

Stages of Faith:

- 1 **Uninformed**
- 2 **Informed, but Unformed**
- 3 **Informed and Formed/Conformed/Transformed**

Let's look at each stage in turn:

1 About 5 of the world's 6 billion people have heard of Jesus--more than have heard of any body else. About half of those who have heard have only scraps of information mixed with misinformation & disinformation. Jesus sent out his disciples first to inform the world of the gospel ("good news"), & they took that preaching task seriously: "How can the people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them?" (Ro.10.14 CEV)

"Actions speak louder than words" (in the familiar metaphor), but telling can only be done by words. Mr. Rogers' universally praised children's television work is not Christian (since telling the gospel is an integral element in a Christian event) even though he is a devout Christian (& Presbyterian clergyman): he avoids the Christian language-&-story. (I'm explaining, not complaining.)

Formed Christians are articulate about their faith in God through the gospel.

But even when the telling gets done, the hearing is hard. Secular society has formed our populace to believe in discoveries but not surprises, of which the gospel is full: (1) It's a surprise that the universe didn't just happen by itself but was made by Somebody; (2) It's a surprise that that Somebody became one of us (the incarnation); (3) It's a surprise that He died, was killed by us; (4) It's a surprise that his death ended (the resurrection); (5) It's a surprise that his death (the cross) opened for believers the gate of life (the atonement); (6) It's a surprise that his death didn't end his movement (pentecost, the church); & (7) It's a surprise that we Christians believe "Christ will come again" as prophet, priest, & king. That makes seven unbelievables in a row...

...to the mind of the English-speaking world's dominant culture, which "make[s] the inhabiting of a full Christian vision extremely hard to think, feel or imagine" (as David F. Ford of Cambridge U. puts it in concluding a three-part CHRISTIAN CENTURY [Apr.19-26.00] series on current movement in British theology (p473)). The cultic competition is fierce: Christianity is only one of the ways--each trying to inform the public & form its believers--of seeing, construing, constructing, & living in the world. The knowledge revolution, the information age, universal commodification, & the narcissistic incurvature of individuals & neo-tribes so raise the decibel level that the gospel can be heard only if its trumpet sounds are clear (1Cor.14.8; not "fog and flatulence," as an Episcopal theologian said of the preaching of ex-Bp. John Spong's present "cybersex" website [5.16.00 NEW YORK POST]).

2 At this stage, the gospel has been heard but--for a variety* of reasons--not hearkened to (i.e., so intently-deeply heard as to form one's inner life, G.M.Hopkins' "inscape")....*The Word as seed that doesn't come to fruit (Mt.13,M.4.,L.8) because of (1) evil influences, (2) adversity (tribulation/persecution/temptation), (3) the cares/delights/pleasures/riches of the world/life.

Most church members, & even many clergy, are stuck at this stage. That's why we're now hearing/reading so much about Christian formation (& having a Craigville Colloquy on it this summer, the leaders including the first two of the three authors of GOOD NEWS IN EXILE: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church, by Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson, and Wm. H. Willimon [Eerdmans/99]). Note these two quotes on getting beyond the second stage of faith: (1) p80: "the teaching ministry of the church has less to do with information than with formation....We want to form, and sustain, Christian persons and congregations as disciples, followers, of Jesus....[As are all other faiths,] we are in the conversion business"; (2) p96: "if the virtues required to address human need are cultivated in the community of faith, if more than being *informed* we need to be *formed* into faith-

ful people for the sake of the world, then we will tend carefully to our worship. We can be informed quickly, but to be formed takes much longer....we will have to hear the scriptural story continually, pray countless prayers, and sing the same songs of praise over and over again....If we get the gospel straight, the rest will follow."

3 At stage three we come to see how we've been *deformed* by "the principalities and powers" (Ro.8.38) & that in Christ we are now being *reformed*, "*conformed* to the image of his [God's] Son" (Ro.8.29, the solidarity of Savior/saved), "*transformed* by the renewal of your mind" (12.2). While by repentance-faith-baptism we are incorporated into (i.e., become parts of the Body of) Christ, during stage three he becomes, as it were, part of our body (he being "formed" in us [Gal.4.29]) & we become, as it were (in a stupendously brave metaphor), parts of God ("participants of the divine nature" [2P.1.4]).

1 Our book analogizes from the landless-homeless Jews in Babylon exile to our present Christian disestablishment, including the social demotion of our clergy, in the U.S. Contrast: $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago today, a Jewish homosexual came to me-as-pastor of "Community Church" for sanctuary, or at least comfort; & my diary for 5.17.50 says "The experience for him now: a ladder to climb with, not a hole to fall into." A highschool teacher of drama, he'd been outed--in those days a community crisis. The superintendent of schools had come to my study two days before the teacher did; & the diary reports "Most of the day [was given to the] "stream of civic leaders and school pupils who came to see me on" (teacher's name). I'd been pastor there for only $4\frac{1}{2}$ months. What a difference the half century has made in the general community's estimate of the pastor's public unofficial authority. During the 1950s in that pastorate, those in exile came to me: I was not in exile: "Christendom" was not yet dead: the public square was not yet religiously "naked" (to use the metaphor of Rich.Jn.Neuhaus, whose monthly FIRST THINGS addresses the problems ensuing from this nakedness).

2 Further, our book compares the two exiles vis-a-vis Scripture, whose value was/is situationally heightened when land was, & establishment is lost: "Scripture has become our home" now that we've become a textual community in exile (34), so (43) we must "learn its [the Bible's] language." (As I've often put it, the sacrality of the land/establishment was/is sucked up into the Book.)

3 If we live in the Book, we're only archaizing bibliolaters: if we live in-from the Book (its language our first-order language from daily exposure to the Book + weekly communal hearing of it as reading & exposition + Bible-honoring formal & informal conversations), we are third-stage Christians.

What to read on the Bible's language as the first-order language for Christians in process of formation? I suggest Douglas F. Ottati's HOPEFUL REALISM: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology (Pilgrim/00). Reviewing it in the 5.10.00 CHRISTIAN CENTURY 545f, Paul E. Capetz shows that this seriousness about the Bible's language (in English: not the biblical languages) is prophylactic against psychologism & sociologism: "In an earlier book Ottavi cautioned against the allure of two temptations besetting contemporary Protestantism: therapeutic spiritualities aimed at the well-being of the self, and communitarian enclaves focused upon the purity of the church. The former (represented by Howard Clinebell) is an example of an 'easy optimism' in its affirmation of the possibility of personal wholeness apart from a realistic emphasis upon guilt, sin and finitude. The second (represented by Stanley Hauerwas) is an example of a 'cynical pessimism' that considers the political, economic and cultural spheres of the wider society in which the church exists as beyond redemption. The former option is hopeful without being realistic, and the latter is realistic without being hopeful."

4 The anything-goes "flexidoxy" of the "bobos" (David Brooks' term for the bohemian bourgeois now culturally regnant in our country) is offended by the gospel unless it's dumbed down to "love"/"compassion"/"kindness." Once again, as in the early (preConstantinian) church, "the [narrow, demanding] message of the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people. But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work" (1Cor.1.18). By being exclusive, the gospel is inclusive.