

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION
March 2010

The Great Conversation began as a Christian enterprise in the form of *proclamation*. What does “proclamation” mean; and, what difference does it make that we began by accounting for ourselves in this fashion, as opposed to some other fashion, mere *cognition*, for example?

Proclamation means “to shout for, on behalf of,” to publicly announce something to be so. One of the best examples of early Christian proclamation is Peter’s sermon, recorded in Acts 2:14-39. As you re-read this passage in your New Testament, recall the question of authority we raised in January, and the issue of scripture we raised last month. In addition to thinking about those things, now we have to ask a question something like this: “What was going on with Jesus’ first followers and the community in which they lived that eventuated in this *proclamatory* kind of response?” Remember, things were becoming topsy-turvy for Jewish people at this time. For Jesus’ followers, who weren’t yet thinking of themselves as “Christians” so much as Jews embracing a New Covenant, there was no institutional church, no seminary education, no clergy, no laity, no “church service.” The notion that someone officially called a “preacher” would stand up in a building called a “church” and deliver a Sunday morning monologue lay far in the future! At this time there was simply a new way of living together motivated by Jesus’ spirit.

If you read the parts of Acts leading up to Peter’s sermon, notice how these common Jewish people went about making important decisions *without appealing to conventional religious authorities*, that is, the temple priests, rabbis, others but, rather, to scripture (Psalms), prayer and, of all things, drawing lots (to keep their own biases out of the way, perhaps)! Notice also that the Jesus Spirit so energizes their life together that, when Pentecost arrives, those who see them seem either repulsed by them (They are drunk!) or are drawn to inquire further of them. Amazement and perplexity, expressed both positively and negatively, mark the responses of those who witness the lives and behavior of these Jewish followers of Jesus. *In short, their behavior drew attention that required explanation.* Peter’s sermon proclaims what underlies, motivates, permits them to live as they are living. His proclamation publicly announces the Jesus Way, making it available to any who choose to turn and to take that journey. If you are interested in following up on this, you can check out a good commentary on Acts to better inform yourself.

I wonder, though. I wonder not so much about what it must have been like to live in a topsy-turvy world where every established institution seems to be failing, where everyday people are pushed aside by the powerful callously and selfishly manipulating systems to their advantage. The case then as now, this seems to be the usual way of the world. Given such circumstances that seem to pervade all of history, I wonder how a community of people, like Jesus’ first followers, gets to a place and time where, as it amazes and perplexes, *it can do no other than give account of itself* both to those who are offended and to those who are attracted. Maybe here is where the Great Conversation starts.

Do you ever wonder about Christianity’s “amazement/perplexity factor?” In our time and circumstance, what amazes you (if anything) about the Christian way? What perplexes you? What amazes and/or perplexes people you know or of whom you have heard as they witness the Christian way? What do you observe that causes those who witness our lives and behavior to dismiss us (as drunk, or otherwise!)? What do you observe that causes those who witness our lives and behavior to be drawn to further inquiry?

If you can identify some of those things, are you ever moved *to proclaim*, to publicly explain even if only to one other person what underlies, motivates, permits you to choose this Jesus-pattern of living? Peter did it by talking. Talking is one form of proclamation. But, I wonder, beside talking, what other ways do you/we display in proclaiming the Jesus Way? Whether you are the one amazed or perplexed, or are responding to someone else’s amazement/perplexity, how might you characterize your/our way of responding as *proclamation*?