

Mission Table 2015: Case Statement on the Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society  
*How can we engage Christ's presence in a rapidly changing world?*

**A Rambling Reflection**

I was asked to write a reflection on the case statement addressing the Gospel in a rapidly changing society for the Professional Ministry Team. I begin with three caveats:

1. It is easier to deconstruct something than it is to construct something of value. I shall try to refrain from deconstructing the statement with too much vigor, not showing respect for the work that went into composing it.
2. The case statement needed to be rather short. Thus, it is more suggestive than definitive. Perhaps part of what I do here is develop these suggestions in a way that the group was not able to do because of the time allowed.
3. The case statement reflects the contributions of a number of people; thus, it does not represent a unified coherent stream of thinking by a single mind. A document written in this way will inevitably feel a bit disparate.

The Gospel

The document never defines or delimits what is meant by "the Gospel." The original and persisting meaning of "the Gospel" in Christian tradition is the story of God's work through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> What transforms tragic news into "good" news is the assertion that God was working through these events; what God did through these events is what makes the story "good news." The Gospel was originally a story and not a concept, a principle, or a program of reform. Acts 2:22-24 nicely summarizes the story. The *Case Statement* rightly refers to the "transcendence" of the Gospel and then lists its hallmarks as "reconciliation, forgiveness, faith in humanity, and hope."<sup>2</sup> These four characteristics are certainly embedded in the story, but these themes also characterize many other epic stories. In other words, they are not uniquely Christian. When we speak of "Gospel" we usually intend something that is distinctively Christian.

The church took this foundational and organizing narrative of the Christian faith, drew out the implications for human beings and creation, and then built a theological and ethical framework upon the story. It is perhaps helpful to cut our language more finely and place some daylight between the Gospel story and these justifiably-drawn implications. This also serves to distinguish it from the many other fine stories that have shaped human belief and behavior.

Perhaps a good starting point for moving in the direction the case statement wants to move would be to ask: How does the Gospel narrative speak to the concerns, challenges, and opportunities of our current

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<sup>1</sup> The second paragraph begins with a statement about our love of the church and how we believe the church can make a difference. This is an accurate description of American Baptists, but sometimes our love for the church and belief in its crucial role in God's work in the world can lead us to confuse the Gospel with the church. They are not the same thing. The church is derivative from the Gospel; the Gospel story necessarily produces Christian communities.

<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that the story of the Gospel fosters little faith in humanity. On the whole, humanity comes off looking rather hopeless as the story reaches its climax, thus necessitating the need for the work of God in Christ. The words "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" should set humanity in the proper perspective.

society? Attention could be given to how we can resist the temptation to so relativize this story that it loses its capacity to transcend a particular cultural and temporal articulation. This would necessitate a process of continually rediscovering that story, each time peeling away anew the cultural and conditional clothing that inevitably begins to cling to the story in a particular context. This would equip us to articulate the story and draw out its *current* implications in a way that makes it transformative in a society that is constantly changing. In a rapidly changing society, the danger of freezing a single expression of and response to the Gospel and making it the “received tradition” is greatly increased.

#### The Working Out of the Implications of the Gospel

To simply recite the story and then think our work is finished is an error as well. From the earliest days of the faith, believers have been working out the implications of the Gospel for their generation. The acceptance of Gentiles into the church without first becoming Hebrews was the first major shift in thinking. That shift was not a part of the original Gospel narrative story, but early church leaders extrapolated the way the story was headed and came to this fresh implication. Later on, believers would extrapolate that story further and reject the institution of slavery, a development that early believers certainly never saw coming. In our day, believers are extrapolating the story to formulate a faithful response to global warming and immigration, for example. None of these things were included in that original Good News narrative and, therefore, are not strictly the Gospel.

We can so laden the “Gospel” with implications born of a particular place and time that we sometimes are no longer able to distinguish between the Gospel and its contemporary implications. At that point, something of lasting value is diminished. And, consequently, the Gospel can become stale and powerless. When people cite both right-to-work laws and capital gains tax relief as unequivocally demanded by the Gospel, we have lost our way.

#### Denominational Adaptation

The third paragraph begins with “ABC has been a denomination which has historically adapted to the changing society....” This is a bit of an abrupt shift of topic from the Gospel to denominational history. Certainly, denominations sort out their place in the broader Christian family as the implications of the Gospel are reimagined as the context changes. Some denominations are better-suited to this task at certain times and other denominations at other times. The civic life of America has created fertile ground for members of the Baptist family. In Western Europe, Baptists have tread a more difficult path due to their differing cultures and histories. Philip Jenkins recently mused on why Baptists, though a weighty presence in the USA, have been a “quite marginal presence” in other lands.<sup>3</sup> My caution here is that we not jump too quickly from the contextualization of the Gospel narrative to particular denominational institutions and emphases.

When the world outside our churches begins to get the suspicion that our presentation of the Gospel and its implications is a veiled attempt to justify our religious institutions, it undercuts our credibility and tends to mute our voice.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Jenkins, “The Baptist Exception,” *Christian Century*, May 10, 2017, p. 61.

## The Role of Fear

The document rightly points to the suppressing role of fear in sorting out the implicit mandates of the Gospel in a changing culture. It might be helpful to look behind the fear to assess the anxiety that generates it. What is it about change in general and the particular changes we are undergoing that makes us anxious? Anxiety is one of the core characteristics of human existence. It will never be eradicated; we can only manage it and exploit it for change. Trust in God can certainly dull anxiety's power in our lives, but we will always battle it. Seeing our fear through this lens may lead to more productive conversations. This spawns the empowerment that the document talks about in its next paragraph.

I think it might also be good to think a bit about why we are *experiencing* change so dramatically. I don't know what would be the best yardstick to measure change, but, certainly, the rate of change *feels* to have heated up. There are, perhaps, two factors that intensify this experience. First, we have a great deal more information to process. Thus, we are more *aware* of the change that is taking place. Second, as Alvin Toffler pointed out, our relationships to things are becoming increasingly temporary.<sup>4</sup> That is, more of the items that fill our lives feel less permanent. With increasing mobility, relationships feel more temporary as well. This is particularly true in America, where we hold our places more lightly and dispose of places and things and relationships more readily than in other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> The "crisis" of change felt by the church in North America is not so deeply experienced in other places. It might be helpful to reflect upon why the church in America sees a crisis where the church in other places is less troubled.

One difference between the anxiety in the American church and the less-anxious mood of the church in other nations could be that the American Protestant church feels the loss of something of which believers in other places have little memory. Perhaps we are mistaking a loss of entitlement, on the one hand, with the cultural marginalizing of the Gospel and the faith it engenders, on the other hand. Among the things that are changing in America is the dissipation of the Protestant franchise. We have absolutized something that, in other nations, long ago passed away.

In this same paragraph, the case statement talks about the relevance of the church in making the world a better place. Certainly, we should not make irrelevance a goal of our ministry! On the other hand, we must be careful not to make relevance a primary value or measure of our success. Henri Nouwen argues that Jesus' first temptation in the wilderness was to be relevant by turning stones to bread. He writes that offering up to the world nothing but our vulnerable selves is the best we have to offer.<sup>6</sup> It is, perhaps, through our vulnerability that we will capture the attention of the world around us, earn the opportunity to speak to people's deepest needs and most profound dreams, and will be able to tap into our deepest source of power.

## Conclusion

I am arguing here for a more belief-grounded/convictional approach, from which will spring a more vigorous encounter between our congregations and the communities in which they minister. Luke

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<sup>4</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, pp. 50 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard-Henri Levi, *American Vertigo—Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*.

<sup>6</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus—Reflections on Christian Leadership*, pp. 17 ff.

Timothy Johnson wrote: “Belief is not nearly so central to most other religions as it is the Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> I am arguing here for a more open embrace of the scandal of particularity of the Gospel and a willingness to see where that takes us.<sup>8</sup>

In a way, I think I experienced the future of America while living in Belgium—a future that is admittedly a very long way off. America is still a hyper-religious nation, which is not the same thing as being a faithful nation. Belgium is an extremely secular country. There is very little remembrance of any type of owned religious faith. People are overwhelming secular humanists, but they are really good secular humanists. As a nation, they have a strong commitment to justice, both economic and otherwise. They take exemplary care of their elderly, their young, their poor, their sick, and their vulnerable. They embody many of the values we espouse as springing from the Gospel, yet there is no Gospel narrative that drives their living. If the thrust of our faith is about being relevant and transforming society in healthy ways and yet does not give a central place to the Gospel narrative and the belief it spawns, then we have lost something of great value.

Finally we have only one claim:

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power! (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

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February 2017

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<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed-What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*, p. 9. On pages 150 ff. Johnson then makes a case about how open acknowledgement of the centrality of belief in the Christian experience can animate such doctrines as sin, forgiveness, and atonement.

<sup>8</sup> The scandal of particularity refers to the resistance that many people have to the idea that God would enter into the creation in a particularized way, such as through a covenant with the ancient Hebrews or the individual of Jesus.