Speaking Christian:
A Commencement Address For Eastern Mennonite Seminary

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God knows what possesses anyone to enter the ministry in our day. The lack of clarity about what makes Christians Christian, what makes the church the church, and continuing ambiguity in our diverse denominations about ordination itself should surely make anyone think twice about becoming a minister. Moreover the lack of consensus about what it might mean for anyone to act with authority in our society and the church cannot help but make those of us who are not ministers wonder about the psychological health of those who tell us they are called to the ministry.

Too often I fear the ministry is understood by many Christians as well as many who become ministers, to be but one expression of the more general category of something called a "helping profession." A minister is a social worker with "a difference." "The difference" is thought to have something to do with God, but it is not clear exactly what difference that difference is to make for the performance of your office.

As a result many who enter the ministry discover after a few years of doing the best they can to meet the expectations of those they serve—expectations such as whatever else you may do you should always be nice—end up feeling as if they have been nibbled to death by ducks. They do so because it is assumed that since pastors do not work for a living those whom the minister serves, or at least those who pay them, can ask the minister to be or do just about anything. Though it is often not clear how what they are asked to do is required by their ordination vows, those in the ministry cannot say "no" because it is not clear what their "job" is in the first place.

Many in the ministry try to protect themselves from the unlimited demands and expectations of their congregations by taking refuge in their families, some alternative ministry such as counseling, or, God help us, a hobby. Such strategies may work for a while, but often those who

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employ these strategies discover that no spouse can or should love another spouse that much; that even after you have done C.P.E. you are still stuck with the life you had before you were trained in C.P.E.; and a hobby turns out to be just that—a hobby.

The failure of such strategies, I think, throws some light on clergy misconduct. I wish I could attribute the sexual misconduct characteristic of some Methodist clergy to lust, but I fear that most people in the Methodist ministry do not have that much energy. I think the problem is not lust, but loneliness. Isolated by the expectations of the congregation, or the challenge of developing friendships with some in the church without those friendships creating divisions in the church, too often results in a profound loneliness for those in the ministry. Unfortunately, the attempt to overcome that loneliness can take the form of inappropriate behavior.

There is another alternative. You can become a scold urging the church to become more socially active in causes of peace and justice. This may earn you the title of being "prophetic," but such a strategy may contribute to the incoherence of the ministerial task. For it is not at all clear why you needed to be ordained to pursue causes of peace and justice. It is a great challenge for ministers who would lead their congregations to be more socially active to do so in a manner that does not result in the displacement of worship as the heart of the church.

By now you may well be trying to understand why someone thought it a good idea to ask Hauerwas to deliver your commencement address. This is a celebratory day. You have graduated from Eastern Mennonite Seminary. You are going into the ministry. It is not as if you are unaware of the challenges facing you. You do not need me to catalog those challenges. That is certainly true, but I have taken the time to characterize some of those challenges—a characterization that no doubt is a caricature—because I want to suggest how the work you have done in seminary is crucial for the work you will do as a minister if you are to sustain the ministry for a lifetime.

For what you have learned to do in seminary is *read*. By learning to read you have learned to *speak Christian*. That you have learned to read and speak means you have been formed in a manner to avoid the pitfalls I have associated with the contemporary ministry. For I want to suggest to you that one of the essential tasks of those called to the ministry in our day is to be a teacher. In particular, you are called to be a teacher of language. I hope to convince you that if you so understand your task, you will discover that you have your work cut out for you. But that is very good news because you now clearly have something to do.

Yet in the book of James (3:1-5) we are told:

> not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

The problem, according to James, is no one has found a way to tame the tongue. Because the tongue cannot be tamed it becomes a "restless evil, full of deadly poison." The tongue is the source of discord because it at once makes it possible to bless the Lord and Father yet curse those who are made in the image of God. That we bless and we curse from the same mouth is but an indication of how dangerous the tongue is for those who have learned God will care for his world through patient suffering.

If James is right, and I certainly think he is, then how can I suggest to you that if you are to serve the church well in the ministry you must become a teacher and, in particular, a teacher of a language called Christian? I do so because I think the characterization of the challenges facing those going into the ministry is the result of the loss of the ability of Christians to speak the language of our faith. The accommodated character of the church is at least partly due to the failure of the clergy to help those they serve know how to speak Christian. To learn to be a Christian, to learn the discipline of the faith, is not just similar to learning another language. It *is* learning another language.

But to learn another language, to even learn to speak well the language you do not remember learning, is a time-consuming task. You are graduating from seminary, which I assume means that you have begun to learn how to speak as well as teach others how to talk, as we say in Texas, "right." For as I suggested there is an essential relation between reading and speaking—it is through reading that we learn how to discipline our speech so that we say no more than needs to be said. I like to think that seminaries might be best understood as schools of rhetoric where, as James suggests, our bodies—and the tongue is flesh—are subject to disciplines necessary for the tongue to approach perfection.

That the tongue is flesh is a reminder that speech is, as James suggests, bodily. To speak well, to talk right, requires that our bodies be habituated by the language of the faith. To be so habituated requires

constant repetition. Without repetition—and repetition is but another word for the worship of God—we are in danger of losing the grammar of the faith. At least part of your task as those called to the ministry is to help us, as good teachers do, acquire the habits of speech through the right worship of God.

You may begin to suspect that my call for you to think of yourself as a teacher is an exercise in self-justification. I am not ordained, but I have spent a life, for better or for worse, as a teacher. No doubt I deserve to be judged, as James suggests, with greater strictness because I have surely made many mistakes. Indeed I am sure I still remain in the beginning stage of learning to speak and write Christian. But I am also sure that to the extent I have learned to speak Christian I have done so because I have had to teach others how Christians in the past have spoken.

In truth I have only come recently to understand that what I have been doing for many years has been teaching people how to talk. For example, I was startled by a remark a friend made to me recently. He is a graduate student in anthropology with whom I was writing a paper in which we tried to challenge the presumption that "global Christianity" was an adequate description of what it means for the church to be "Catholic." He told me that when he is asked by his colleagues what it was like to write with me he has to say it is not easy because, in his words, "Hauerwas only knows how to write Christian."

I confess I found his response gratifying though I am not sure I think him right that I know how to write Christian. I am sure I did not know how to "write Christian" when I began to teach and write. If I have learned to "write Christian" it is only because I have learned through imitation. For I think what it means to write Christian is to have a vocabulary sufficient to order the words of that vocabulary into sentences, and the sentences become paragraphs, which are meant to form readers to see that what is said cannot be said differently than how it is said. Put differently, the most important part of writing and speaking Christian is what is not said.

Scripture, of course, is the source as well as the paradigm of Christian speech. What we say must be said in a way that is faithful to the language of Scripture. That is a complex task because it is by no means clear how the many ways of expression in Scripture are to be said coherently. The investigation of that process is called theology. But theologians are often tempted to say too much because the reticence of Scripture—the refusal of Scripture to tell us what we think we need to know—drives us crazy. I sometimes think that the work of historical criticism, essential work for helping us read the scripture faithfully, is a

rage against the silences of Scripture. Why do not the Gospels tell us what Jesus is "thinking"?

Reticence, however, is a hard discipline to learn not only for theologians but for those in the ministry. You also will be tempted to say too much as ministers of the Gospel. For example, you will be tempted to use the simulacra of Christian speech in an effort to say more than can be said. Confronted by a sudden and unexpected death of a "loved one," it is natural to underwrite the phrase "they have gone to a better place." It is hard to resist that language, not only because you want to be of help, but also because that language helps you not feel helpless. But it is not the language of the faith. God is not a "place." Moreover, such language can underwrite the pagan assumption that we possess a soul that is eternal and, thus, fail to gesture our conviction as Christians that our life with God on either side of death is a gift.

To speak Christian is an exacting discipline. It has taken the church centuries to develop habits of speech that help us say no more than needs to be said. But I fear too often those of us charged with responsibility to teach those habits fail to do so in a manner that those in the ministry can make their own. For example, a prominent figure in my church was asked how she understood the Christian faith in Jesus in relation to other religious traditions. She responded by saying that Christians believe that Jesus is our way to God but other traditions have their way to God. It seems to have never occurred to her that Jesus is not our way to God because he is the Son of God. A generous interpretation of what she said might think she was trying to indicate how, given the essential union of Christ's humanity and divinity, a union necessary for our salvation, Christ as the Incarnate Word is our way to God. But unfortunately she made no mention of the Incarnation.

Her response, of course, was the response required by the speech regimes of a liberal culture that before all else demands that we be tolerant. The acknowledgment that others have other ways to God—even though it is not at all clear who the god to whom they have a way to is—is a speech act necessarily learned by Christians to insure we are not identified as political reactionaries. Many Christians think being a Christian gives them all the problems they want. In particular they fear being associated with the Christian right. I am sympathetic with their desire not to be identified with the Christian right not because the Christian right is intolerant, but because the Christian right has lost the ability to speak Christian just to the extent they identify Christian speech with what Americans call "freedom."

That a prominent member of the clergy would seem not to know how to speak Christian raises profound questions about the kind of training

she received in seminary. That she could say that Jesus is but one way to God suggests somehow she must have missed the class on "Trinity." How can the second person of the Trinity be the way to God if Jesus is the second person of the Trinity? We not only follow Jesus. We worship Jesus. You can only worship God. So if Jesus is the way to God he is so only because he is the Second Person of the Trinity.

This is Theology 101. It does not get more basic than this. But somehow one of the leaders of my church seems to have missed the lectures on the Trinity in her basic theology course. Or she may have heard the lectures, but somehow thinks the lectures to be information about "doctrine" that has little to do with answering the question about other faiths. But if that is the case, then I fear she was not adequately taught the politics of speech, which is crucial to understand if we are to speak Christian. In particular I suspect she was seduced by the word "god" and how that word can be used to legitimate social formation that ironically tempts Christians to abandon the Christian vocabulary.

I am aware this last remark may strike you as strange, but I think it quite important. I can illustrate what I mean by relating a recent exchange in a class I taught this semester on peace. The class had read William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*.[1] Cavanaugh challenges the oft-made argument that after the Reformation the creation of the modern state became the necessary institution of peace just to the degree that the state was able to stop Catholics and Protestants from killing one another. He argues that the very creation of the notion of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural concept is part of the legitimating myth that is now essential to the liberal nation state. A correlative of such an understanding of religion is that "god" is a word acceptable for use in the public forums of the state because it is a word that does not entail the specificity of a particular tradition. So, interestingly enough, just to the extent Christians think they can say "god" more easily than they can say "Jesus" they are underwriting the legitimating violence of the nation state.

The politics of speech associated with the use of the word "god" that Cavanaugh exposes was wonderfully made concrete because one of the students in my class is a chaplain in the Army who holds the rank of major. He has had a long career in the Army and has served in Iraq. He is a deeply committed Christian who is admirably forthright about the ambiguities of his position as a chaplain. He has been sent to Duke by the Army to study ethics because his next duty will be to teach ethics at

1. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

one of the Army bases where soldiers are trained in artillery. During our discussion of Cavanaugh's argument he reported that his reading of Yoder had put him in a real quandary because he cannot use the name of Jesus when he teaches ethics but he can talk about "god." One seldom has philosophical and theological arguments empirically confirmed, but that seems to have happened with his report of how "god" is used to confirm the status of the state as an instrument of peace. Such an account seems particularly persuasive when the state so conceived confronts an Islamic world that we do not think has learned the lessons allegedly associated with the Treaty of Westphalia.

I am not a Mennonite so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the decision at Goshen College to play the national anthem before sporting events, but I assume what I have said about how Christians should not say certain things has implications for singing the national anthem. Suffice it to say, in the very least, singing the national anthem is not politically innocent. To speak Christian does not insure we will be faithful witnesses to Christ, but it may not be a bad place to begin rediscovering the radical implications of Christian orthodoxy.

If you are to minister to a church that is an alternative to a nation state that has co-opted the word "god" as a means of legitimating the violence it calls peace, you should insist that it makes all the difference that when the church says "peace" the peace that is said requires that we also say "Jesus." I say this even though it may seem like bringing coals to Newcastle. After all, this is Eastern Mennonite Seminary, which at the very least means that John Howard Yoder is read here. Surely this is a place that has not forgotten that when you say "peace" the peace you say is unintelligible if Jesus has not been raised from the dead.

But you can never, or at least you should not ever, take for granted the locution that Jesus is our peace. For learning to speak Christian means that what we say requires constant practice because the predominate speech habits that also shape our speech tempt us to not know what we say when we say Jesus. Take, for example, Yoder's comment on the debates about effectiveness between William Miller and James Douglass in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*. In response to Douglass's claim that the promise of good effects is integral to nonviolent action's ethical basis, Yoder observes that such a claim is a mistake. If Jesus is Lord, we betray the hope that makes our commitment to nonviolence intelligible if we try to prove it. For if we tried to prove our hope, we would have to subject it to some other more fundamental standard. But that would mean giving our loyalty to another Lord. Such a move is analogous to trying to prove one religion is higher or purer than another by using standards external to the religions one is comparing. So our faith in the resurrection sustains a "hope that cannot

be destroyed by my failures or jeopardized by my inability to manipulate events."[2]

Such a faith—that is, a faith in the resurrection of Jesus—also means that to speak Christian does not mean such speech cannot be understood by others who do not speak Christian. It does mean, however, that like us they will need to undergo training to hear what is being said and hopefully thereby become more eloquent and confident speakers. Moreover if we are confident Christian speakers, we may well discover that there are other languages that have words and grammars we can use. After all, Christian speech has been and will continue to be forged from encounters that have resulted in Christian appropriation of other ways of speaking which help us be faithful to the Gospel.

The hope that the resurrection makes possible, the hope that sustains the witness of peace in a world of war, the hope that Jesus names, is a hope that you must have if you are to sustain the slow and hard ministry of word work. To learn to speak Christian and to help others speak Christian means that many of the days you spend in the ministry will seem as if you have not done anything. When your spouse asks you at the end of the day, "How was your day?" you will discover you cannot remember anything you did. If you are looking for "results" to confirm you have lived a life worth living, you probably are making a mistake by going into the ministry.

But then the ministry, like a commitment to nonviolence, does not promise success. For as Yoder reminds us, Jesus did not promise his followers if they did things right they would conquer within time. Rather the love that refuses to achieve the good through the disavowal of violence, the refusal to use mechanical models of cause and effect to force history to move in what is assumed the right direction, means the promise of victory can only be found in the Resurrection. Victory, moreover, means for those in the ministry the willingness to do the same thing over and over again in the hope that by doing so the Christian people can speak truthfully to one another and the world.

So I hope that when you are asked about your day you might say, "Well I was reading Barth on the Trinity and I think I finally understand why 'Father' is in the first article of the Creed." I assume you will still be reading, and in particular reading Barth, because the reading habits you have developed during your studies here are habits crucial for sustaining your life in the ministry. I am sure you have read many good books in seminary, but that reading is meant to prepare you to spend a life

2. John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Goshen, Ind: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), 494.

reading. You must continue to read and study even though you may receive little reward for doing so. You must, moreover, help the people you serve recognize that their support of your study is a good the whole people of God have in common.

I hope occasionally when asked for a report of your day in the ministry you will be able to say, "I think I wrote one good sentence in the sermon for Sunday." The sermon is at the heart of our ability to speak as well as sustain speaking Christian. The sermon is not your reflections on how to negotiate life. The sermon rather is our fundamental speech act as Christians through which we learn the grammar of the faith. As my colleague Richard Lischer puts it in his book, *The End of Words*, "the preacher's job . . . is to do nothing less than shape the language of the sermon to a living reality among the people of God—to make it conform to Jesus. The sermon, in fact, is Jesus trying to speak once again in his own community."[3]

James may well be right that not many should be called to be teachers, but as one charged with the proclamation of the Gospel, I do not see how you can avoid being a teacher. For as Lischer observes, preachers are authorized to say things that if they did not utter them no one would ever hear the forms of language that require God as their final audience. One sentence may not seem like much but our lives as Christians depend on your struggle to say Christ.

Finally I hope in response to the question of the character of your day you might be able to say that you hope that you prayed with the dying Mrs. Smith the prayer that needed to be prayed. Prayer is the heart of Christian speech. Like all Christians you are called to live a life of prayer. As one called to the ministry of Jesus Christ you are called to help those like me learn to pray. That surely is the most important work in the world.

I rejoice that you are graduating from seminary, but even more I am given hope that you are called to the ministry. There can be no higher calling.

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3. Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008).

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Conference: "Peace Among the Peoples" July 28–31, 2010, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind. The Decade to Overcome Violence, sponsored by the World Council of Churches, will culminate in 2011 with an International Ecumenical Peace Convocation. "People Among the Peoples," organized by the Institute of Mennonite Studies, will prepare peace scholars, clergy, and activists in North America to contribute to the larger process. Contact information: Kent Yoder: kentjyoder@gmail.com; John D. Rempel: jrempel@ambs.edu. Further information will be available on the AMBS web site: www.ambs.edu.

Conference: "Conversations on Attachment: Integrating the Science of Love & Spirituality" March 31–April 2, 2011, Harrisonburg, Va. A conference hosted by the Shenandoah Anabaptist Science Society and Eastern Mennonite University. Featured Speakers: Sue Johnson, Daniel Siegel, James Coan, John Paul Lederach, and Nancey Murphy. Recent neuroscience demonstrates that connection is crucial for health. If relationship is essential for survival one of our most important tasks is to learn how to form healthy attachments—with each other, with the earth, and with God. This conference explores these dynamics through the lens of attachment theory and by bringing together nationally recognized voices from a variety of disciplines who will apply key insights from attachment theory to current research and practice. Visit www.emu.edu/sass-/conference for more information. Conference brochure and registration will be available in the fall of 2010. This conference is being funded by a grant from the Metanexus Institute, an organization dedicated to "Advancing the Constructive Engagement of Religion and Science."