

I statements: A preacher's testimony

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

I regretted to see in the January 2 *New York Times* that Peter Steinfels was writing his final “Beliefs” column. I’ve rarely missed a Steinfels column over the years. They were consistently respectful and totally devoid of either simplistic advocacy or simplistic criticism. Steinfels attempted to understand and analyze the complexity of religion in contemporary America. In years when religion generally made it into the news pages only when someone did or said something outrageous, Steinfels’s column was an oasis of thoughtful, theologically informed analysis. In a very brief conversation with him years ago I found him to be cordial but crisp and to the point, without hinting at all about his personal feelings on the subject we discussed—in other words, a consummate journalist.

In his last column Steinfels wrote that his choice of topics did reveal a personal perspective, but he tried to be detached. “I never wrote in the first person singular,” he explained.

Martin Marty picked up on that comment in his January 4 “Sightings” column and remembered that he and Dean Peerman used to coauthor a *Century* column anonymously, which occasionally led them to take refuge in “stilted phrases such as ‘it seems to the present writer that.’” Some years ago the *Century* resumed an old tradition of having the lead editorial be unsigned—another case where there can be no first-person pronoun: it’s an editorial that belongs to all of us.

This discussion made me think of the special place of the personal pronoun in preaching. I learned to preach at a time when there was nearly a phobia against making “I” statements. The sermon should be about the Word, not about the preacher, we were told. We delighted in poking fun at preachers who seemed always to be talking about themselves. It was good advice. It is dangerously easy for a sermon to be about the preacher’s experiences, convictions, relationships, tastes, even vacations.

But I will never forget a seminar led by James Forbes in which Forbes began by saying that preaching is, among other things, testimony, and that if it is not

testimony, it isn't going to work. "If you don't believe this stuff and tell them you do, why would you expect them to believe it?" That sentence hit me—it was what Forbes would call "a fax from heaven." Preaching as witness. Forbes drove the point home by asking participants to "just stand up and say what the Holy Spirit is doing in your life." I was not the only one looking for the exit.

I'm still a little skeptical and cautious about using the "I" word in sermons. I respect Steinfels's journalistic integrity and the appropriateness of other forums in which being impersonal is a virtue. But I learned from Forbes that preaching is one of those vocations where personal testimony is called for. If it is not clear that the preacher is personally committed to what he says, there is little reason to expect that anyone else will believe it.