Elaine Storkey (public Christian communication)

Public Christian communication that is winsome, relevant, and believable has been a tough nut to crack for many Christians. English philosopher, sociologist, and theologian Elaine Storkey not only gets this, she has overcome the problem in ways that make me envious! Elaine is widely-listened-to in the UK ? as a Christian thinker. She started broadcasting with the BBC in 1986, and has been involved in many documentaries, arts, news, and current affairs programs. She has been a presenter on Radio 4's ?Thought for the Today? for over 20 years, and has written many articles for national newspapers and scripts for the BBC World Service.

No stranger to North America, Elaine did her graduate work in philosophy in Canada at McMaster University, and her husband, Alan, has taught at Calvin College. They spent a school year at Covenant College teaching, and they have worked in various capacities at Gordon, Bethel, Concordia, and Eastern colleges.

Although the following conversation was published in Openings (Oct-Dec, ?99), her ideas and advice about effective public Christian communication remain timeless. I believe it is especially important for American Christians today who have bought into and parrot rigid right-wing or left-wing ideologies as if they were God's wisdom for public life. I asked Elaine to unlock some of her secrets to effective Christian communication to a world that, often for good reason, doesn't want to listen to us. We also spoke about worldview for young people, and at the time she was editing the final draft of her sixth book, Created or Constructed?: The Great Gender Debate, and topics such as gender, marriage, metaphor, and symbol quite naturally found their way into our conversation. Except for rewriting this introduction and one or two minor changes, the original interview has not been changed.

Elaine has taught at the Universities of Stirling and Oxford, Open University, and King's College London. From 1991-1999, she was Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, which was founded by John Stott. In 1997, she became President of Tearfund, a Christian relief and development charity. In 2010, she and her husband, Alan, became founder members of Restored, an organization committed to advocating against violence to women.

Charles Strohmer: When did you first get glimmers about speaking sensibly to the world in Christian categories?
Elaine Storkey: That began decades ago when I saw the importance of running theology alongside philosophy and sociology and in building up ideas surrounding the interplay among these three aspects of life. In particular, the relationship between theology and philosophy is ever so important. When people try to do one without the other, it shows.

CS: You have a good relationship with the media in Britain. How have you been able to make the often rarified fields of theology and philosophy work with sociology to speak understandably and christianly in the media and for their audiences?
ES: One of my interests has been to use those three disciplines to develop an apologetic that reaches the secular mind without all the Evangelical language and baggage. One of the ways I've been able to do that in Britain has been though the secular media, especially the BBC, where for 15 years I've been doing a short program called ?Thought for the Day.? It goes out on the main radio news program between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. every morning. I have a 4-minute slot on that, which is shared by a number of people from different faith positions. So you might hear anyone. What I like about it is the broadcasting ? sowing the seed as far as you can throw it. And you've got to speak to the whole national audience in a way that's clear and, for me, shows a high integrity for Christians. This gives me the opportunity to communicate the things I've been thinking in a much broader way. Another way has been through a column that I write several times a year for The Independent, which is one of our national newspapers.

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CS: Is there a particular way you usually approach this kind of broadcasting?
ES: I think you have to be topical. You have to engage with something that's in the public interest and then give a philosophical or theological comment on it which people can reason with. Even if people can't agree with it, even if they're not Christian, at least they can identify with it and you can get them to think about their own commitment and what's underneath their own faith.

CS: Can you give us ?for instance??

ES: Typically, I take a topic that people are excited or emotional about, and then explain to them why they feel like this, or why I feel like this. I can bring my own values into it, and often use a biblical position, or even the Bible itself, to explicate the undergirdings of it. For instance, I did one on the UN peace-keeping force when they first went out to Bosnia ? how do you train fighting men to go keep peace? And then I did one on the beef crisis here, which was quite an interesting one. I started by saying that most people are not going to see any immediate connection between an obscure passage in Leviticus and a beef crisis in England. But there is one. And then I showed that connection. I hardly ever do that ? quote the Bible in the first sentence. It got a lot of people listening in and received a lot of correspondence. For a column in The Independent I did one on our political sex scandals and another on genetically modified crops.

CS: A Christian friend of mine has editorial control over a widely circulated national secular publication, which I do some writing for. So I know it's not easy crafting and languaging such pieces while wanting to maintain Christian integrity. Using the piece you did on genetically modified crops, can you give us some clues about reaching national audiences?
ES: Well, it's difficult to say how you do it because it's a constructive piece ? it's all woven. You would have to read the whole thing because the argument is contained in the actual descriptions and narratives. The piece on modified crops looked at the whole debate, such as who said what and why, and then it looked at what lies beneath the debate and at questions of who owns natural resources and what it means to own a crop, and what extent this means anything to patenting. Can you really own and patent something that is there in creation? Are we just copying or modifying or cloning bits of creation, moving around little bits of genes, rather than making anything new and then calling it ours? It also looked at risks and dealt with the question of boundaries: why has God put certain boundaries around the creation, and what do we do when we violate those boundaries? What you're doing is working up to giving a Christian response.

Recently I did a piece, during Holy Week, on the problem of evil. I took some content from one of these films in which evil comes from aliens, and I used the idea of evil as coming from prehistoric monsters recently revived. Then, after I explained that we always have to have an external force of evil coming to invade the planet, I posed the question: what possible evil could they bring that isn't here in multiple forms already? Then the piece relocated evil in the human heart and our response. Then it looked at the reality of evil and the Easter solution to evil. That was very effective. I preached the gospel there in a direct way and they didn't even mind. Which surprised me. I don't normally push so heavily, and I was expecting the editors to come back and say sorry, we can't actually do this.

CS: You're Evangelical, but earlier you said that you try to communicate without using Evangelical language and baggage. What do you mean by that?
ES: The nonChristian world doesn't really understand Evangelical language. A lot of our ?Evangelical? words only have resonance with us. They sound culturally strange and clichéd to ?outsiders,? who then don't actually hear what we're trying to say. They hear our words and say, ?Oh, listen to that funny subgroup.? They see it as Evangelicals talking to each other but not to ?us? (the culture). Changing this involves the whole way in which we as Evangelicals talk about things, rather than just finding different individual words to use. It's about trying to talk to the nonChristians about God and the world in their own language.

For instance, on one of the broadcasts I did a talk on ?unlearning.? I placed it in the context of people having a lot of unlearning to do, like criminals, who have to unlearn crime if they're going to be any good, or smokers, who have to unlearn smoking if they are not going to die of cancer. Then I said that the New Testament makes a big thing of unlearning, and that sometimes you've got to go a long way back to unlearn. Like for example in the conversation between Nico- demus and Jesus, who suggested that Nicodemus had to go right back to the womb ? he had to be ?born again.? At that point people got it, because they'd been waiting for it, but they hadn't known where I was taking them. But they were following along and suddenly they understood. In that context, renouncing the past and going back to square one and beginning your search for God made sense for them. This is the kind of thing I'm talking about, rather than just replacing odd words.

CS: I think one of the secrets for getting Christians to communicate to secular audiences more effectively is to start thinking much more creatively about educating the next generation to know how.
ES: I agree entirely. I do quite a bit with youth audiences, trying to get them to think more seriously ? not just to have reactions but to take their own learning seriously, because there's a crisis of learning in our countries. I try to give them a taste of how they can go

through difficult things with more confidence. One way I do this is through courses on worldview that I take around the country. I usually get huge audiences for this. I do a thing called ?Soul Survivor,? which lasts for two weeks. Last year did a seminar called ?Thinking Till It Hurts,? which drew about 500 young people ? starting at 8.30 a.m.! I loved it.

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CS: How do you teach worldview to young people?
ES: There's a lot to it of course. I might give them several cultural scenarios and ask them questions. What did Hitler have against the Jews, and what was going on in fascist Germany in the 1930s? Then we might look at a bit of Hindu scriptures and discuss various practices that come out of that. We might read various passages from humanist documents and discuss their various meanings on law and education. Basically, I want them just to deal with the question of what's going on, to try to identify what sort of views of the world do these give. From this they can start to see that all worldviews are answering fundamental questions like: what is reality, who are we, who or what is God, what's wrong with the world, what would put it right? And so on.

All our cultures are grappling with these issues, and how they answer them takes shape in social policy; like: you exterminate six million Jews because you have redefined humanness. So that's you're answer to the question: who am I? You're a human being if you're a member of the Arian race; if you're a Jew, you're not. Then we look at how the Bible answers these questions and what that would look like socially, politically, economically, and so on. It's wonderful because by then they can see the stark differences between the Bible's way of looking at life and the other ways. It helps the Bible come alive for young people. It takes on much more shape and content than it did for them previously. Before, the Bible's stories weren't easily understandable to them. They were just remote facts or cross-sections of ideas. But now the Bible's stories become a tool for understanding far far more. I've found that once the young people get the hang of doing worldview thinking they go wild over it.

CS: We're really up against it here in the States. It's slowly changing, but as a rule it's hard to get church leadership into bringing worldview instruction into the churches. I get many more invitations to do it in the UK than here. I've always suspected that this indicates a big difference in our two cultures, the different ways of thinking.
ES: One of the differences, and I still see it in my travels to the States, is that here in England we don't seem to have as much pietism left any more. I think we are more used to working through how things are connected up in life and how you live it out in the whole of life as a Christian. I mean, at festivals like Spring Harvest, you can have a meeting on ecology and a couple hundred people will turn up, and they'll all know the issues. This would be true for other subjects, like art, education, or business. So I think we are more engaged. I was surprised last time I was over to the States at the considerable gap between what we are doing in England for the last ten years.

CS: How do you get burned by the gap when speaking in the States?
ES: Often some of the analysis that people would expect me to offer in England, or be disappointed if I hadn't said it, might be regarded as terribly ?left wing? or ?political? in the States. In England, it wouldn't be regarded as particularly political, only having a political dimension. But in the States it's, you know, what's this socialism stuff? Which I think is terribly odd. I think it's because they haven't got categories for understanding what I'm saying, and because a lot of America is caught up in right wing ideology.

CS: We have a terribly rigid ideological polemic over here. You're either on the left or the right.
ES: It's extraordinary, really. We've got our movement for Christian democracy here as well, which has grown out of Christian worldview [thinking]. It's a wonderful organization with thousands of members. They're writing position papers on all kinds of issues, and they're doing it thoroughly from an informed philosophical perspective. But you can't stereotype it as either right or left. For instance, it would side with the anti-abortionists on the issue of human life, but it would also side with the anti-arms trade people on the same issue.

We're looking at life from a different undergirding set of questions, which produce different answers.

CS: My experience has shown me that it's not a middle road thing, either, not a kind of compromised place between the two

positions.
ES: That's right. It's quite different. We're not looking for a consensus or a bit of both. It's a different perspective. We're looking at life from a different undergirding set of questions, which produce different answers. I mean, occasionally you sound like someone on the right, or some issue or someone on the left. But you're not either, although you can invite people from the right or left to join your platform. These people are pleased to hear that the movement for Christian democracy is tackling some issue and they'll come on board. The movement will explain that it is not doing it from the same perspective, but we're happy to join forces on this because it matters. It's also interesting how the movement has drawn pretty evenly from Evangelicals and Catholics. And sometimes you sound like nothing the world ever heard before!

CS: Many Evangelicals in the UK have found themselves disillusioned with what they know of Evangelicalism, precisely because they don't see it helping them to influence the modern world effectively. Some people are in agony over this. Some have gone so far as to opt out of Evangelicalism and are scrambling to find an established intellectual base from which to do the very thing they long to do: offer timely and good Christian solutions to society's problems. What's you're take on this? I mean, there was, for instance, the Evangelical/post-Evangelical debate a few years ago.
ES: That may be a bigger issue then than it is today. Then you had a lot of people protesting, and books were written about it. Now they've had time to think about what they're going to do. Some have actually dropped out of the church altogether and have become post-church. I think this shows. I mean, they may not be thinking creatively anymore, just reacting. But a lot of people have moved back into the Evangelical scene, but in a different church or a different form of church. I think what you're seeing in another sense is that the ?new churches,? the charismatic wing of the church here, have become so established in Britain, so strong and big, that they have almost moved into the gap. They have opened their own Evangelical kind of thinking to much bigger issues, to these world and life views, in a way that maybe they wouldn't have done 20-30 years ago. I'm interested in a number of things here.

So I think you're seeing a lot of life left in Evangelicalism here. I mean, you need more than Third Way, and you can't just wait for Greenbelt every year! We've also got the Evangelical Alliance, which aims to keep all the different kinds of Evangelicals talking to each other and hanging in there, to squash this idea that there is one Evangelical culture that we're all reacting against. That's been tremendously effective.

CS: A secret for making all of this work, it seems to me, is to hold a little less tightly to our ideologies and theologies and a lot more tightly to Jesus Christ as the Logos of our analyses and prescriptions. For me, this allows for a lot of godly experimentation that is faithful to the gospel, and I've personally many times seen it bring a practical unity to the body of Christ, which we're ever so much in need of. I think this is because we get to learn from each other in ways like never before.
ES: This interests me very much, because finding the unity is what it's all about. The unity means that this is where you stand and this is where I stand, and I can build no other. But you might have insights that I might have to learn from. Unity means humility. When you approach brothers and sisters in humility you learn from them. If you approach them in arrogance ? that you have the whole truth and nothing but the truth ? you're not going to learn anything. And you're not going to get to anything like unity either.

CS: Male-female relations is one of those immortal debates, one that Christians need to make wiser public contributions to it. You've done a lot of writing in the area of gender. What do you see as one or two of our most knotty problems here?
ES: I think the way we've often resolved the whole ?role? issue has been literalistic and biblicistic rather than taking the whole sweep of Scripture [into account]. So we've argued about two texts in the New Testament, which are actually fairly ambiguous because they've got Greek that's not used anywhere else, like the words [translated as] ?authority? in 1 Timothy 2:12, and ?head coverings? women should wear ?because of the angels? in 1 Corinthians 11:10, and no one's ever worked out why. So I think you're building a whole theology on fairly obscure texts. And we take a metaphor, and instead of recognizing what a metaphor is ? something is ?like this? ? we've literalized it and built a whole theology on it. For example, the word ?head.? I've never really understood why Evangelicals get so terribly stewed up about ?headship.? To start with, I don't know where the ?ship? comes from! ?Head? is just the wonderful Greek word k?phal?, which is used metaphorically unless it's being used for the thing at the top of your neck.

CS: We need to be wiser about the meaning and use of metaphors and symbols in the Bible.
ES: This is quite important. Symbol and metaphor are very exciting. The New Testament is full of wonderfully rich metaphor, which

adds to the weight and the glory of the Word of God. But we nail the meaning down so crudely that we miss the wonderful nuances. We make the meaning mean what the text means, rather than letting the Bible speak for itself. For instance, Paul talks about ?head? in lots of different ways, like the head being distinct from the tail of a coin, or Jesus being the head, which he qualifies by ?the firstborn of all creation.? And so on. We've used ?head? only in one sense, the sense of ?authority,? which is not even justifiable because the authority aspect only came into the Greek when Greek was Latinized. So we've robbed the beauty of that metaphor of its richness and complexity. I think what Paul is saying in terms of a husband being a wife's ?head? in marriage is to do with being the facilitator, being the responsible one ? it's something about the unity of the relationship rather than being the boss or ?the authority.? I think we've got it terribly wrong.

The underlying message has to be that Christ comes to bring us liberty, to bring our gifts into fruition.

CS: This way of learning from Paul changes many things.
ES: If you look at the balance of Ephesians 5, which people usually quote at you, especially as Paul sums it up at the end, you see that it's all about making sure there's love and respect in the marriage. But we've turned that to say: make sure there's authority and dominance in the marriage. We're always messing about with the arguments to end up with this, but it doesn't fit the Scripture when you look at the underlying thrust of the redemption message found in Galatians 3 ? that once you're in Christ all of these old divisions that people have erected . . . that there's no real privileged position before God. We are all one in Christ. Full stop. I think if we took that message into the church really seriously we would transform the church and it would look very different from the people outside. I'm quite passionate about this. We've got the message wrong here. We need to look at the whole thrust, which is to release the gifts of the church for the use of the King, so that we can bless the whole community and also draw people to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CS: I suspect you're doing this with your new book, Created or Constructed?
ES: In that book I'm looking at the secular debate too, because they've also got themselves in a terrible mess. For instance, it went through the kind of ?fixed role? thing and ?sexual differences deciding everything.? And then we moved into this period of equality from the 1960s onward, where ?difference? was disregarded and it was all about being the same. So men and women were now fundamentally the same because ?difference? always brought inequality. So we have to have equality, which has to be predicated on sameness. Then postmodernity came in and said No, No, once you say women are equal or the same . . . the same as who, equal to whom? And so you stay with the male being the norm; the reference is always back to the man. So you gain nothing because you're sorting things through a male normative structure. So even though the postmoderns say we have to recover ?difference,? the way they're doing it fundamentally relativises everything. So everyone is different from everyone else and there's nothing you can say about human beings because it's all a construct. So you end up with the debate slipping away from your fingers into the chasm. Now the Scripture speaks to that, and it's how you recover the debate that I've worked on in Created or Constructed?

CS: You're really talking about what it means to be human, which is one of life's big questions, and today people are becoming more and more confused about the answer.
ES: We have to recognize that humanness is real. It's not just a construct. There are real human beings. It's not a theoretical language. It's not simply that we are constructed according to our time, place, and language. Human beings are real, and sexuality is real. God has breathed sexuality into the creation for many purposes, and we have to recognize that. But at the same time God has also gifted us, so we're not stuck with just what can unfold from our sexuality. We have many other roles. They unfold from our personalities, from our gifts, from our understanding, from our locations, and all the rest. We have to honor and respect all of these.

We also have to work with the differences that are there, asking how many of these differences are barriers to human relationships and how many enhance them, and come to some kind of approximation. There's a lot of work to be done. But the underlying message has to be that Christ comes to bring us liberty, to bring our gifts into fruition.

This interview makes a nice companion piece to the one with John Peck.
Comment on the interview here