

Ironic witness: Embodying faith in a postmodern age

by [Myron Bradley Penner](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue



Raphael, St. Paul Preaching in Athens, 1515.

John is a self-described atheist Roman Catholic. He earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at an Ivy League university and is a philosophy professor at a small college. We met several years ago at a research center, and I noticed a deep spiritual hunger in him. John was fascinated by my faith and confided in me that although he felt he no longer had faith, he nevertheless experienced this as a profound loss. John confessed that he desperately wished he could believe in God again and had even spent time in two different monasteries hoping to reignite his faith or find some deeper spiritual reality in which he could believe.

During our second week at the center, John and I were joined by two graduate students from a nearby seminary who had come to do research for their master's theses. Our new friends informed John and me that they had just completed a modular course on Christian apologetics with one of the leading contemporary apologists. Jokingly, they related how the apologist described himself as "the hired gun" who rode into town to shoot down the bad guys (atheists) and their arguments and make the streets safe again for Christians.

It did not take our budding apologists long to clue in to the fact that John was not a professing Christian. And despite John's protestations that he was not interested in

arguing about faith, what he did or did not believe or how far his beliefs were or were not justified, our two apologists went to work. They took aim and started to shoot holes in the reasonableness of John's beliefs with their shiny new apologetic six-guns.

John objected to this treatment. What bothered him, he said, was the impersonal way both he and his beliefs were being treated—as if they were abstract entities (like propositions) instead of reflections of spiritual realities with which he personally struggled.

Stories like John's reinforce for me that, typically, we do not come to belief by dint of mere rational persuasion. The reasons that I have faith—or any other belief—and that it appears acceptable to me have to be put in the context of my lived experience and all the various construals of the world, myself, God and others. I have to accept my faith in order to feel at home with it. The context in which we accept beliefs (or have faith) are varied, personal, and rarely fall under our direct, conscious, rational control. And I hazard to say we collectively experience in our spiritual lives the same “breach of naïveté,” as Charles Taylor might say, that makes faith difficult for John.

This is yet another symptom of our condition of secularity that exposes faith and makes it vulnerable from a number of directions—not just to objections of rational coherence. We have lost the naïveté—or immediacy or directness—of belief in God due to a massive shift in the overall context in which we seek to interpret our lives and understand the world.

What concerns me most in John's story is that the actions of the two seminarians are entirely consistent with the modern apologetic paradigm taken in its own right. Their overriding concern is not with John's edification—that is, his personal building up as a self before God—but with the epistemological justification of his beliefs. When—as in the modern epistemological paradigm—the truth of the gospel is construed solely in objective terms, as contained in propositions, doctrines and intellectual positions, and when the rationality of belief is regarded as of primary importance in legitimizing faith, the main issue on which a witness will focus is the reasonableness of a nonbeliever's beliefs, positions or worldview. A person's subjective and personal interests and concerns, as well as the wider set of factors that impinge on a person's ability to believe or disbelieve, are largely irrelevant to the primary activity of apologetics. Instead, these are in fact the very influences on belief that must be

overcome or ignored so that belief may be held in a fully rational way.

How would John's two apologists behave if they were first-century apostles of Jesus? Would they—or could they—believe, act and write as they currently do in defense of Christianity? Will someone who believes they have heard God speak bother to make clever arguments, brilliantly piecing together the evidence, so that the rational inescapability of the message is shown to be universally, objectively and neutrally justified? Will this individual even feel the need to show that Christianity is true in an objective, rational way?

The model for a Christian apologist may be someone other than an analytic philosopher, scientist or lawyer (or some combination of all three)—all of which are different forms of genius. I want to pattern apologetic efforts after apostles who ground their message not in their own genius but in a transcendent word from God. This will mean that apologetic discourse is first and foremost prophetic.

As a species of prophetic speech, witness is personal. Prophets and apostles do not speak in terms of abstract universals but directly address persons. According to Gerhard van Rad, God meets the Hebrew prophet in his Word in the most personal way possible, and this means that the prophet cannot treat it as if it were a neutral or abstract thing. Prophets receive their message personally and directly. Therefore, they are not able to take a logical, rational stance toward it and do not waste a lot of time or energy arguing with their audience about whether their message is rationally justified. The driving concern of prophetic speech is the edification of *this* particular person or people, and edification is the controlling interest that overrides any anxieties over the rational justification of the message.

Thus, the form of argumentation in prophetic speech—if indeed arguments are provided—is often markedly *ad hominem*. That is, it appeals to characteristics unique to the person; it literally argues “to the person” whose mind is to be changed.

To put it another way, when we take prophetic speech as the basis for apologetic witness, we move from an abstract epistemology of belief to an ethics of belief. When I speak of an ethics of belief, I mean a focus not just on what one believes but also on how one believes. It is a practical question about the personal values and cares we have and the practices which they inform and out of which they emerge. Ethics in this sense does not begin abstractly with theory but is concerned with our

concrete modes of being who we are: our actions. An ethics of belief, then, first and foremost refers to a concern with persons as subjects who *are*.

What our age needs is not a scientific or theoretical answer to intellectual challenges of belief but a personal response to the spiritual problems of people who have been unable to receive and have faith. This response, of course, must be Christian lives shaped by biblical and theological categories and articulated responsibly with intellectual acumen and philosophical sophistication. But we need to understand the beliefs that shape Christian lives and stories in terms of norms that govern our actions in the contexts in which we perform them. Ethics, in other words, is the category of edification, and an ethics of belief has the same concerns as prophetic speech—concrete particularity and personal transformation.

Witness as a form of prophetic speech is also ironic speech. Irony generally involves an incongruity between how we act in, talk about or think about a situation and the usual expectations for that situation—between what is formally presented in a statement or situation and what is obviously true about it. In a deeper sense, though, irony is a subtle form of protest against social conventions and rules for what one can or cannot say, mean or do in a given situation. It communicates something against the given rules and in spite of them.

As a rough definition, then, we could say irony is the art of exploiting—either in speech or other forms of action—the agreed-upon “rules” for rational discourse in order to highlight their failure to capture things as they really are. Irony inserts itself into the gap between our thoughts and reality, our words and the truth, the way we refer to things and the way they really are. The use of irony places us and those with whom we engage in discourse in the middle of that gap, leaving us with a choice about what to make of it all. So when I speak or act ironically, I create an ambiguity—or what we may call a negative space—for my audience, which gives them a kind of freedom. My ironic words or actions create a situation in which the social and rational expectations are undermined or questioned so that at some level the audience has a choice to make about how they will understand me.

When apostles or prophets declare that they have a message from God to me, it is a form of address that leaves me free with respect to what I understand them to really be saying and also to appropriate (or not) what I understand in the message.

The irony in prophetic Christian witness within modernity has two features. First, inasmuch as we wish to make Christianity appear plausible by modern standards, we lose its character as the essential action of a life of faith with and before God. Genuinely prophetic speech is ironic because it does not attempt to ameliorate or soften the rational scandal of its message. It does not first justify itself or its message according to the standards of human reason. In other words, prophetic speech preserves the paradox of faith.

Second, apostles or prophets are not speaking on their own and delivering messages they take responsibility for; they are speaking on behalf of God and by God's power or Spirit. The message is not theirs alone but is first and foremost from God. So while it may appear that prophets speak directly, there is deceptiveness or irony to this, for they do not ground the truth of their message in their own adequacy to discover or understand it—nor even to utter it. They claim to speak the truth while having no direct access to the ground or source of its truthfulness. God provides the grounds for both the prophetic word and its delivery, and it is the call of God that makes apostles or prophets adequate to their mission and their message. Prophetic irony disavows all attempts to justify the message while maintaining its authority over us and its ability to speak truly to us.

Hebrew prophets usually begin by professing their own personal inadequacy to speak for God, and almost without exception they stand outside the temple (or tabernacle) cult of Israel. They (with one or two exceptions) are not priests and are not vested with religious authority by the existing religious structures—in fact, they call these structures into question and are critical of them. But it is not as if their discourse is completely ungrounded. The prophetic appeal for authority, validation and legitimation is simply and directly to God, and they leave it to their audience to work this out with God for themselves—will they listen and obey, or not? Thus, the irony I am describing is not just a manner of speaking but a personal, philosophical stance in which my words (as discourse) are not inherently justified. My speech belies its ground of justification. My right to speak the way I do is neither self-grounded nor immediately obvious because of who I am or the brilliance of my discourse.

Paul Ricoeur's distinction between "testimony as narrative" and "testimony as act" helps further to explain how witness works. Testimony, according to Ricoeur, has a "dialogic structure" in which there is a dynamic and mutually reinforcing tension between how I characterize the world (or what I claim is true about the world) and

how I live in it. I testify to what I have seen (or perceived) both by means of a verbal account or story relating how I experienced a truth and by how I embody that particular truth in my actions.

Using this distinction we can say that, as a Christian witness, I give narrative testimony to the word (or truth) I have received by telling my story of that encounter—how it has been received and how it has affected me or transformed me—so that I may help others better embody, and may myself better embody, that testimony in an earnest and passionate life that is concerned with being in the truth. Whether the truth I proclaim is true for me will be evident from how I live—if that truth is appropriated by me as an integral part of how I live and act.

This means that the act of witness is much more like a confession of personal conviction than a logical argument for the objective truth of its propositions. As a witness, I proclaim the truth not only with my lips but by my life. With my words I engage my listeners with a narrative so that they can imagine a world with this particular truth, and by my life I show them it is possible to live in that world.

This dimension of witness is what distinguishes my postmodern paradigm from certain attempts to contrive an apologetic theology as a form of postmodern hermeneutics. Paul Lakeland articulates his postmodern apologetic theology in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." The theologian's task, Lakeland believes, is to "interpret society" from a rational perspective that maintains a kind of happy medium, not favoring wisdom from either the secular or sacred communities:

In the fundamental, hermeneutical, apologetic moment in theology, the fusion of horizons occurs within the consciousness of the theologians and religious thinkers. The world questions the text (or narrative), and the text responds, adding its question in turn. This kind of theologian—in whom text and world meet—must speak the language of the tradition and the language of the world in which that tradition is to be represented. Neither language is to be preferred to the other.

There is much with which to agree in this perspective. I can think of no better description of a prophetic witness than Lakeland's of someone "in whom text and world meet." This is precisely how I understand the biblical depiction of prophets and apostles. And that is what places them squarely in the type of hermeneutical

framework I described earlier. They are those who can narrate God's Word so powerfully that it engages the world's imagination. And they can do this just because they simultaneously speak the language of their tradition and are fluent in the language of the world.

However, for biblical prophets the fusion of the horizon of their culture and the horizon of the Word they received occurs in their very lives, not only in their consciousness. Prophetic speech stands at the intersection of the self and the crowd, the individual and the public, and calls people to hear and encounter God in his Word. And this intersection occurs in the very person of the witness.

It is this public performance of witness that qualifies it as confession. The prophets and apostles confess their faith—they declare before the world, “This is what I believe. This is the truth I have encountered that has edified me. Take a look at my life, who I am, and see if you think that it's true. And I believe that if you consider your own life and appropriate this truth, you will find it is edifying for you too.”

Prophetic witness is a public act performed in the interests of edifying the community, and yet is a personal, private act as well. The appeal is not to universal norms of belief or to privileged insight into the nature of the “really real” or even to a contingent, provisional compromise that will enable differing points of view to coexist peacefully, but to a truth that may be edifying for everyone who embraces it. Thus, in the witness—the person who confesses—private responsibility is embraced by public accountability so that the public and private spheres of life are united.

A witness of this sort has a much better chance of communicating the truth to someone like John, for whom faith is fragile and ephemeral. Coming to terms with the difficulty of faith requires a life lived faithfully before God. One possibility opened up by a hermeneutical approach is that a life of faith is more aptly articulated in terms of a struggle to be *faithful*—to live truthfully—than as the possession of truths and absolute certainties. A faithful life is fidelity in, through and despite the anxieties, uncertainties and difficulties of belief in a secular age. Rather than thinking of the believer as the possessor of truth, who must then work ardently to maintain belief over against all rational challenges, it might be better to view the one who has faith as an “apprentice to truth.”

To speak of an apprentice to truth in this way is to acknowledge that truth is not our possession but something by which we must be possessed. I do not have the truth

and cannot get it on my own. Instead, I must apprentice; I must submit myself to the tutelage of those who have mastered the requisite skills—or what the Greeks call *techne*, the knowledge that comes through exercising an art—in which I am not proficient. That is, I must engage in a different set of practices, learn a new vocabulary, be trained by “masters”—all of which presupposes that on my own I am not adequate to be in the truth.

And this concept of apprenticing to the truth further recognizes that living in the truth is a process in which I learn how to be faithful. If I regard myself as an apprentice to the truth, I must be prepared to have my preconceptions and perceptions challenged, and I must be open to new avenues of understanding and interpreting my life through the texts and conceptual categories of faith as I learn how to be faithful in the ever-changing contexts of my life.

As with any apprenticeship, there will be setbacks and failures as I learn how to be in truth’s possession, and at times it may even appear that I do not have much faith at all. The important thing will be that I maintain an essential interest in or fundamental concern with my life and its relation to truth (God), and that I never stop working this out in dialogue with the texts, practices, community and relationships (i.e., the church) that present me with the concepts and categories to interpret my life in relation to God. This, to my mind, provides a way for us to think about faith in our (post)modern situation that can account for and witness to Christian truth, as well as to cope with the fragile nature of faith in a secular age—at least much more so than any rational apologetic.

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