

Great Slogans

*A Sermon Preached by Stephen R. Silver at
The First Congregational Church
Lebanon, N.H.
12 May 2013*

John 17.20-26

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

One of the most successful TV series of recent years has been *Mad Men*. Indeed, the show has achieved that rare level of pop culture recognition whereby people who have never even seen an episode, a population that includes yours truly, can tell you something about the series' premise, maybe even something about the characters. Thus, I can share with you that *Mad Men* is set during the 1960s; revolves around the personal and professional life of Don Draper; and, set during a time of great social change in America, aspires to do more than just tell the story of the trials and tribulations of working at a New York ad agency. That, however, and the fact that the characters are very snappy dressers, is about all I can tell you about this program.

I can, though, tell you a little bit more about advertising. Our fifteen trillion dollar economy would be dead in the water without it; it's simply impossible to have this level of economic activity without encouraging people to buy and invest in things they might not otherwise purchase. As modern capitalism has evolved and flourished over the last century, advertising has done likewise. From the simple, yet commanding, road side hoardings of yesteryear (there's a reason that Scott Fitzgerald was able to invest that fictional T.J. Eckelburg billboard with such symbolic power) to the billions being invested in Big Data in the quest to market goods and services to ever more narrowly defined niches, the sophistication of advertising and marketing has increased with each passing year.

And yet.

And yet at the heart of the effort one, there remains an immutable truth: if you want to sell something, you need to grab the consumer's attention. That's why to this day the hallmark of success in advertising is the memorable slogan.

Consider these golden oldies:

"When it rains it pours" (Morton Salt, 1914); "Good to the last drop" (Maxwell House, 1917); "M'm! "M'm! Good!" (Campbell's Soup, 1931).

Then, perhaps especially apt for the son or daughter who wishes to impress dear old Mom on this Mother's Day, there is DeBeer's "A diamond is forever." (1948). More recently, there's Nike's "Just do it" (1988). And then there's a personal favorite from the 1970s, "With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good."

Now the folks at Smuckers were onto something. A product with a strange name better be good if it wants to catch on. But to be honest, a great name and a glitzy ad campaign will only get a dud product so far. Ultimately, you've got to have a good product or service to share with customers. Which brings us to our own United Church of Christ.

Nine years ago, the UCC launched what it called its "Still Speaking" identity campaign. That's when the comma some of you may have noticed on denominational materials was first unveiled. According to the Local Church Ministries Office in Cleveland, the symbol was meant to embody a quote attributed to the late Grace Allen, "Never put a period where God put a comma." That in turn was understood to be a more accessible version of the proclamation of Puritan divine John Robinson, "O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your word."

Now some of you might wonder why this effort was even needed. The answer was simple: market research revealed that nobody "out there" really knew what the UCC was. Think about it. People who go to Presbyterian Churches are Presbyterians; those who worship at a Methodist Church are Methodists; the folks at the Baptist Church? They're Baptists. But what about those who go to a United Church of Christ church? Are they Uniters? Christers? Christians? (In one sense, I hope so, but frankly, to claim 'Christian' as our denominational identity would be shamelessly arrogant). I think it's safe to say that people who are part of the UCC don't want to be known as "Yukkers." Some of you, of course, may have a ready solution to this identity problem: "We know who we are. We're Congregationalists. We've been Congregationalists here in Lebanon since 1768. We've been Congregationalists since 1620, when the first Pilgrim stepped off the Mayflower, since 1630 when the Puritans set up shop in Boston. In fact, we were Congregationalists back in England long before anybody felt a need to set sail for the New World. Our roots are deep; our polity, our way of doing things, of organizing church, of worshipping God is tested. We know who we are."

Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple.

You see, technically, we're not Congregationalists and we haven't been since 1957, when the United Church of Christ was formed through the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, itself formed in 1934, and the Congregational Christian Churches, which was the result of a union in 1931.

Now, that doesn't mean that we've ditched our history, our tradition, and our way of doing things. We still value the autonomy of the local church, indeed reject any notion of a church hierarchy; the Conference Minister isn't above the local pastor and the General Synod cannot tell this congregation nor any other what version of the Bible to read or which hymnal to use, who to ordain or marry or what cause to support or oppose. As a church we still emphasize the importance of proclaiming and interpreting Scripture. Just as was true when this sanctuary was designed to give pride of place to the Bible – note the lectern, for the reading of God's word, note the pulpit, for that word's explication – we in the UCC today still focus our liturgy around Scripture. And we love our history, our stories of the Pilgrims and Jonathan Edwards and all those colleges founded by Congregationalists; of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Old South Church where some say the American Revolution was born, and that distinctly American architectural vernacular, the meetinghouse, where many scholars say our form of local, democratic self-government found expression and came to life.

What it does mean is that fifty six years ago this church – and, yes I mean this church, for the congregations of the Congregational Christian Churches each chose individually whether to join the new denomination – opted to participate in something important, and unusual, in the story of the Christian faith: coming together.

Think about it. For much of the supposedly universal Church's history, the story of the day has been division: the split between East and West in 1054, the Reformation and its still-ongoing generation of new denominations. It was as part of this ecclesiastical mitosis that our Puritan forebears created their own churches in England. Opposing the polity and liturgy of the Church of England, they devised their own. But in 1957 two churches that had some important things in common yet were also culturally, historically, and at times, liturgically distinctive, came together in covenant. Union was to take precedence over separation, commonality over difference.

The merger was a milestone in the post-war ecumenical movement. There had been lots of talk about Christian fellowship and a common calling. Now, someone was doing something about it. But something else was happening, and this is why I believe the UCC was and is valuable and it all traces back to our denomination's motto. And I'm not referring to the one that involves punctuation, but the one that comes from today's Gospel lesson, specifically John 17:21: "That they may all be one."

Our denomination was formed in response to Jesus' hope that his followers would be united, not for the sake of unity itself, but because he wished them to know God and be with God and love God. That knowing, being, and loving occurs within community, and

that community exists not just locally but globally. The desire that “they may all be one” should be the defining, organizing principle of the church.

For more than half a century the implementation of this vision has been shaped by the maxim, “In essentials unity, in doubtful matters liberty, in all things charity.” And just what are the essentials in the UCC? Our denomination does not require its members to formally subscribe to any creeds or doctrines. It does, however, make one bold, unequivocal assertion: that Jesus Christ is sole head of the church. Not the pope, not the pastor, not the congregation. Jesus is the boss, the head honcho, the one in charge. It’s his vision, not ours that’s supposed to guide things. It’s his way, not our way, that the church is supposed to follow. It’s his call to unity, not our penchant for division, that we are called to pursue.

I’ve discovered that there’s a benefit to being a member of a denomination that doesn’t lend itself to an easy-to-share name. Tell people you’re an Episcopalian, a Baptist, or a Catholic, and they know what they need to know, or at least think they need to know. But when you tell people you’re part of the United Church of Christ, you have an opportunity to do a little bit of witnessing for church unity. Sure, you can say, “We’re essentially Congregationalists” (or if you live in Pennsylvania, “We’re essentially E&R”) and be done with it. But you can also say, “We’re part of the Christian family.” Then you can dive into the denominational minutiae, talk about mainline Protestantism, Puritan forebears, and all that good stuff.

Sometimes, a company, trying to make inroads with a new demographic or maintain its position in a changing marketplace, will dispense with a long-time slogan, hoping that something new will capture the attention of consumers. Both Campbell’s Soup and Maxwell House tried this. Both failed. And so both went back to using their classic slogans. I find myself thinking that the UCC might consider doing the same. Yes, the comma can elicit questions and inspire conversation. But the cross – specifically the empty cross that proclaims the resurrected Jesus Christ – is also a pretty effective symbol, one that simply yet powerfully tells a most compelling story. And while everything I’ve ever read or heard about Grace Allen suggests she was a nice, and very funny, person, I believe that the author of John’s Gospel had some insights into the Christian life that are as vital, as exciting, and as transformative today as they were when they were first shared almost two thousand years ago. That’s why, in an ever more fractured and increasingly atomized world, where alienation and aloneness are all too common, a church grounded in a desire for reconciliation, restoration, and reunion, a church that has as its slogan, and I think this is not just a good slogan, but a *great* slogan, “That they may all be one,” offers people individually and in the company of others, offers you and offers me, the opportunity to experience God’s grace, God’s love, God’s new life.