

Are we ready for the return of testimony?

Ryan Siemens

Testimony is back! With these words, Allan Rudy-Froese addressed the Mennonite Church Canada National Assembly in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in June 2009. And looking over some of the literature published in the last several years, I think he may be right. Diana Butler Bass, in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*,¹ addresses testimony as one of the vital practices of the Christian church. Christian Scharen, in *Faith as a Way of Life*,² looks at the role of testimony in pastoral ministry. Thomas Long, professor of

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preaching at Emory University, provides resources on testimony, both in his book on preaching, *The Witness of Preaching*,³ and in his 2004 release, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*.⁴

These books point to an urgent matter in certain segments of Christianity: the need to find ways to speak honestly about our faith. In recent decades, the voice of Christianity has been taken over by (handed over to?) the Christian right, and many a progressive Christian is left searching for an authentic

way to talk about faith. After all, speaking openly about faith in Jesus Christ is deeply rooted in Christian history and was formational in the early church and during the Reformation. Recognizing that many are unable to articulate their faith, Bass, Scharen, Long, and others are trying to help voiceless Christians find our voices. So testimony is making a comeback. Are we ready?

What authentic testimony is not

I returned from Pastors' Week 2008 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), on the theme of testimony, energized by what I had experienced and heard. In Sunday school

on that first Sunday back, several people asked me about my trip and about what I had taken away from it. Immediately I jumped into telling them about Alan Kreider’s inspiring address, “Tongue Screws and Testimony”—but I noticed that as I uttered the word *testimony*, an uncomfortable silence suddenly fell. Testimony, it turns out, might as well be a four-letter word.

While the class’s reaction did not take me completely by surprise, I realized that I could have said far more shocking words in that circle and provoked far less reaction. For many in my congregation, and even in my own experience, the idea of testimony and memories about testimony stir up negative feelings. Several people in the class talked about how testimony had been used as a litmus test to determine whether one was saved. Others said that testimony was often cheap talk: people can say they believe in Jesus, but to actually follow Jesus and become a disciple is something else entirely.

In my own experience, testimony or God-talk has been “just a pious form of marketing.”⁵ In grades eleven and twelve, I attended an Evangelical Free youth group in southern Alberta where we were taught how to use our testimonies to evangelise and convert. The leaders gave us formulas so that even if we only had five minutes with someone, we could plant a seed to save them.

Such tactics, when they use testimony manipulatively as a means to produce conversion experiences, have turned many progressive Christians against testimony language altogether and moved them toward the approach attributed to St Francis: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” If testimony is to make a comeback among progressive Christians, if we are to become capable of speaking freely about our faith in Christ, then we need to begin by talking about what testimony is not: it is not a way to manipulate or control others.

Credible witness

To help us move beyond these negative images of testimony, Thomas Long likens the Christian practice of testifying to the testimony of a witness in a court of law.⁶ According to Long, the witness “is placed on the stand because of two credentials: the witness has seen something, and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”⁷ The

witness is an authority about what she has seen, and has therefore been asked to provide testimony. It is her duty, in the court of law, to speak truthfully and honestly about the incident in question.

Now in a court setting, as Long points out, the personal values and characteristics of the witness do not really matter; they are not on trial. What matters is that the witness tell the truth. Truth telling is the concern of the court, because it is only through the witness's testimony that the judge and jury learn the truth. But if the witness bears false testimony, he has committed perjury—and “perjury, bearing false witness, is a serious crime in every society because the ability of a society to hold together ultimately depends on the reliability of the law, which in turn rests on the trustworthiness of testimony.”⁸ While the purpose of the witness's testimony is to shed light on a specific incident, the witness's life is now caught up in that event. He has seen something that others need to hear about, and if the court is to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he must be honest. The witness be-

comes a vessel of the truth; his testimony doesn't point to himself but to the event or incident he witnessed.

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We live in a postmodern society, in which many people think of truth as relative, as socially constructed. The idea of truth telling itself is nebulous. If we claim that the world was created by a loving God and is not the result of a random cosmic accident, or if we proclaim that the world's redemption is to be found in a God-man executed on a cross, not

through military power or economic theory, those claims leave the watching world wanting some credible evidence.

Incarnational living

On the Sunday after Easter, I began my “doubting Thomas” sermon by showing the cover of the March 31, 2008, issue of *MacLean's* magazine.⁹ It featured an image of Jesus with this bold caption: “JESUS HAS AN IDENTITY CRISIS: Scholars are casting new doubt on the divinity of Christ—and even wondering if the church would be better off without Him (Happy Easter).”

Presumably, the intent of the cover and the article was to create interest in and discussion—controversy—about the identity of Jesus Christ and the church. Letters to the editor in the weeks that followed displayed the reactions you'd expect. Some Christian respondents were aghast that *MacLean's* would even consider publishing such a story, while post-Christian and non-Christian respondents used the article as evidence for their view that Christianity makes invalid truth claims.

My contention is that when we Christians spend our time arguing for the “truth” of the resurrection but don't live as a resurrected people, then anyone can see that we don't really believe in the resurrection, and our debates are just so many words. According to Lawrence Moore, director of The Windermere Centre in England's Lake District, “Truth is demonstrated to be true when it results in transformation, discipleship and Life in the Spirit.”¹⁰ If our belief in Christ doesn't take us down this road, then it just isn't true in our lives. We live before a watching world, and our living must speak credibly to the things we hold true. We are called to incarnate the truth we profess!

Proclaiming Christ crucified

If testimony does indeed make a comeback, it will take a shape unlike what my Sunday school classmates remember. It can't just speak abstractly about God; it will take shape in the openness of our own lives and in the honesty with which we live out our convictions.

In 1905, when Saskatchewan became a province, its three major cities each became the site of a significant federal or provincial institution: Regina became the capital, the university located in Saskatoon, and Prince Albert got the prisons—both federal and provincial. Now Prince Albert is home to three federal institutions, minimum, medium, and maximum security, and a community release center for federal offenders. We also have provincial men's and women's correctional facilities and several other urban and rural community release centers.

Over the last thirty years, members of Grace Mennonite Church, along with others throughout the province, have been involved in a prison visitation program called Person-to-Person. The intent of this program is to create friendships with people in

the federal institution who do not have family or friends in the area able to visit them. About ten years ago, Person-to-Person expanded into the area of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) for high-risk sex offenders. In all, more than a quarter of the people in our congregation are involved in one of these programs. Both programs push us beyond what we are comfortable with and challenge our understanding of the reach of Christ's redeeming power.

Many years ago, Jack (not his real name) committed a horrific crime. He was caught and convicted and is incarcerated in Prince Albert. Many who know about his crime would regard him a monster who should be locked up forever. For more than ten years, a couple in our congregation have visited him. They are not evangelistic in the traditional sense of the word. They didn't go to prison to proselytise, nor did they go even to engage in friendship evangelism. They went because of their faith in Christ,

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and they visited Jack because he didn't have other people who could visit him. They formed a relationship with him for its own sake.

Through the course of these ten years of visits, Jack's life has changed. He saw himself as a person of little worth, but the time these folks have spent with him has given him a greater sense of his value. These three people have shared their lives openly and honestly, and over time they have become close

friends. Each speaks about the significance of their friendship, about the important place they hold in one another's lives, about how their interaction has changed them. The couple from our congregation didn't go to the prison in order to visit someone who needed saving, although he did, but as faithful witnesses to the love of Christ. They believe that Christ's redeeming love takes us into places of discomfort.

Since last September, Jack has been permitted to leave prison on escorted absences, and he has been coming to worship with us. He puts our faith on trial. Recently a parole hearing considered whether to grant him unescorted leaves of absence. Several people from our congregation attended this hearing and testified

to what they have witnessed in him. I was unable to attend, but included in the testimonies was a letter I had submitted. The hearing granted permission for unescorted leaves to Jack. We celebrate his good news.

And now Jack is looking forward to the day when he can be baptized into the body of Christ and participate more fully in our community of faith. His story calls on us to testify to a love so powerful that it can include him as a valued member of the community of the redeemed.

We dare not use testimony as a tool to try to make people become like us. Instead, it must be a way of speaking about God's loving, redeeming activity in our lives and in the world. To accomplish this purpose, we may need to find a new language. And if testimony is to make a comeback, our words and actions will need to come together.

Notes

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How The Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

² Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

³ Thomas G. Long *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004)

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ Long develops this metaphor more fully in *The Witness of Preaching* and in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*.

⁷ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 47.

⁸ Long, *Testimony*, 28.

⁹ *MacLean's* is a Canadian news weekly.

¹⁰ Lawrence Moore, "Commentary and Reflection—Easter 2B," *Disclosing New Worlds: Weekly Reflections, Commentaries, and Sermons on the Revised Common Lectionary Texts*, posted April 13, 2009, <http://lectionary.wolsblog.com/2009/04/13/commentary-and-reflections-easter-2b/>.

About the author

Ryan Siemens has been serving as pastor of Grace Mennonite Church, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, since he graduated with an MDiv from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in the summer of 2007.