

One New Book for the Preacher

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PREACHING THE JUST WORD by Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. Hardcover, \$22.50.

In his new book, Father Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., one of America's foremost Roman Catholic theologians, articulates his concerns about the perilous proposition which he feels has pervaded a significant segment of American Catholicism (I have similar concerns for much of American Protestantism). It is the assertion that the very nature of Christianity concerns itself primarily with the relationship of the soul to eternity; the belief that Jesus Christ took upon himself our human form "not to relieve our suffering but to forgive our sins, and so the church's function is to focus not on violations of social justice but on the undying hardness of human hearts."

His response to this thesis is to declare in no uncertain terms that it does violence to the Bible. He calls it as he sees it:

Those who read in the sacred text a sheerly personal, individualistic morality have not understood the Torah, have not sung the Psalms, have not been burned by the prophets, have not perceived the implications and the very burden of Jesus' message, and must inevitably play fast and loose with St. Paul.

Without mincing words, Father Burghardt articulates the struggle that is raging for the soul of the church in America today, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. His book, originally delivered as the 1994 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, calls for the preaching/teaching of biblical justice, not merely ethical and legal justice, as it relates to the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

His impassioned concern is that we need first to understand and then preach and teach the truth that all sin is social; that it results in the *sundering of community*. He argues that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is essentially the story of the struggle to shape a community; but a story that also honestly chronicles "lapses into disintegration, division, enmity." If biblical justice, writes Burghardt, is fidelity to the demands of relationships within community, then sin is a negation of that responsibility. Thus "sin creates division, alienation, dissension, marginalization, rejection; sin dismembers the body."

After establishing the biblical foundation for the *just word*, Burghardt devotes the next section of his book to highlighting the social teachings of the church over the centuries from the Patristic period to the Social Gospel movement as well as papal declarations. He wants us to see the rich tradition in which justice preaching stands.

Yet another section focuses on *Preaching the Cry of the Poor*, including children, the AIDS-afflicted, the elderly, refugees, and those on death row. But preaching the cry of the poor is more than simply relaying statistics or delivering essays. We must preach/teach as if we were standing in the shoes of the crucified. On Christmas, he suggests,

I might well ask my people what they see when they look into the Christmas crib. For the Christ Child is no longer there; he has grown up, has died a cruel crucifixion, is eternally with his Father. His place has been taken by an African-American baby with his mother's drug addiction, by a Hispanic infant with multiple sclerosis, by a poor white child left at a hospital entrance by a desperate mother.

In his commitment to preaching the just word, Burghardt does not suggest the preacher give specific answers to social issues, but rather that she or he sensitize the congregation's awareness of these issues; to implant them squarely into the heart of the ministry of the church. Forums and study classes provide opportunity for further study and debate.

But sensitizing a congregation can only be done by those who both understand and feel the pain of God's people. The need to listen to a variety of voices is crucial. He quotes approvingly Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's invited critique of an Advent homily he gave on Mary. After some gracious comments, she noted the dangers of a church that restricts preaching to only celibate male clergy; concerned that male clergy can only articulate their own experience. She suggested the need to listen to the voices of pregnant women; to hear of their experiences in giving birth; of their exhilaration in touching their newborn; of the need also to do feminist analysis on how society structures and mediates the institution of motherhood, declaring, notes Burghardt, "that the silent majority must be heard and allowed into speech again if the richness and fullness of God's presence with us [is to] be articulated and proclaimed today."

While disagreeing with him on several issues, including the right to life, I found his personal warmth and deep commitment to people who are in pain very winsome. His advocacy on behalf of those who are marginalized and dispossessed comes through so loud and clear that he can only be viewed as a fellow pilgrim and colleague on the journey. Would that my preaching created such bonds with those who disagreed on a particular issue.

While written primarily with preachers in mind, Father Burghardt's insightful and compelling book is must reading for clergy and laity alike to help us understand afresh the deep roots of justice within the biblical tradition and then to preach, teach, and live that *just word* to, with, and on behalf of our world.