Preaching from a 'higher than thou' pulpit



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Like many ministers, I once stood behind a high pulpit on Sunday morning, looking down on a congregation of eager listeners. How "eager" I'm not sure, but most seemed attentive, open to what I had to say. The traditional belief is that a pastor "speaks the inspired Word of God" through expounding the Bible. The belief is that the Holy Spirit inspires the preacher to say what God wants "God's people" to hear. Can that kind of "divine authority" be questioned?

All this leads me to say something (not necessarily inspired) about the "sky evangelist." I read about this lady who stood up on a plane to preach to passengers. She was escorted off, and has now been banned from several airlines. Rather than apologize for her performance, she joins with many in our day who cry: Persecution! Though she was actually the one doing the persecuting (pursing with annoying harassment), she wants to claim infringement of her free speech and religious rights. We might just roll our eyes and shake our heads. In my view, the airlines got it right – these verbal assaults don't belong on an airplane.

Intrusive preaching and performance faith has a long history. Proclamation of the Gospel is as old as the Church. Early evangelists like the apostle Paul walked around from town to town announcing a new and improved God, better than all the other gods most people already worshiped. No wonder he was chased from some of those places, after claiming the true God sent him, while proclaiming those who didn't like his "good news" would be eternally tortured by his Loving Lord.

In early America, traveling preachers set up tents in fields beckoning farmers, laborers, church ladies and anyone curious about the noise to come out for "revival." At least this was voluntary – no captive audiences. Yet, what about the churches already in those towns? What did the pastors and priests (let alone any rabbis) think of these itinerant preachers and their emotional ruckus? Did it appear to be an intrusion, a rather disrespectful show, staged for the most vulnerable? (We may recall Neil Diamond's song about "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show"). Did the preachers passing through ever stop to think they could encourage ministries present and active in town? Not likely. They were too busy "saving souls" and counting up conversions.

I witnessed some of this meddlesome style of evangelism as a jail chaplain. The Catholic chaplain and I held services each week in the county jail. We got along very well, since she (a good-natured lay woman) genuinely cared about the inmates and wasn't there to convert men or women to her Catholic faith. The inter-religious services I led in seven units of the jail every week were open to anyone; these were designed for discussion (and singing) rather than preaching. To counter the Catholic and interfaith gatherings inside, a pastor and volunteers from an Evangelical congregation also came in to "preach the Word" (this is common in many jails and prisons). This group enjoyed the chance to "reach" a literally captive audience, rejoicing in making new disciples "on fire for the Lord." On my rounds during the week I often found myself in conversations through cell bars, listening to the dramatic stories of conversion. Though I didn't attempt to discourage or disparage their new-found faith, I would gently encourage serious thinking about their emotional decisions during incarceration.

For those of us who prefer a podium to a pulpit, teaching rather than preaching, a commitment to learning along with other students seems more reasonable than claiming authority from on high. This isn't to say there aren't many clergy who are skilled as both preachers and teachers. I've known a lot of pastors, priests and rabbis who use sermons to pass along wise lessons perhaps drawn from ancient sources. These aren't the performing preachers I'm talking about here.

Returning to the "sky-vangelist," I would like to ask her – and those like her – how she would feel if she was in a "captive congregation" when a Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon or other preacher forced her to hear their version of "The Word"? Would that be tolerated? Is this what it would take to learn the basic lesson of treating others as you wish to be treated? When you are humble enough, self-reflective enough, to realize each person has a right to believe what they choose and doesn't have to listen to you, it can be a valuable educational moment.

From street corner preachers with loudspeakers, to those who force the public to see their signs and billboards, faith's performers believe their message should be shouted for all to hear. Maybe what they most need to hear is: Come down from your condescending pulpit.

Chris Highland is a humanist teacher and writer living in Asheville, NC.