

Eight things the church needs to say

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(RNS) If Christians stopped bickering about church, presenting sex as a first-order concern, telling other people how to lead their lives and lending our name to minor-league politicians, what would we have to say?

We need to figure that out, because we are wearing out our welcome as tax-avoiding, sex-obsessed moral scolds and amateur politicians.

In fact, I think we are getting tired of ourselves. Who wants to devote life and loyalty to a religion that debates trifles and bullies the outsider?

So what would we say and do? No one thing, of course, because we are an extraordinarily diverse assembly of believers. But I think there are a few common words we would say.

- We would say the name “Jesus.” We might mean different things by that name, but he is the center, the reason we exist.
- Allowing ample room for our diversity, we would say what we mean by faith in God. Not how right we are and how wrong others are, but an I-message: Here’s why I believe in God.
- We would tell stories about God’s impact on our lives. Not grand doctrines, not airtight theories, not definitions of who’s inside the circle and who’s outside, but stories of personal encounter.
- We would listen to other stories, respectfully, not defensively, eager to hear what our fellow Christian has to say.
- We would each tell as honestly as we can how we are trying to lead our lives in the light of our encounters and stories. We would sketch the bridge between faith and action.
- We would tell what we see in the world — not in the woe-is-me, sky-is-falling, Satan-is-winning manner people expect from us, but just what we see and how we think God cares about it.

- We would speak of hope, a durable, solid-rock hope that God is God, and God can use us to make a difference.
- We would talk of joy. Not giddiness, not even happiness, as the world understands happiness, but that deeper response to God that feels whole and peaceful.

Personally, I think these eight things are what we ache to say. They are why we walked in the door of a church in the first place. They are why we stay, despite abundant reasons for leaving.

Everyone has a theory about “why people are leaving the church,” “why millennials don’t come to church,” “why churches are dying” and “what’s wrong with society.”

Personally, I think we should stop worrying about institutional outcomes — especially outcomes that we hope will prove we were right all along — and try instead just to be hopeful, joyful, active people of faith.

I think we should take our parts in the great political debates — power and wealth, after all, were Jesus’ primary concern — but then agree that, whether X or Y gets elected, God will still grieve our cruelties and sufferings, and we will all have much work to do as believers.

Whatever the label — progressive or conservative, contemporary or traditional, denominational or nondenominational — we will each have something unique and necessary to contribute.

There is more binding us than dividing us. For division comes from our small and selfish places. Binding comes from God.