

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH: REINVENTING THE CONGREGATION FOR A NEW MISSION FRONTIER by Loren B. Mead (Alban Institute, 1991).

From self-help books to corporate training program videotapes, writing and speaking of “changing paradigms” is definitely “in.” However, in announcing that the church is in the midst of a major shift in paradigm, Loren Mead of the Alban Institute is doing more than following a popular trend. In this short, to-the-point book, Mead puts into clear words truths that many of us in the church have begun to see to the extent that as we read, we find ourselves saying “Yes! I knew that!” In bringing the truth to public speech, Mead challenges leaders in the church to follow the lead of Puah and Shiphrah (Exodus 1:15f) and learn creative midwifery, helping bring to birth a new church fit for mission in new times. For preachers in particular, the challenge is to “prepare the way” for the birthing. More of that after a closer look at what Mead has done.

In company with others (such as Willimon and Hauerwas in *Resident Aliens*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Mead observes that the Constantinian era of the church, or what he calls the Christendom Paradigm, is drawing to a close and a new era or paradigm is beginning to emerge—though we do not yet know the full shape of that new paradigm. In a cogently helpful summary, Mead reminds us that the earliest paradigm of the church was what he names the Apostolic paradigm, that which was lived by the first generations following Jesus. The church of this paradigm was centered in a community of believers in the midst of a hostile world. It was a church whose “front door was the frontier into mission” (p. 12). With the fourth century Constantinian conversion, the paradigm shifted radically to one in which the church was identified with the Empire (The Christendom paradigm). The frontier of mission was relocated well beyond the door of the congregation to the edges of the Empire, and imperialism and mission became nearly inseparable; familiar territory so far.

Mead then goes on to outline the implications of the shift from the Apostolic to the Christendom paradigm: the distancing of mission, the convergence of sacred and secular (particularly the merging of nationalism and religion); the emergence of strong structures to implement mission; and the role of the laity as quiet, generous, supporters of the structure and the *status quo*. This analysis becomes the backdrop, then, for focusing on the implications of the emerging shift from Christendom to the yet-to-be-shaped new paradigm: a breakdown in the “all-powerful authority of the clergy” (p. 33) and a reformation in clergy self-understanding; new roles for laity requiring new lifelong formation and empowerment; relocation of the mission frontier to the local church; reformation of judicatory roles focusing on services for local church mission; and the local church as the center of theological work. No gentle shift this, Mead helps us see. It is more like the shifting of the earth along fault lines, a sharp and sometimes painful break. It is here that many readers may begin to shift in their seats and say, “I know this about the church” and feel a sharp discomfort in the now spoken knowing.

One pastor who read this book reported finding it deeply troubling for it put into

words what he and many of us are painfully experiencing. Clergy and laity alike, we find ourselves living between times, some still tightly locked in the Christendom paradigm, some moving on to explore new possibilities, and some torn within our own beings between the eras. In some settings, it is clergy leading into the new paradigm and laity confused or angry about the changes but in others laity are on the leading edge and clergy are feeling literally lost.

Without question, Mead has spoken a truth to the church that challenges even as it disrupts. The church is being transformed and we are living and doing ministry at a hinge of history. The turning is still in process and there is deep uncertainty about where the turning will lead. The task for preaching in such a time has precedent in the prophet of the exile: Prepare the way! We who preach have the opportunity and mandate to participate in opening the way for the emerging new church by listening to the texts of our tradition that open the way for newness and proclaiming them with courage for a new time. There is more to the task of preparation, however, than painting the vision and setting forth creative options for life in the new way of being church, although that creative visioning is required.

We who preach will need, as well, to utilize the preaching opportunity to help “equip the saints,” first for letting go of the past and then for fruitful participation in the emerging new paradigm. In the task of releasing the past, clergy who preach will need to wrestle with our own clinging to the old ways and together with our congregations do whatever grief work must be done so we will be free to move on. Then preaching that opens the door to new possibilities for the church will be needed. Mead is helpful here in reminding us that even as we must be open to innovation and creative options, there is also a need for steadiness and grounding (p. 77). To preach toward faithful creativity and innovation will call for firm rootedness in text and tradition.

Perhaps the greatest challenge Mead presents to us who are preaching in this hinge of history time is that it is a time for ecclesiological preaching, preaching that grapples with what it means to be the church. The three polarities Mead identifies as needful for balancing in the new time of the church offer possible material for ecclesiological reflection in preaching: the church as parish vs. congregation, servanthood vs. conversion, and exclusivity vs. inclusivity. The preacher who would take on scripturally rooted homiletical exploration of these tensions in our understanding of being the church would gift a congregation with resources for movement into the future.

That, finally, might be Mead’s strongest plea to preachers: that our preaching help to equip laypersons for the doing of theology and for being the frontline actors in the mission of the church. One quarrel with Mead may be that he does not seem to know that some clergy do now indeed see this as their primary task and that some congregations and even perhaps some judicatories are preparing the way for the emerging paradigm. His vision of the church of the new time is also lacking in a sense of mission as participation in a global community. But he does not claim to “do it all” in this book. What he does is sufficient. He speaks clearly the truth about the end of an era in the church and calls for church leadership that will midwife the birth of a new time. We who preach need to know that we are preaching from a hinge in history and participate in God’s turning to the future.