

Unbelieving Believers

"But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." Luke 24:11

The encounter on the Emmaus road is a wonderful instance of spiritual formation Jesus' style. The men were skeptical of the women's testimony. Reports of an empty tomb and the statement given by two unidentified men that Jesus had risen from the dead made no sense to them. The disciples were in a state of unbelief. The need for truth frames this encounter (v.11 & 34). Spiritual formation is not an optional exercise of pious devotion, designed for those with an emotional proclivity for feeling their faith. It is the essential integration of core Christian beliefs in the total life of the disciple. Everything about the believer's life, convictions, relationships, priorities, values, intentions, actions, hopes and expectations are formed in Christ. Spiritual formation is the process by which a passion for Christ shapes our identity, worship, witness, and world-view.

What young disciples expect to experience at divinity school may be different from what we intend to teach them. Robert Wuthnow calls this generation in their 20s and 30s a generation of tinkerers. They put life together "by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else." They have a "do-it-yourself" mentality, as they cobble together a customized lifestyle (After *The Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 2007:14).

Wuthnow likens younger adults to "the farmer rummaging through the junk pile for makeshift parts, the spiritual tinkerer is able to shift through a veritable scrap heap of ideas and practices from childhood, from religious organizations, classes, conversations with friends, books, magazines, television programs, and Web sites. The tinkerer is free to engage in this kind of rummaging. . . Each individual claims the authority—in fact, the duty to make up his or her mind about

what to believe" (15). Today's student tends to believe that there are no best answers, no one way to see things, no meta-narratives that orient all of life. They are their own best authority. They see themselves as in charge of cobbling together a world-view that works in a pluralistic culture. They have been trained "to hedge [their] religious convictions in a language of opinion and feeling" (121).

Tinkering is at odds with what we are about at Beeson. We reverently submit to the whole counsel of God. We seek theological depth, an integrated Kingdom ethic, an outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit, a global mission perspective, and a passion for Christ. Many of our students come to us in search of their own personal identity and what they will do in life that is fulfilling and significant. We seek to transpose that longing into mature discipleship. Only a few have learned their theology at their mother's knee and even less have had the experience of an authentic household of faith.

Unbelief in believers is a catalyst for spiritual formation. Divinity students are sympathetic to the things of Christ, but they may be like these two disciples, unaware, skeptical, wondering. Spiritual formation involves building belief in unbelieving believers. Two of the unbelieving disciples leave Jerusalem and head for Emmaus. "They were talking with each other about everything that had happened." The pedagogical scene is set. The subject is under discussion, raising the hopes of a teachable moment. Teaching cannot take this dialogue for granted. Answering questions that have not been asked, much less cared about, makes teaching even more difficult. The issue under discussion is "hot" for these disciples, but even then, Jesus approaches the subject indirectly. We would like Beeson students to become like medical students, always talking about theology the way medical students talk about medicine. Jesus didn't have to get these two disciples into the subject. Luke gives a double emphasis to their lively conversation. They were discussing "everything that had happened."

Willed Passivity

"Jesus himself came up and walked along with them." Here is the second instance of the humility of the risen Lord! In his first encounter with Mary, Jesus is mistaken for the gardener. Even after the resurrection the hidden God remains hidden. Jesus unexpectedly shows up incognito. Is this not what we want to have happen in our conversation with students whether in the classroom or in our offices or in the dining hall? We want to keep pointing our students and ourselves to the risen Lord.

Frank Wuest was a missionary to China until health and family reasons brought him to our little Baptist church as pastor. When I was in the hospital, he gave me a glass framed Scripture verse that had hung on his wall in China. It read, "Jesus himself drew near and went with them." This framed statement has been on my study wall for over thirty years. Then last Spring, Yong Lee, a medical doctor went to Shanghai to serve in a "tent-making" ministry. For several years I met with Yong for coffee every Thursday morning to discuss the Bible and what it meant to follow the Lord Jesus. The Lord answered our prayers on marriage, medical opportunities, and a growing desire to serve in China. When our church prayed over Yong and Deanna and their three children and committed them to the Lord, I gave Yong this plaque to hang on their wall in China, "Jesus himself drew near and went with them."

The pedagogical body language of walking deserves mention. The setting is in motion. It is not static. Good teaching has to intersect with the movement in our students' lives. They may sit in our classrooms but spiritual formation is holistic. We have to come alongside students, if we hope to be faithful and effective. Real communication involves much more than the transmission of information. The model is not static, but in motion.

The two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem. Does this have any significance for Luke, who describes the movement of the gospel toward Jerusalem? The same Jesus who resolutely set out for Jerusalem is now catching up to two disciples intent on leaving

Jerusalem. When these two disciples learn that "it is true!" they will immediately head back to Jerusalem.

The Jesus way intersects unbelieving believers without interrupting either their pace or their dialogue. He is the subversive Savior, redeeming from below. The risen Lord is unobtrusive and intent on preserving anonymity until the right time. Each move is carefully orchestrated. Nothing in Jesus' strategy is accidental and haphazard.

How is it that they are kept from recognizing him? Luke does not blame them for their failure to recognize Jesus. There is no hint that they bear responsibility for this. The sentence is passive. The issue of timing appears significant. If they recognize Jesus right away, is something lost? The immediacy of Jesus' teaching presence does not necessarily mean the immediacy of their understanding. Truth is rarely understood instantaneously, not even in the presence of Jesus.

Yet Jesus will criticize them for being "slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" However, the criticism comes only after he has solicited their self-disclosure and their description of the situation. Luke reports more of their conversation than Jesus' teaching. Why?

We have no doubt that Jesus knew what they were discussing. Why then did Jesus ask, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" Why the intentional desire to process this information? Why not a bold presentation and immediate recognition? Jesus' question did two things: it stopped them in their tracks and it solicited a false impression.

The strategy got their attention. "They stood still, their faces downcast." The process of spiritual formation is often painful. We wonder if either of the disciples got a good look at Jesus. They are so absorbed in their own emotional state that they cannot focus on the person before them. Jesus intentionally drew out their grief and discouragement for the purpose of dealing with it.

The strategy produced a false perception. The question resulted in a disparity between the real identity of the teacher and the disciple's [student's] perception. "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened in these days?" The failure to recognize the risen Lord is compounded by a false perception of Jesus. This may have implications for all those who teach the Word of God.

Jesus ignored the wrong perception. He didn't take the slight personally. It was the pedagogical price to be paid for teaching unbelieving believers. He was not distracted by Cleopas' unintended put down. He simply asked, "What things?" The two of them responded and Jesus lets them do the talking. This is listening for the sake of clarity and comprehension. Jesus enters the dialogue, but only after establishing in everyone's hearing where everyone stood. Encouraging self-disclosure is key to good communications, but it requires some patience and wise passivity.

The two disciples are upset on several levels. They have no clear direction for the future. Their hopes and expectations of what Jesus would do have failed and the established religious hierarchy was responsible for his crucifixion and their disappointment. They could not go back to either Jesus who was dead or Judaism that killed him. They must speak of Jesus in the past tense. "He was a prophet. . ." and "We had hoped that he was one who was going to redeem Israel." Without Jesus, they had neither a future nor an identity. On top of all this grief and confusion was the deeply unsettling news, reported by some of their women, that the tomb was empty. The women saw a vision of angels, who said he was alive. These two disciples did not know what to believe. There was confirmation that the tomb was empty, but no one had seen Jesus. They were disillusioned and distraught, profoundly bewildered spiritually, intellectually and emotionally.

How shall we understand this generation of unbelieving believers? Can we draw a link between what the disciples on their way to

Emmaus felt and thought and Beeson students? Emerging adulthood is marked "by intense (1) identity exploration, (2) instability, (3) focus on self, (4) feeling in limbo, in transition, in-between, and (5) sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope. These, of course, are also often accompanied by big doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, and disappointment" (Christian Smith).

Studies indicate that there is a major disconnect between what young people are taught in church and in home and what they remember and embrace in the 20s and 30s. Christian Smith quotes the findings of Jeffrey Arnett:

"The most interesting and surprising feature of emerging adults' religious beliefs is how little relationship there is between the religious training they received throughout childhood and the religious beliefs they hold at the time they reach emerging adulthood. . . In statistical analyses [of interview subjects' answers], there was no relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and any aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults. . . This is a different pattern than is found in adolescence [which reflects greater continuity] . . . Evidently something changes between adolescence and emerging adulthood that dissolves the link between the religious beliefs of parents and the beliefs of their children."

Stay in the Story

Jesus was neither sympathetic nor compassionate. He challenged them on an intellectual level. His no-nonsense tone was impatient. "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" As if to say, what were you thinking? Have you read your Bibles? Jesus insisted on the importance of the mind. He lifted the discussion out of the realm of the subjective self and placed in the context of objective truth. The way in which he sought to penetrate their confusion and bring clarity is significant. Content—

revelational content, set the foundation for spiritual formation. Jesus began with the mind. He made his case with truth. He appealed to their cognitive grasp of revelation. Instead of beginning with personal self-disclosure, he began with salvation history, the only story that redeems our story.

This is not an easy way to go. The current epistemological bias against history and the importance of the mind distance students from the truth. Literary criticism belittles authorial intent and historical studies make the past remote. Few students leave university believing that "History is a story with a well-defined plot, pivoted on Creation, Fall, Redemption and Judgment" (Lewis). The modern university refuses to have this discussion with Jesus.

Jesus launched into the whole story of salvation history. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." I wish we had this conversation verbatim, but even if we did, it wouldn't add anything to what we already know from the Word of God. However, what a wonderful experience it must have been for these two disciples to have Jesus explain "all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Our purpose in teaching is to comprehend more deeply the drama of God's great salvation history. This is an approach to the Bible that I would have benefitted from at the beginning of my formal theological education. Like so many Bible and theology students I started out by taking language studies and courses in theology and hermeneutics. I enjoyed classes that delved into background information on the text and explored the latest critical studies. I studied works by famous biblical scholars and theologians and did research on higher criticism, form criticism, and the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation. I found these courses and my professors fascinating. In fact there was very little in the graduate school curriculum that I didn't enjoy or imagine myself teaching someday. I liked it all: systematic and historical theology, church history, evangelism, and missions. But something was missing

in my theological education and ministry preparation that I wasn't aware of until years later. I spent several years studying theological German and Latin and exploring every facet of Latin American Liberation Theology. I read Augustine for the better part of a whole academic year and sat under brilliant scholars, but I could not have explained to you the importance of the prophet Zechariah or the impact of Isaiah. I knew the trends of modern theology better than I knew God's salvation history.

I grew up in a home that practiced the spiritual disciplines and encouraged a devotional life. For family devotions we read from *The Daily Bread* and a short passage of Scripture that the devotional guide recommended. In my personal devotions I read Oswald Chambers and kept a journal of my daily Bible reading. Thanks to my parents who lived out the kingdom lifestyle long before it was called that in popular evangelicalism, I was nurtured and instructed in a home that embraced the Word of God seriously. But I still didn't have a sense of the big picture of salvation history. Much of the Old Testament was foreign to me, like the old and forgotten stuff that got stored in our attic. I heard a zillion evangelistic messages at our church, but almost nothing from the biblical prophets.

During my high school years our pastor focused almost exclusively on the apostle Paul, but it was Paul through the narrow lens of our subculture, rather than the great epic of salvation history. I knew a lot about "getting saved" but not a whole lot about the comprehensive meaning of salvation. Looking back, I sense that my family had an intuitive grasp of the message of the prophets and Jesus' kingdom ethic, but we didn't see how it all fit together. We had pieces of the puzzle but not the big picture. Except for a few famous psalms, the riches of the Wisdom literature were hidden from me. Biblical books, such as Leviticus or Numbers were basically ignored or, when thought about at all, regarded as anachronisms for New Testament Christians. Forays into confusing books like Ezekiel or Daniel were usually for the sake of discovering a devotional thought for the day. I used the book of Revelation to fuel my curiosity more than to deepen

my courage.

Although good in themselves, my devotional experience of the Word and my graduate theological education conspired to conceal my ignorance of the sweep and drama of salvation history. My experience and my scholarship produced an unintended and hidden deficiency—a trained incapacity to see the big picture and feel the drama of God’s story. My well-intentioned devotional subjectivity and specialized expertise had unwittingly obscured the Gospel story. I was left with a piece-meal understanding of the Bible and at the time it didn’t bother me that large portions of the Bible remained relatively unknown to me. What I was missing was a coherent understanding of the compelling unity of the Word of God.

We make the mistake of assuming that since we have read the Bible in personal devotions, attended small group Bible studies, and listened to sermons, that we know Salvation History. We often bring a heartfelt sincerity and prayer to our studies, but not a great awareness of the dynamic of the Gospel story.

Students come to divinity school to learn how to tell the Gospel story from cover to cover, but this is where we often disappoint students. By focusing on prolegomena and technical issues, at the expense of the big picture, seminaries have a way of exhausting students and preventing them from understanding the scope of God’s work. Good teachers know this and guard against it. They defy the scribal propensity to overwhelm students with the complexities and intricacies of scholarly opinions. They do not teach as if it were their primary duty to debunk students of their intellectual naivete, but instead lead students into the powerful story of God's revelation. There is a place for careful explanation, where interpretations are weighed, scholarly debates reviewed, and the latest research cited, but only after the Genesis story is understood in the flow of salvation history. First of all, we want to be concerned with the primary focus of Genesis, what the Spirit-inspired author and the Spirit-enabled editors had in mind when they wrote Genesis. Later we can go back

to the perplexing, and often complex, side issues we uncover along the way.

Wisdom dictates that we first hear the story before dissecting the text. By the time many divinity students plow through the scholarly introduction of a biblical book, including authorship, sources, date, setting, redaction criticism, exegetical problems, etc., they have lost the intellectual and spiritual energy to hear the story, much less proclaim it! These academic questions and concerns can be important, but their priority should be reversed. Begin with the story, revel in the truth and when once that storied truth is internalized in the soul, turn to the textual technicalities. It is hard to proclaim what we have been trained to see as textual conundrums and scholarly debates.

To use an analogy, seminary professors are trying to teach advanced auto mechanics to people who haven't even gotten their driver's license. Textual experts need to be careful with the biblical story. Their love of grammar and syntax may cause them to miss the tone and texture, and especially the truth of this real life story. Scholars can exegete a biblical passage, and pastors can work up sermons, but yet never really tell the story and embrace the message.

If we stay in the story as Jesus did our teaching ministry will have impact. A passion for Christ will grip our lives and then the lives of our students.

Table Grace

Jesus retained the strategy of willed passivity even after giving a forceful rebuke ("How foolish you are. . .") and delivering his comprehensive message on salvation history ("He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."). When they reached Emmaus, he made it seem as if he were going to continue on. He neither presumed their receptivity nor imposed his will. This is the fifth mark of humility: (1) he pursued them as a stranger; (2) he

entered into dialogue with them; (3) he ignored their wrong perception of him; (4) he solicited their perspective; and (5) he waited for their invitation.

The disciples "urged him strongly, 'Stay with us. . .'" Spiritual formation requires this step in order to be effective. The implication is that Jesus' teaching was so compelling that they invited Jesus into their home. The intellectual work moved to an interpersonal relationship by invitation.

The moment of recognition came at the table, when Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. The journey from Jerusalem and the table fellowship in Emmaus are reminiscent of the pedagogical scene described in Deuteronomy 6. The "classroom" is daily life. "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Knowing the truth is not an academic exercise, but a daily life experience. The practical purpose of the disciples' delayed recognition was to give them the opportunity to absorb the message intellectually. They met the risen Lord by grasping the truth of the Savior. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, because the Lord opened the Scriptures for them. In that Eucharistic moment, they discovered the Person of Christ because they understood the work of Christ.

The real work of spiritual formation took place without them hardly being aware of it. Retrospectively, they realized what had happened. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" It was only after Jesus left them that they began to realize how compelling and transforming their encounter with the risen Lord had been. Our work at Beeson is to lead our students to the risen Lord Jesus and to experience the risen Lord for ourselves. We cannot control, nor would we want to control our students experience of the Lord, but we want to embrace the truth in such a way as to encourage such an encounter.

When they set out from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the disciples were despondent. Now, they are ecstatic. They have gone beyond an academic conclusion about the resurrection. They are convinced that Jesus is alive. "It is true!" they shouted. "The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Their experience confirmed Peter's witness, even as our students' experience confirms our witness.