

Testimony: Dialogue in Difference

Testimony is everything . . . almost. In a courtroom, the testimony of a victim or a forensic expert can sway the jury. Elie Wiesel's fiction is a testament to the horrors of the holocaust. Television's most popular shows major in the confessional. The story of creation, fall and redemption is contained in two books—the Old and the New Testament.

Testimony is a sharing of one's story, a relaying of one's experience, a retelling of the truth. On the one hand, testimony is indisputable, always valid (unless one is lying, of course). On the other hand, it is a retelling of the truth, not the truth itself. Testimony is always vulnerable to having been altered, changed or twisted, if only slightly. It is, in that sense, troubled, both indisputable and open to critique at the same time.

A number of years ago, Brock Campus Ministries and the Queer Club cosponsored a dialogue entitled, "Coming Out . . . Spiritually." The participants spoke of their experience in the church, the teachings of Scripture and the similarities between speaking of one's faith and expressing one's sexual orientation. Together, we listened to one another and spoke of grace.

Perhaps the most significant question of the evening involved the nature of dialogue. How do we speak with those who see things differently? How do we connect with those who are working from within a different perspective? Such questions are particularly pertinent in our current postmodern climate.

In a piece entitled, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote, "When I commit myself to speaking the truth, I commit myself to repeating the same thing, an instant later, two instants later, the next day, and for eternity, in a certain way. But this repetition carries the instant outside of itself. Consequently the instant is instantaneously, *at this very instant*, divided, destroyed by what it nonetheless makes possible—testimony."¹

Throughout the piece, Derrida argues that truth is something that is housed within a particular moment in time, whether an event or an experience. To say that the snow has fallen is only possible if someone has stepped outside and experienced such a thing. Even God's goodness is something that must be experienced in a particular moment in order to testify to its truth or validity. Derrida doesn't argue that there is no truth, only that truth is always something instantaneous, experienced at a particular time, in a given moment.

When one speaks of truth, one bears testimony to that experience, to that instance. Testimony is the repeating of that instant—a retelling of a particular experience or event. To speak of truth is to bear testimony to *that* experience, *that* instant. Testimony, as such, is a supplement. On the one hand, it empowers the instant, drawing our attention to it, pointing out its validity. On the other hand, testimony is a supplement *for* the instant itself, taking its place, altering its appearance.

In its relation to truth, testimony is always already risky. If truth, given expression in a particular instant, is spoken of as if it's commonplace, as if it could happen again and again, as if the instant were, in fact, repeatable (not instantaneous), that truth is violated and in some sense destroyed. Although Derrida does not argue that there is no truth, he does argue that truth is implicitly violated by the way we speak of it and the conceptual box in which we place it.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 33.

This, of course, has serious implications for those of us who wish to bear testimony to God's gift of grace or any other truth, for that matter. In today's institutions of learning, the assumed, rational centres of yesteryear have been replaced with so many different perspectives, from feminist to queer, from Afro-American to those that are economic in orientation. Dialogue in this pluralist context requires openness to the other and an understanding of the inherent annulment of our own testimony. Put otherwise: it's dangerous to bear testimony to God's gift of grace because it can never, and will never, be adequately spoken of or conceptualized, not by myself or any theologian of note. It's not that we shouldn't say anything at all, but that we must always be open to the possibility of our testimony tainting the truth.

But where do we draw the line? Is this true of the testimony we give to scriptural truths? Is this true of Scripture itself? To what extent does our testimony annul the truth or alter it? And perhaps more importantly, how do we distinguish between annulment and empowerment?

The answers we give to these questions, which here remain unanswered, impact the position we take on a number of issues, not the least of which is biblical authority. We may not be able to travel down the road of deconstruction with Jacques Derrida, but the disjunction between the instant (of truth) and testimony is an intersection we cannot simply bypass.

Looking back on that conversation with the Queer Club, I do believe that fruitful dialogue requires, at the very least, being open to the possibility of annulment. We need to recognize the limitations of our testimony, of testimony in general, of placing truth, particularly God's truth, into a neatly wrapped conceptual box. This requires a different posture, a different tone--one of humility, of caution and of openness to the other.