

“Easy to be Entreated”: Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent and Christian Communication

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I FIRST ENCOUNTERED WAYNE BOOTH'S *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*¹ when I started my Ph.D. program 1979. One of my best friends from graduate school told me that he owned the book when the book was recommended to us in our first seminar together. He said he had bought it solely on the basis of its cover. He had no idea what the content was, but he liked the picture. The cover is a photograph of three students engrossed in serious conversation over coffee. Perhaps the first lesson that Professor Booth wants us to take from this book is that Mormons should take their coffee substitutes more seriously.

I read the book twice during graduate school and am happy for the opportunity to have returned to it a third time for this essay. I believe, upon this my third reading, that it is a remarkably prescient book, foreshadowing many of the debates in the literary profession that have occurred since the lectures were given at Notre Dame in 1971. The book starts with a narration of an event that informs the entire argument; I will begin my discussion narrating an event that I hope will inform mine.

On June 11, 1993, Brigham Young University announced that it would terminate five faculty members, two of whom had attracted much public attention and therefore were high profile cases. The university

1. Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

claimed that procedures were followed, facts considered, experts and peers consulted. Doubters claimed that the decision was based not on the facts but on political, religious, and personal motives. Students demonstrated and rallied, letters and editorials were written, discussions were held all over campus.

Interestingly enough *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* begins with an analogous event. A popular professor's employment had been terminated. Students revolted and took over a building; and for the next sixteen days, they occupied the building from which they issued their demands. Not to be outdone, the administration and some faculty wrote their responses claiming reason, fact, evidence, procedure as their guides. In Booth's words:

Nobody now doubts that this event was disastrous, even though some would argue that it was an experience that we had to pass through. For many of the radical students it was disastrous—more than forty were finally expelled by a disciplinary committee. For the university it was disastrously embittering—only now [two years after the fact] has the normal level of tolerable mistrust between faculty and students been restored. If the main purpose of the university is learning and teaching, everyone concerned would say that the real university was diminished for many months. And even the most extreme students who at first claimed that their defeat was a victory, since at least "the university had been polarized," found at the end that the sit-in had produced apathy in most other students, not unity and spirit.²

Although the events at BYU and at the University of Chicago are strikingly analogous, there are obvious differences. The BYU students didn't take over buildings and write obscenities on the walls. You can be only so radical at BYU. But I believe the consequences at BYU were equally disastrous: mistrust, apathy, bitterness. Booth analyzes this event as a rhetorical failure not simply of the participants, although there is blame for them as well, but a failure of the modernist paradigm that informed the entire event and most of this century.

Modernism for Booth is the schism of fact from value beginning with Descartes' philosophy of doubt and resulting in two modernist dogmas. The first is that the only way to know anything is by verifiable fact and cold, hard logic. Opinions, beliefs, values, and the like cannot be verified, so they are ruled out of bounds. A fact must be verified by holding it up to rigorous scrutiny and to systematic doubt. That is, the only way to verify anything is for the best possible minds to try to falsify it. If it can't be falsified, then it can be accepted as being verified. This dogma Booth labels "Scientismic."³

2. Booth, 9-10.

3. *Ibid.*, 17.

The second modern dogma counters the Scientismic with its own beliefs that logic, facts, and evidence are mere façades for other, more deeply seated motives such as power, desire, and prestige. This is the result of a fiercely romantic distrust of the rational and the willing adoption of the intuitive, the emotional, and the irrational. This dogma Booth calls the "Irrationalist."

For the adherent of the Scientismic, communication must adhere to the standards of logic and evidence; all else is propaganda. For the Irrationalist, all claims to rationality and evidence are opportunities for delving beneath the surface in what Paul Ricoeur calls "interpretation as exercise of suspicion."⁴ The Irrationalist can take nothing at face value; a cigar is never just a cigar.

In dogmatic encounters such as I described above, I hope we can see the futility of any attempt at communication, at reaching other persons and changing their minds. The Scientismic wants only what can be verified, a kind of Sergeant Friday—"Just the facts, ma'am." The intended audience of this factual appeal sees the facts as dodges for what really motivates other persons and asks that they come clean, tell the truth, stop playing games. The situation is similar to what Wendell Berry in his wonderful essay, "Discipline and Hope," sees in political discussions; there is a radical left, a radical right, and a radical middle.⁵ All sides are so rooted in their positions that they cannot entertain another point of view. Any real communication is impossible and the exchange quickly devolves to a bomb-lobbing contest. One side hurls a fragmentation grenade; the other side takes cover, regroups, and launches an incendiary device. It escalates until the two sides run out of things to throw or until one side kills or dominates the other. Bystanders are either bored or are forced to cheer their side against the other; hence, the apathy and the distrust. No one wins, nothing is accomplished; hence, the bitterness.

For Booth this is a rhetorical failure because his definition of rhetoric precludes such an exchange. For Booth rhetoric is "a whole philosophy of how [humans] succeed or fail in discovering together, in discourse, new levels of truth (or at least agreement) that neither side suspected before."⁶ His is "a view of rhetoric as the whole art of discovering and sharing warrantable assertion."⁷ In essence, then, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* is occupied with the following two questions:

4. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36.

5. Wendell Berry, "Discipline and Hope," *Recollected Essays 1965-1980* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 152.

6. Booth, 10-11.

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

1. *How should [humans] work when they try to change each other's minds, especially about value questions?*
2. *When should you and I change our minds?—That is, how do we know a good reason when we see one?*⁸

The book is an examination of these questions in light of the consequences of modern dogmas and of the possibility of changing the modernist tendency to apply systematic doubt into a postmodernist opportunity to begin with assent. I will not attempt to summarize in a few pages what Booth has so thoroughly explored in his book. I will simply restate his conclusions to present to you the opportunity for assent that Booth foresees, and urge that as Christians we have already the wherewithal to do as he suggests.

After a careful analysis of the preference of fact over value and after careful consideration of the consequences of doubt and of how it is that people make ordinary decisions, Booth concludes that the modernist philosophy of doubt is bankrupt because it is disastrous, is internally inconsistent, and because it is unnecessary. People make ordinary decisions just fine without it. Knowledge does depend on values and beliefs, and it would be impossible to know anything or even do anything without them. Instead of "doubt pending proof," we are free to "assent pending disproof."⁹ This is not an invitation to gullibility, and Booth is careful to explicate why this is so, but suffice it for this discussion to know that the consequence of a willingness to assent rather than to doubt is significant to the questions of changing minds.¹⁰

From Booth's point of view, the self is no longer the transcendental ego of the Enlightenment striving for, and isolated and alienated within, universal reason. Nor is the self the brooding, intuitive genius of Romanticism, equally isolated and alienated. Instead, the self is "essentially rhetorical, symbol exchanging, a social product in process of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves."¹¹ This view of the self changes everything for Booth: "[The individual] is essentially, we are now saying, a self-making-and-remaking, symbol-manipulating creature, an exchanger of information, a communicator, a persuader and manipulator, an inquirer."¹² And if humankind is essentially different once we reject the tenets of modernism and its philosophy of doubt, we can begin to ask different and interesting questions. Thus Booth suggests, "But if all [humans] make each other in symbolic interchange, then by

8. *Ibid.*, 12.

9. *Ibid.*, 101.

10. *Ibid.*, 111.

11. *Ibid.*, 126.

12. *Ibid.*, 136.

implication they *should* make each other well, and it is an inescapable value in their lives that it is good to do it well—whatever that will mean—and bad to do it badly.¹³ Hence a primary value of human existence is to be found in human rhetoricity—the medium or mode in which we change our minds as well as others' minds.

Booth believes that at this juncture in history, the postmodern, whatever that is, transcends "the shocks of negation that produced the modern temper."¹⁴ We now have the opportunity to affirm rather than doubt as we go about changing one another's minds. This rhetoric of assent, by which we change our minds and remake ourselves in communities of shared values, enables the kind of communities based on tolerance and dignity that have long been envisioned because assent makes discussion about beliefs and values possible, even necessary. As we discuss and argue opinions, beliefs, and values, we also learn to entertain the reasonableness of beliefs, opinions, and values other than our own, even when we do not accept them. Thus, the quality of our social relationships depends on the quality of our communication. Without the presumption of assent, we risk the rhetorical impasses of the modernist era and their disastrous consequences. With the presumption of assent, we hope for genuine community, though not total agreement. But why stop there? Booth poses this as another question: "Who or what made the universe such that it can be apprehended only in a shared language of values?"¹⁵ Such a provocative question propels us into a consideration of how we as Christians respond to the word and to *the Word*, how it is that our communications configure our relationships both human and divine.

At this point I would like to pursue the reasoning of *Modern Dogma* to its reasonable conclusion for Christians. If the time is now ripe for us to consider how it is we change minds as we engage in symbolic interchanges, I believe that Christianity has something to offer in this matter. In essence I believe that Christianity is not a dogma, although Christians can certainly be dogmatic, and thus is not susceptible to the critique of modernist dogmas that Booth presents. I also believe the obverse: to the extent that a person is dogmatic, he or she is not acting as a Christian. Christianity is not a dogma in Booth's sense because the changeability of minds is integral to Christian salvation through repentance.

The issue of changeability of minds became an issue for Christianity in the fifteenth century when Lorenzo Valla, a fifteenth-century Italian philologist and humanist, wrote his *Collatio* and *Adnotationes*, or notes and commentary, on the New Testament. Valla applied a philological method to the Greek and Vulgate texts to determine critically what the

13. *Ibid.*, 137.

14. *Ibid.*, 201.

15. *Ibid.*, 136.

text actually said. His method and temperament put him at odds with the Catholic Church. For example, in discussing 2 Corinthians 7:10-11, in which Paul speaks of repentance and the change that occurs to the repentant soul, Valla argues that no doctrine of penance is stated or implied in these verses. The King James version reads as follows:

10. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

11. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

The Greek *metanoia*, "repentance," is translated in the Vulgate as the Latin *poenitentia*, "penance." The Latin suggests a weariness or annoyance that is not present in the Greek. The Greek verb *metanoew* means quite literally "to change one's mind." Other connotations include "reconsidering one's judgment" or "concern to become better after reflection."¹⁶ This meaning is quite clear, Valla argued, in verse 11, and does not suggest a doctrine of penance, but merely a willingness to change one's mind. Erasmus repeated Valla's judgment in his New Testament and thus came under the same criticism from the church. He consistently translated the Greek as *resipiscite*, "change your minds."¹⁷ Later this point would be taken up by Luther. But the Greek is quite clear in its sense of repentance as a change of mind and heart. A godly sorrow moves us to repentance in that it causes us to change our minds. Repentance is a rhetorical act of assenting to the Word of words. Insofar as Christians must constantly be in a state of repentance, they must always be willing to ply their minds in order to change them; they must always be willing to assent to the Word.

As Christians this state of being places us under certain obligations in our communications. We are obliged to persuade all to come to Christ and to heed the Word and its goodness (See 2 Ne. 25:23, Jacob 1:7, Ether 4:12, Moro. 7:16-17). But how does the Christian do this without dogmatism? The responsibility is similar for both speaker and hearer. Speaking of a heavenly wisdom James admonishes as follows:

13. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. . . .

16. Liddell and Scott, *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1972), 439; Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 64.

17. Bentley, 139; Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 139.

17. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy, and good fruits (James 3:13, 17).

Likewise Alma urges that the followers of Christ be "humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering" (Alma 7:23). And at the time of Christ, Nephi longs for a people that would be "easy to be entreated" (Hel. 7:7). I do not believe that this phrase, "easy to be entreated," means to make easy marks of ourselves or willing dupes. It does mean being patient, long-suffering, and submissive. It means being willing to hear the other out and consider the reasons and appeals carefully, deliberately, and considerately, setting aside for the moment ego, interest, prejudice, and ambition. It means being willing to change our minds, to assent pending disproof. The obligation of a Christian audience is to hear as faithfully as possible what is being said, to take it up deliberately, to be entreated by it easily if the reasons are good.

And as in most else, the Golden Rule also applies to the speaker: speak as you wish to be heard. Nowhere is the duty of the Christian rhetor more thoroughly spelled out than in Doctrine and Covenants 121:

41. No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

42. By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile.

The rhetoric of Christianity is not involved in any power play or any attempt at victory for its own sake. The Christian rhetor knows that if we are made in the image of God, we are made as the Word, in and by words, refashioned by the things we say and do to each other. And as we repent, changing our minds, vowing to do better upon reflection, we make each other better by our symbolic interchange, and so we edify one another (D&C 50:22). The state of mind for the Christian is assent, assent to the Word, and "inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," he reminds us (Matt. 25:40). The Lord requires "the heart and a willing mind" (D&C 64:34). He requires this willingness of heart and mind to assent to him and to each other so that our communication can truly be the foundation for our relationships, both human and divine.

If Booth is right that postmodernity is a crucial juncture for improving human relationships, I believe that Christians need to leave their dogmatism behind and, as always, show the way by their example and their practice. Christian communication requires practice at assent and at being easily entreated. It requires a practice that becomes habitual. Because

Booth gave the lectures that he reworked as *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* originally at Notre Dame, he ended the final lecture with an allusion to the Catholic church and some of the rhetorical turmoil it was experiencing. I will end with his words, hoping that you can make the requisite translation for our own church.

I have met some rebels in the last four days here who talk as if salvation will be found only if the church can be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century. Many have been eager to show me that my audiences here will be just as secularized, fully as modernist, as I could find at my own university. Whatever the reasons, good and bad, for turning from traditional Catholic dogmas, I would hope that the turning would not be simply a rerun of the triumph of modernism. To catch up with Bertrand Russell is not enough for a modern Catholic or rebel-Catholic—not if one of the things we know is that beliefs are not disproved simply by asking whether we can prove them in the modernist sense.

In short, it would seem to me a pity, if in fighting the dogmas of pre-modernism, you were to fall at this late date from the arms of the church into the thorns of modernism. I suppose that what I am asking, without being entirely sure that it is possible, is for a leap over modernist battlefields to the postmodern rediscovery that the primal symbolic act is saying yes to processes like the wrenching one in which you are engaged.¹⁸

Our own church is sometimes embroiled in wrenching rhetorical turmoil that in many ways reflect the modern dogmas Booth outlines for us. For some the truth of the gospel will be proved beyond skepticism when the golden plates are returned or when the city of Zarahemla is finally located, when a founding document or artifact is discovered, when a historical enigma can finally be put to rest by incontrovertible fact, when the doctrine can be verified with tangible evidence. This is the Scientismic dogma. For others any such claim is met with skepticism and distrust, as an opportunity for suspicion. This is the Irrationalist dogma. I, together with Booth, would hope that this modernist wrangle of dogmas could be transcended by an invigorating yet long-suffering, a demanding yet loving rhetoric of assent in which the ease of being entreated is commensurate with the ease of His yoke, a burden borne lightly by virtue of the Word.

18. Booth, 203-04.