

Title: Can I Get a Witness?

Text: John 4:27-30, 39-42

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* Diana Butler Bass discusses several Christian practices that are bringing renewal to the church. She has one chapter simply entitled “Testimony.” She shares how the power of testimony turned around “The Church of the Redeemer,” a church that is located in the shadow of Yale Divinity School. She writes, “A few months after my time at Redeemer, the United Church of Christ, the denomination of which the church is a part, started a national advertisement campaign entitled ‘God is still speaking.’ I chuckled when I saw the ads; I wondered if the producers had visited Redeemer! Certainly there I witnessed God still speaking through God’s people. The reality of the Christian story, of the power of biblical faith, was not the stuff of distant historical events. Rather, their own stories vibrate with the Spirit’s wisdom—of discovering faith, of living faith, of struggling faith, of risky faith. Yes, I thought: God continues to speak.”

What she mentions here is the stuff of testimony—discovering faith, living faith, struggling faith, risking faith. I want you to think about the testimony of the woman of Samaria—the woman to whom Jesus offered living water—and its implications for faith. After her conversation with Jesus she leaves her water jar at the well and goes back into the village town. She says to the people of her village excitedly: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” This was her testimony and I want us to think about its implications for our own testimonies of faith.

First, she shares her own experience, and in sharing her personal experience she does not use factual language; she uses the language of devotion, the language of exaggeration. “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did,” she exclaims. Well now, Jesus didn’t really do all that did he? This is an overstatement, but Jesus did speak truth to her and she felt like he knew her completely.

Much of the language of the New Testament is the language of devotion, and as such it is the language of exaggeration and overstatement. Some of the exclusive language about Jesus in the New Testament may be understood as the language of devotion. When this Gospel says that no one can come to the father except through Jesus that may also be the language of devotion. Statements of devotion are not literally true, but they are true in a deeper than literal way for the one who makes the statement.

When this woman says that Jesus told her everything that she ever did this was her way of saying that Jesus spoke the truth to her and she felt as if he really knew what she was

about. When the early Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God they are saying what is true for them—they discovered God in a new and radical way through Jesus. Much of the language of John’s Gospel is the language of testimony.

If I say, “Jesus is the only way to God” I am speaking out of my experience and for me that is true, but I cannot make that claim for everyone else. I am speaking devotionally; other people in other places immersed in different cultures and customs may come to know God other than through the Christian tradition. Who am I to tell God what God can or cannot do? I can only speak out of my own personal and spiritual experience. This is the language of testimony.

Sometimes testimonies clash. My experience of God may not correspond to your experience of God and my experience may make you uneasy and your experience may make me uneasy, but that’s okay. If we are mature in God’s love we can learn from one another’s stories.

There may be times when my experience seems so foreign to your experience that it would almost seem that we have encountered different Gods. Is such diversity of experience possible? It is if we believe that God is great and good enough to accommodate God’s self to our fallible and limited beliefs and ideas. And we can grow from the experience by learning to be sensitive, accepting, and compassionate toward one another in our differences.

If a church can hold diverse perspectives together in love that church can show real maturity and can offer hope to our world, which is more diverse than any church. As it is now, so many churches tend to divide the way the world divides, so instead of offering an alternative to the world, the church simply follows the ways of the world. But if a church can learn to welcome and accept diverse perspectives and God experiences then that church can be a reflection of the kingdom of God to the world.

After sharing her experience she next asks a question. Could this be the Messiah? I don’t think she is sure yet. She was thinking it through and she shares her own faith struggle—Is it possible for this one to be the Messiah? She’s probably thinking: He is a Jew, and we are Samaritans, can I accept a Jewish Savior, a Jewish Messiah? She shares her hesitation and her hope.

Much of what I write in my Friday columns has the flavor of testimony. I often bear witness to where I am in my faith journey—how I have arrived at where I am and the questions I am still struggling with. I think that the people who get upset by my columns are people who feel threatened because my faith experience is different from their own.

Do you or did you ever get upset with a son or daughter because they questioned your faith, your politics, your reasoning, or your lifestyle. And instead of acknowledging their questions and doubts, inviting them to be open with us respond with, “That’s just the way it is.” And that’s why so many of them when they leave home they also leave the church, because the church doesn’t want to struggle with their questions. And they can’t see the relevance of going through the motions and giving lip service to the things that they don’t really believe in their hearts.

A few weeks ago in my Connections Column I referenced a new book by Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*. Wicker is the former religion reporter for the Dallas Morning News. Her research indicates that the conservative, evangelical church in America is in decline; by one measure since 1900, the evangelical church has declined from 42 percent of the population to 15 percent of the population. Her research shows that about a thousand evangelicals are leaving the church every day. She writes, “Losing young people is an old story, but dissenters I was meeting were of a different, even more alarming kind. They were not lightweight kids trying out different ways of being, as I had been when I left evangelical faith. These were church stalwarts whose Bibles were so well thumbed that the pages curled, midlife Christians being drawn out of evangelical faith by their own, Bible-inspired, deepest values, sometimes ones they hadn’t realized they had. They were leaving evangelical faith for the same reason outsiders sometimes say they won’t join the evangelicals—because they seem un-Christian. These departing evangelicals could outquote, outtestimony, outshout me anytime, anyplace. Some were leaving altogether, foreswearing the faith totally. Others were keeping their memberships intact but quietly pulling back. Some were still going to church, staying quiet but disagreeing on more and more until they could hardly be counted as evangelicals at all. Others were quietly changing their beliefs, working for a new kind of Christianity.”

Here’s what has happened in recent years. The baby boomers dropped out of church because they thought the church was irrelevant (I’m speaking of broad trends here). The church had been doing the same things in the same ways for years and they did not see the relevance of going to church.

But then something happened to draw a number of them back to church. Evangelicals in particular became very sensitive to adapt to the wants and needs of baby boomers. So a number of new church starts became consumer oriented. New church structures emerged that were more like theaters and entertainment centers than churches. A new style of worship music emerged with a soft rock or pop rock melody. Sermons became more practical: Five characteristics of a successful marriage or Four Keys to Raising Spiritual Teenagers. Very practical stuff. A whole wave of church literature expounding techniques and methods for growing the church came into existence. And with the church growth movement came the era of the mega church.

But that was then and now, many (not all by any means, but many) of the mega churches have hit a plateau and are in decline. Their approach is still quite popular though. For example, Joel Olsteen's church as far as I know is still growing on a model of very practical success oriented ministry and preaching—How to be successful in your marriage, in your job, in your relationships, in your finances, and so forth. It's very American and it's still very popular. But a number of other mega churches are not faring so well.

Willow Creek Community Church, pastored by Bill Hybels was one of the first mega churches and still is one of the largest churches in the country. They hold numerous conferences yearly teaching other pastors how to grow churches. But their growth has started to taper off. So they invested in some major research. After three years of research they concluded that one out of four people at Willow Creek was stalled or dissatisfied with their spiritual growth and many were thinking about leaving. Who were these people? These were their most dedicated members—their best tithers and most committed volunteers.

And so many of the baby boomers who came back to church are now leaving the church again and the children of the baby boomers have decided not to go to church. What's happening? These churches have the best children and youth programs around. They have the best music and entertainment and small group structures of any one. The pastors are usually great administrators and interesting speakers. They have large staffs. But even with all the glitter and glamour, the magnificent Easter and Christmas productions, all the fun and games and entertainment, all the practical how-to and personal fulfillment and success oriented sermons, all the exciting children and youth programs, people are still leaving the church. Why? Because some folks are thinking deeper.

I know there are doomsayers that say our educational system is in shambles and I suspect that we could make some improvements for sure, but when all is said and done we have done a pretty good job teaching our children to think. And guess what? They are not just thinking in areas of science and mathematics and English, they are thinking about God and faith too.

And the old answer, "Because the Bible says" doesn't cut it anymore. John Killinger tells about a conversation he had with Jerry Farwell over dinner when Killinger pastored in Lynchburg. They were in a disagreement over the nature of Scripture and Killinger said, "If the Bible is perfect and infallible then how come in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' cleansing of the temple takes place at the very end of Jesus' ministry, but in the Gospel of John it takes place at the very beginning? Jerry Farwell was quiet for a few moments, took a sip of ice tea, and then said, "When I was in school I had a professor that explained that to my satisfaction." And that was it. End of discussion. But that kind of explanation, which is no explanation at all, is not acceptable to our sons and daughters.

Our sons and daughters will not be moved by testimonies that are dogmatic presentations of faith that seem to have all the answers. Our sons and daughters will be drawn to testimonies where people share their doubts and fears and questions and admit that they don't have all the answers. They will be drawn to authentic stories of faith struggle and truth seeking, where fellow pilgrims and strugglers admit their uncertainty in a context of unconditional love and acceptance. And even then we still may not get them into church; and so we will have to find other ways to help them in their spiritual life.

This woman of Samaria can be our model of how to relate to each other and share our faith stories. She shared out of her own personal experience and she shared the question she herself was struggling with. She was passionate and honest. We too must be passionate and honest about our faith—about our questions, doubts, and struggles as well as our convictions and beliefs.

May God give us the courage to talk about our faith, to be honest and open about our questions and doubts, and to love one another no matter how much or how often we may disagree. Let us be a church where all people, people of strong faith, people of uncertain faith, and people of no faith, may find a home and a place to explore and consider the way of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gracious Lord, help us to be a people sensitive to the questions and faith struggles of those around us, those in our church and outside our church. Help us to be humble enough to admit that we don't have all the answers. Help us to accept one another and love one another though we may be at different places on our faith journeys. And may we discover a new passion and enthusiasm about telling our stories. Amen.