instruments in God's providence for this age.

On Pentecost the Spirit inaugurated an astonishingly public mission by giving voice to the word in every language present. So also do Christ's ambassadors have the freedom and calling to plumb the depth and explore the range of every public idiom, even the idiom of American popular culture. Knowing that the Spirit can speak in any tongue, they can approach any culture and its idiom with gracious goodwill rather than imperious disdain.

Speaking a message true to the good work of the crucified Christ, voiced in the living present, in the idiom of the public square—that is the gospel fluency characteristic of Christ's ambassadors. It is, I believe, a more faithful and promising service of God's embassy of reconciliation than promoting countercultural communities of purified post-Constantinian piety. ⊕