



“Jesus as Authority”

Preaching Text: Philippians 3:4b-14

17 March 2013: 5th Sunday of Lent

First United Methodist Church, Arlington, Texas

Some Christians talk a lot about “evangelizing people” and “making a witness.” These are good things, yet in some environments it makes the uninitiated break out in hives. Why? Because to the novice or neophyte these terms suggest a kind of “religious buttonholing” or “pious ambush”—all in the name of Jesus! In truth, our lesson today offers some of the most sophisticated and persuasive evangelistic speech we will find in our entire Bible. Paul draws on his not insubstantial learning to plea to those in the church at Philippi.

What Paul does, however, is tricky and some people who teach those who preach suggest that Paul’s rhetorical/speaking strategy is just downright dangerous. William Brosend, for example, writes, [Another] “mark . . . differentiates Jesus’ preaching and our own. This is Jesus’ apparent reticence to speak about himself.”

As Brosend puts it, the preaching of Jesus was [only] occasionally self-referential. He continues:

The frequent use of self-reference in the Fourth Gospel is one of the main differences between the rhetoric of Jesus in John and in the Synoptic Gospels. But regardless of that comparison, it is striking how infrequently Jesus is depicted as speaking about himself directly in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Thus when modern people hear Paul’s autobiographical speech-making we may hear it as egotism. Yet, autobiographical reasoning was common to the rhetoric the first century. Listeners considered a speaker’s character as a valid, even powerful, tool of persuasion. Paul wants readers to know that he has experienced firsthand God’s love in Christ. Paul also wants readers to know that he himself strives to live out the message he preaches. In the minds of first century readers, Paul’s personal story authenticated his message and gave his voice authority (*Feasting on the Word—Year A, Volume 4*). It is similar to an endorsement from a person who has actually used a product! And



yet danger lurks when celebrities say “I endorse this _____ (whatever).”

Advertisers want us to see celebrities using their products and then we go out and buy these products. Endorsement amounts grow as more celebrities connect with us on social media. Some companies are exploiting the medium and paying up to \$10,000 per tweet for a high-profile endorsement. But not all deals are so sweet—agreements go awry. Margaret Campbell, a professor of marketing for CU at Boulder points out, “The overall message to marketers is be careful, because all of us, celebrities or not, have positives and negatives to our personalities, and those negatives can easily transfer to a brand.” Do you remember when Tiger Woods saw \$22 million walk out the door after his issues came to light? ([foxbusiness.com/personal-](http://foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2013/02/28/six-celebrity-endorsement-disasters/)

[finance/2013/02/28/six-celebrity-endorsement-disasters/](http://foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2013/02/28/six-celebrity-endorsement-disasters/)). Hear the day’s lesson:

4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:4-14).

What Paul tries to do in this segment of this letter to Philippi is to establish his character because Paul knows that before you can convince an audience to accept anything someone says, they have to accept you as trustworthy. Not only that, but there are several aspects to building a person’s credibility:

- Does the audience respect the speaker?
- Does the audience believe the speaker is of good character?
- Does the audience believe the speaker is generally trustworthy?
- Does the audience see the speaker as an expert on this topic?



Paul is using himself as an example of how Christ has worked in him to make him who he is. He does this by using rhetoric in establishing his good character. First, he obtains a positive character assessment from the Philippian believers. In this way Paul enhances his personal character. Second, Paul effectively warns them against potential enemies who may lead some away from a proper perspective of both Christ and a particular way of life. Third, Paul establishes an eschatological or “day of the Lord” perspective that focuses on the meaning and impact of Christ’s post-resurrection return that should serve as a guiding principle in their earthly or worldly existence.

Paul establishes all this “because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” In this lesson from Philippians 3:4b-14, Paul cites his own experience as an example. Earlier I implied that self-reference as a “speaking strategy is just downright dangerous.” I hear a lot of preachers, and I pity the poor congregation that hears in the introduction of every Sunday’s sermon these words (or something like them): “When my little boy, Billy Bob and I went down to the Wal-Mart this week, I had a revelation from or of Jesus.”

Or: “When my little girl, Betty Lou and I went down to the Sonic this week, I had a revelation from or of Jesus.” Or: “When the Mrs. and I went down to the Piggly-Wiggly yesterday, we saw something Jesus would have been proud of.” Well you get the idea. Week in and week out this imaginary preacher has experiences that most of us normal folks have had as well. It reminds me the guy who always saw the Virgin Mary in every cloud formation. I brought this idea of self-referential preaching up in my preaching class and this veto or ban on our little lives dragged into the pulpit makes many preachers mad. They say, “Well, Mouzon Biggs talks about his life all the time in sermons!”

I reminded them that Dr. Biggs has a remarkable life. He is in Istanbul one week and San Francisco the next. He preaches one week in a New York City church and the next week for Sioux Christians at Montana’s Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Dr. Biggs



seldom spends time at Wal-Mart, Sonic, or at the Piggly-Wiggly.

But more than that, when we are self-referencing from the pulpit we put our lives under the microscope of public scrutiny. If you do not believe me then ask Pope Francis. As we can surely note with presidents-elect, popes always have detractors on their coattails, if for no other reason than the public lives they have led as cardinals and archbishops. Francis leaves a trail of the detractors in Argentina where he led the Roman Catholic Church of Buenos Aires since 1998. From his handling of church-sex abuse cases to his gay marriage opposition to alleged ties with military extremists, the incoming pope has had to deflect a series of controversies.

Yet Paul is not worried about detractors and in fact he addresses them when he writes of “the sharing of his [Christ’s] sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” Mostly what Paul does is cast aside his Jewishness in order to realize the gain Christ offers. That is Paul writes that he wants to “know Christ” as risen and living—and because he has found that happiness in Christ he recommends it to others.

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