

# ***“The Suffering Christian, Broadly Construed” or “Simple Speak”***

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## 2 Timothy 2:8-15

*“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel, ...”*

We are told that there are two things certain in life, and then there is a heck of a lot of uncertainty. And with all due respect to Mr. Franklin, there may not even be two things certain. With changing tax laws, and advancements in medicine, I sometimes wonder if anything at all is certain. Have you ever stopped and thought about this – the lack of certainty? We say everything will be fine, but can we be certain? Can we be certain that we will make enough to get by, that we will dodge the next round of staff cuts, that our retirement pay will be enough to get us by, that our health will hold, that we will study enough to get the grade we desire, or that life will just get better? Where is our sure thing? Where is our certainty? Where is our guarantee for anything in life? Our childhood prayers betray our own uncertainty of the possibility for a next day, “and if I die before I wake...” I’m sorry, Annie, but we just can’t be certain that there is always a tomorrow.

This uncertainty and ambiguity goes even deeper. We try to find some claims of surety. We say our God is a loving God, is in control, and then we see people suffering, we read and hear of an 8 year old boy’s father shot before him and our uncertainty reaches a deeper, existential / emotional level. What can we now say about God and human experience? Or another example is when we say we must respect life at all costs, but it isn’t that easy. Think about the medical profession and questions concerning end of life, beginning of life, stem cell research, allocation of resources, and on and on. What about politics? We are given the option of taking one side or another, but can we really fall into one or the other categorically with a clear conscience? Things aren’t so clear cut in the political world, are they? The church historian, Mark Noll, recently wrote an article on why he, as a Christian, cannot vote for either candidate. (“None of the above,” *Christian Century*, Sept. 21, 2004) Noll laid out a number of issues and showed how either one or both candidates failed to approach his Christian views. So, in good conscious, because neither are taking a completely Christian approach to politics, Noll claimed that he could not vote. The editor of the paper, John Buchanan responded that Noll should take the messy risk and jump into the ambiguity of election. He claimed that sometimes being a Christian is messy, but we must still get involved.

Something that Christian missionaries eventually learned is that what many held to be “right” was not universal. The western way of life was not necessarily the best way of life for other cultures in other contexts. So today, instead of a missionary entering into a culture and offering the “hope of the western world,” he or she enters into a culture to learn the ways of that particular culture, because some of those ways may be better. This takes away the certainty of our own way of living.

This is the Postmodern critique of life – that all is ambiguous, that nothing is certain. The theologian, Katherine Tanner talks about “truths” particular to one’s community, but there never one specific truth. And when those truths collide – as they often do in life – ambiguity and uncertainty emerge from the explosion. Sometimes we feel like we are a buoy in the raging waters of the ocean. The unknowing, uncertainty, and lack of an anchor in life causes panic, confusion, fear, anxiety, and anger as we are tossed to and fro with our questions and our hopes. What can we say for sure? What can we know for sure? Let’s face it; there is a heck of a lot of uncertainty in the world.

So we turn to the church for some hope, some grounding and some direction. But even in the church, in our Christian faith, we are faced with an amazing amount of uncertainty and ambiguity. This was the uncertainty that Paul was addressing in the letter read today. You see, in that time there were a lot of different ways or philosophies in which one could understand life and those understandings influenced Christianity in its early stages. From the Epicureans, to the Stoics, to the Platonist, all were trying to persuade others that their understanding of life held the greatest truth, and offered the best way to live. All of these groups were pressuring the early church’s understanding of Christianity. For a community which was newly formed, such pressures were difficult to avoid. “Maybe we could take what we know about

Christianity and live it in a Stoic way or maybe in a Platonic way. Maybe we could be both. Nah, the Epicureans are the right way to go, Christ enjoyed life and so should we.” Arguments ensued within the community over the best way to be a Christian. This is why we read in the text a warning not to get hung up in language, because language was muddling the early converts’ beliefs. We read a warning to the community not to get distracted by philosophical and theological arguments that tend to be confusing and pedantic.

I wish I could say things have changed, but I am afraid that they haven’t. Let me give you an example. I was recently at a clergy breakfast at Eastern University, and I was taking the opportunity to meet other clergy in the area. With each one I met, we did this little dance I call, “Where are you and your church theologically.” Or put more simply, “what kind of Christian are you?” The clergy threw out leading questions on doctrine, liturgy, biblical interpretation, political alliances, and sports fanaticism. I knew what they were doing, they were using indirect speech to find out if I fit in their camp or in the “other” camp. They were trying hard to categorize me with certainty. I did my best to hide my dance card, answering with vague, avoiding answers, or redirecting the conversation. Maybe you haven’t experienced this dance I am referring to, but I have done it many times. Is this a “fundamentalist,” or a liberal, or a community, or a bible believing, or a republican or a democrat church or a green party or a libertarian church? Do we ascribe to the five fundamentals of Christianity, or do we believe in the redemptive suffering of the Cross, or in the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, or in the transforming sanctification of the Holy Spirit? What is our theological, doctrinal litmus test, where do we stand on the divisive political issues? We use words to complicate and confuse the basic idea of belonging to a church and being a Christian. One is not simply a Christian, but a specific type of Christian. The problem is, as with all of the issues in the world that really need to be addressed, hunger, poverty, violence, and injustice, churches are fighting over issues of labeling and political camps.

There was a Simpson episode where Homer was sitting on death row, and a Catholic priest came to give him last rights. When the Priest found out he was a protestant, the priest said in a calm voice, “well I hope you enjoy the flames of hell.” The scene was promptly followed by a fist fight between Rev. Lovejoy, the protestant minister, and the Catholic priest. In this episode we are shown the severity of the Catholic / Protestant fight and a lack of ministry because of this fight over Homer’s deserving of ministry. What does this say about Christians, that we care for each other, or that we shut each other out? The best people at making the church uncertain, confusing, and ambiguous are the Baptists. From the Seventh Day Baptists to the General, Particular, Regular, Freewill, General Association of Regular, National, Progressive, American, United, Alliance, Cooperative, Southern, and on and on could we ever say with certainty who is, or what it means to be a Baptist? We complicate things, we add words, we add to the ambiguity. Look at the sermon title – “broadly construed?” What the heck is that supposed to mean? The great Chicago preacher, Jeremiah Wright illustrated how words complicate our faith by demonstrating what would happen if a student from the University of Chicago read John 3:16 –

“For God, as we know God to be, so loved, in that which we understand love to do, the world, as the physical and the metaphysical, that he, in the non-gender specific sense gave.....

Do you see what I am saying. The theologians complicate things, then churches demand that you make a definite decision in the midst of the complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity, and those hungry and vying for power force the issue as a central tenet of Christianity. Sides are drawn and we are told we must, in the midst of the uncertainty, take a side. In searching for certainty we reach out in the midst of the tepid waters and grab the church – a sponge - sucking up everything but having a lot of holes.

Oh we run from the questions, the uncertainty, the ambiguity of the world into the doors of the church hoping to find some kind of truth, but instead we find theological litmus tests, fights over interpretation of truth, and a lack of focus on what it means to be a church.

Yet there must be something in our faith that we can look to for focus, direction and certainty. There must be something a core conviction, a simple way for us to understand and speak of our faith. That is what we are looking for, isn’t it – the simple speak of Christianity. This is what you would tell a child if you were trying to explain your faith. There is a story of one Jewish teacher who was approached by an adversary and demanded that he explain the entire Torah (which include the first five books of the Bible) while standing on one leg. He stood on one leg and said – Love the Lord you God with all of your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as your self. This is the simple speak of Judaism. Well what about us? What if we were asked to explain our faith while standing on one foot? Can you do it? Can I? “Keep

it simple, pastor,” I’m told and that I shall do. This is what Paul is doing in this letter. He is writing to a group of doctrinally confused Christians, and so he says, remember the Gospel that I preach, “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David.” That is it! Jesus died and was raised, and was a descendant of David. There is a story about the great theologian Karl Barth, who wrote volumes of dense theological thoughts, that claims he summed up the Gospel in this one phrase, “Jesus loves me, this I know, and the Bible tells me so.” Simple speak. A basic understanding of faith that can be explained while standing on one leg. This is the certainty that we are looking for.

Think about your conversion experience – was it a political argument which converted you? Was it a theological litmus test that made you a new person? I imagine that it was the knowledge that Jesus is special – he rose from the dead, he is God amongst us, and that he loves you. Let me say that again so I can keep it simple – We know that Jesus is special and that he loves us. I won’t go any farther. I won’t talk about the special nature of Jesus, what it means to be loved by him, and how that love is seen at the cross. Keep it simple, preacher, I’m told! So I tell you, Jesus Christ was raised and a descendant of David – AMEN – he loves you! Here is your anchor, your focus, which will brush away the clouds of unknowing and uncertainty so you can see the light of the day shine through. Jesus Christ, descendant of David, raised from the dead, loves you. This is the simple speak that offers hope in the church.

Once we claim this simple truth, things actually get harder. “Now hold on preacher,” you may say, “didn’t you just tell me to keep it simple? So why should simplicity be so hard?” The difficulties occur when we return to the complexities of life. It is when we are asked by others to nuance our simple statement of faith that things become difficult. It is when we are asked to use our faith for the sake of a political agenda that things become difficult. When we are invited again and again to take part in that theological dance I earlier alluded to we must stand with our simple speak. When we have to decide not to be a part of one group or another, and when we have to refuse fidelity to a specific group of people for the sake of fidelity to greater humanity and a greater fidelity to the simple Gospel that things become difficult.

Let me give you an example – Will Campbell, the great southern Baptist firebrand decided to live by a very specific Christian ethic of love. So during the civil rights movement, Campbell befriended members of the NAACP and of the Klan out of the sake of Christian love. The result of his decision to hold to a simple gospel, was that Campbell was scorned and mistrusted by both groups – they demanded a nuanced gospel that meet their needs. But the uncertainty existed – we are called to love, shouldn’t we love all. Do you see how this could be difficult? With other Christians we will be upsetting the liberals and the conservatives; the modernists and the fundamentalists; the Baptists and.... the Baptists because if we hold to our simple speak about Christianity, to the basic idea of Jesus as Lord and Savior, no more and no less, then we will not fit cleanly in any group. Do you see what Paul was getting at in his letter when he claimed that he suffers to the point of being chained as a criminal – we will suffer in the same way because we will upset people with our simplicity in the face of uncertainty. Can you imagine the conversation? “What do you think about abortion?” “I believe that Jesus Christ was raised and descended of David.” “What do you think about separation of Church and State?” “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord a Savior.” “What do you think about the war?” “Jesus loves me, this I know, and the Bible tells me so.” Could we be more annoying? But this is what we need to do, especially in the heat of an argument, in the moment when anger boils and tempers are high, to remember that all believe and have common ground in the simple speak of Christianity. And hopefully, whoever is asking us to take a side, will have to at least see the commonality that we have in Christ. How can you hate someone when they love the same Lord as you do? The raging waters will continue to move us, and pull us in one way or another, but we have an anchor, a rock upon which to stand. This is not easy; it certainly is not a popular approach, because we will be challenged to nuance our core convictions so that we will fit within one theological camp or another. But I challenge and implore all of you, and this church to stay with the simple speak of Christ.

But what about the outside, the secular world that we live in on a daily basis? In the world, will still be confronted with ambiguity, but our rock, our simple speak of Christianity will offer us hope in the despair of the uncertainty. When you face the worries of providing for your loved ones, when you face the uncertainty of your own health or the health of your loved ones, when you face the uncertainty of life that is before us, the simple speak of Christianity offers assurance and hope. In those moments of darkness, and fear, who cares whether there was an ascending or descending incarnation or your political views as a

Christian. What you need to know is that you have Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. That is all. When I was working in an AIDS clinic, more often than not I would hear stories of individuals who survived their first bout with AIDS because they just reminded themselves that God loves them and that was all they could do. That was enough. We will have to make difficult decisions. We will have to face the ambiguity and the uncertainty of life, but we have the cornerstone of our faith, Jesus Christ, to rest upon. Keep it simple, people, for in the simplicity shall hope and assurance be found. Keep it simple, people, for in the simplicity unity can be achieved in the often broken body of Christ. Keep it simple, people, for words are distracting and misleading. Keep it simple people, for in that moment of despair and weakness the simplicity of the Gospel is all that we can have.

And finally, remember the faithful words Paul has given us:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

If we endure, we will also reign with him;

If we deny him, he will also deny us;

If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.

I know that my redeemer lives. What that means specifically, what are the implications, I will not say. But I rest my hope, and my life on the peace in knowing that my redeemer lives. And this is the simple speak of the Gospel in which I live.

AMEN