

Preaching in a Society Hostile to the Gospel

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There are various ways a society can be hostile to the Gospel. They can be put into three categories:

1. When religion itself is hostile to the Gospel. Here a distinction should be made between (a) the hostile attitude of a non-Christian religion towards Christianity; and (b) the hostility of one Christian denomination towards another, or others.
2. When a specifically anti-Christian ideology turns against the Gospel. This ideology might be (a) just one among the others trying to exert its influence, or (b) might be in a ruling position.
3. When the attitude of a society towards the Gospel is characterized more by suspicion than hostility, which, however, can be turned into hostility at certain times.

Let us examine these attitudes and the task of the preacher towards them.

I.

The Gospel was rejected by many of Jesus' contemporaries, often very vehemently. This vehement hostility took Jesus, humanly speaking¹ to the cross. When the first persecutions were launched, which were really the most extreme forms of hostility, they were aimed at Jesus (Acts 9:4) whom the authorities thought they had disposed of. Yet He came to them in the powerful proclamation of the disciples. They presented Jesus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17) by His life and death and resurrection, and also in the life of the community which lived out of the powers of the resurrection. At first this persecution was carried on by the Jewish leaders. It was part of the crisis of this new group (*hairesis* Acts 24:14) coming into existence as its place and relationship to the rest of the Jewish community was being hammered out amid much travail. This was a special situation which was never repeated in history. Unfortunately, we know of situations in history when the Christian community contributed towards oppressing the Jews over the centuries. In those days, according to the Witness of the Acts of the Apostles, which along with Revelation is the most important book in the New Testament concerning the church in a hostile environment, the crucial emphasis of preaching was on the Old

Testament promises and on their fulfillment in Jesus.

A "classic case" of another religion being hostile to Christianity can be found in the Roman Empire before the Edict of Milan of Constantine the Great. During that period a hostile atmosphere was created by all available means of propaganda. Christians were regarded as enemies of the human race who were supposed to have covenanted against humanity. The public, the atheists of those days, had a very low opinion of Christians and were in favour of their oppression and persecution. *Chriastianos ad leonem!* was the cry in Nero's time.

The proclamation of the Gospel during the time of that persecution emphasized Jesus' resurrection, His Lordship over history (Rev. 5:5; 11:15), and His expected *parousia* to come to judge the world (Acts 17:31). While Christians were law-abiding citizens (Acts 24:12f), they did not hide that their ultimate loyalty was to the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Jesus Christ. That was the very point of conflict. To offer sacrifice to the Caesar was regarded as the duty of a citizen. The Christians denied this, but accepted the duties and also the privileges (Acts 22:26) of citizenship. By this act they pioneered a distinction that would centuries later be an integral part to any legislation which tended to honor human rights: that of the freedom of conscience and religion. This was implied in the Edict of Milan, unfortunately for only a short time. The Empire "fired back" by forcing Christianity upon the population.

It is very important to see that the whole behavior of Christians in the era of persecution was in harmony with the preaching carried on at that time. Those who preached were surrounded by the people of the church (Acts 2:14a). This standing together was an essential part of preaching. Furthermore, preachers and congregations went on proclaiming the message with their lives (Acts 6:7f). The way they lived, in which the words of the Lord became flesh in a secondary sense, was part of the proclamation (Phil 2:16). Christians dying in the Circus Maximus proclaimed the Lordship of Christ. In other words, *preaching went on with the common stand of preacher and congregation, and in the unity of word and action*. This is a pattern which was part of the revelatory process and as such it is binding upon the preachers of all ages.

The atmosphere of hostility can also be created by Christian denominations turning against one another. Unfortunately, the forced establishment of Christianity of the Constantinian period by the time of Theodosius the Great made it a matter of course to use force against those who saw things differently within the Christian fold. So Arians, or Trinitarians, Monophysites, Nestorians, iconoclats, or those venerating icons, might be oppressed by using physical force. These acts had a negative effect upon the proclamation of the Gospel. If the military might of the state or any other power is visible behind the preacher, it is difficult to speak about love that endures all things, and it is bound to have a negative effect on preaching in weakening and distorting the message. This shows once again the great significance of the context in which preaching is taking place.

For us in the Reformed Church in Hungary the two centuries of sad and bloody events of the counter-reformation offer illustrations of the hostility between Christian denominations. What could have been and should have been a

matter to be debated within the church, as the reformers had intended, became a matter of hostility and of power politics all over Europe.² In the Hungarian situation the Roman side, enjoying the full support of state power, did not rely on preaching in its effort to gain the population. There were a few exceptions. One particular Jesuit, Peter Pazmany, was an excellent preacher and writer, and wanted to create the right context for the *propaganda fidei Romanae*. But he was just one and there were many who relied on force. On the other side stood the suffering Reformed church with clergy in prison or in galley-slavery, congregations being sent away from their land to become homeless refugees. That was the context in which preaching went on. Often congregations were left without pastors for long periods. Yet the proclamation of the Gospel was carried on by the people themselves. This experience of our church helped us in our orientation in the recent past when ideology supported by the military might of one superpower would be hostile towards Christianity.

II.

From the French Revolution (1789) right up to the Russian (Communist) Revolution (1917), European history witnessed a series of vehement outbursts and protests against Christianity. However, it must be made clear that these revolts were against that forcefully established and maintained, and so in many ways corrupted church. The revolt was often not so much against Jesus the crucified and risen, but against the caricature of His message. The church under such circumstances gives a negative illustration concerning the deep, organic relationship between verbal proclamation and the message conveyed by the life of those representing it. In a situation like this the church itself must go through a process of purification. In fact, the message of the Reformation is that this process of purification/reformation has to go on all the time, because *the church is always in need of being measured and judged by the Word of God*. This fact has an important message for the preacher in every age.

The addressees of preaching are not only the outsiders. In fact preaching is an essential part of the life of the congregation. The people of God, the members of the church, are called to self-examination and repentance. Among other things they have to find out in the light of the Word, is how far they have also contributed towards the hostility against them.

In the era following the French Revolution, revolt and hostility became official policy only in a few countries. France did have a period of anticlericalism supported by tough measures against certain church activities which caused difficulties for the church. In the long run, however, it helped the church to find its place and role in modern society. Secularization spread all over Europe in the course of which crowds have broken or loosened their church connections.

In the countries where the Marxist-Leninist parties took over the power, hostility against Christianity became official policy. In the Soviet Union, and to a lesser degree in China during the so-called "cultural revolution" during the later years of the rule of Mao Tse-tung, and in the small Balkan country, Albania, the official atheist policy meant killing church leaders, closing down many

or all church buildings. In these countries the sufferings and the person to person encounters of the people of the church were the most important ways of proclaiming the Gospel. Whereas in the churches of the Reformation preaching has always held the primary place, in the Orthodox tradition the liturgy plays this role. Some of us have had the chance to meet people who have been brought to the church by means of the divine liturgy of the Pravoslav Church.

In the countries of Central Europe the hostility and fight against the Gospel took far more subtle, yet very efficient forms: intensive propaganda which wanted to "prove" that Christianity is an outdated phenomenon; the assertion that the Bible is an unreliable book, often using the arguments of liberal/rational Bible criticism; the claim that Christianity lost its attraction and was on the periphery of the society serving the hobby-like needs of some odd, mostly aged people. At the same time governmental authorities put great pressure on people at their places of work, urging them to give up being involved in the life of the church, and to abandon educating their children in the faith. Parents were warned to think of the futures of their children and not to burden their minds with a conflict between "scientific" thinking and irrational "mystical" religiosity. Only in a few cases did this pressure result in the use of force. Pressure was also exercised on the clergy and lay leadership in the church to give ideological justification for helping the realization of the goal: the withering away of the church or of turning it into a petrified museum of the past. Corrupted clergy and lay leaders in the church, or planted agents, were willing to accept this mean role.

What could the preacher do in a situation like this? First of all, *the pastor had to face the ultimate question: in whose service am I?* If the person dedicated his^a life to be a servant of the Word of God, then he had a point of orientation. He might have to consider making certain compromises in various cases, but there could be no compromise in relation to the proclamation of the Word of God. Every opportunity, in season and out of season, had to be seized and the content of preaching had to be faithful. In the Hungarian church there had been a centuries old tradition of textual preaching. Preaching on "themes" had always had a marginal role in the life of the church. True enough, for almost a century textual preaching in the Hungarian Reformed Church was formal and was built on an extremely poor exegesis (if there was such a thing at all) without taking the principles of *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide* into consideration. But the Neo-Orthodox renewal between 1925-1948 brought about a marked change in the direction of Christocentricity. The study of both Old and New Testaments in the seminaries was once again of high standard. Thus the tools for biblical teaching and preaching were available. Those who made up their minds that they wanted to be only servants of the Word of God, could get help in terms of exegesis, biblical theology, and homiletics.

The commitment to be a servant of the Word was an existential decision which could be challenged, among others, by the police informer who was sitting somewhere in the back pews of the gallery of the church. Thus every Sunday brought with it a new situation when it was necessary to make a decision. It was not enough to make the decision once. It had to be renewed all the time, for temptations did come.

If one has made up his mind to be the servant of the Word of God, it will be a matter of course that he is dependent on the Bible and he would not be thinking of speaking on "themes" for many reasons, such as: If I preach on a subject, who decides what the right subject is in a delicate situation? Should I preach about the folly of dictatorship, or should my theme be the relationship between conversion and regeneration? The latter subject would be a fairly safe one, as Communists did not bother much about the kind of preaching which had concern only for the inner soul (*Innerlichkeit*) of a person. Or should I preach on the relationship of science and theology, or of church and society? Both of these would be "hot" themes. But if the preacher takes his Bible, he is saved from choosing a subject. The subject will be these, not *in abstracto*, but in the middle of life in which God is acting in and through His people. It is well known that the Bible is not interested in abstract concepts, but in the dynamics of life and events. In line with this understanding the preacher will proclaim God in action, carrying out His plans of salvation with His people having their share in His activities.

In the Reformed Church in Hungary the text in most of the cases would come from a scripture reading guide which reads through the whole Bible in three years, giving an OT chapter and a shorter passage of the NT for each day. The situation favored the wide use of this guide. The text was given, and we had to preach it. In a way it fixed our loyalty and also gave protection. The main task was to struggle with the text. In preaching the text, with a careful exegesis taking the hermeneutical task of getting to know the original horizon of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the text and that of its contemporaries, *we had the amazing and shattering experience of getting in touch with the most important themes of our lives* both in terms of individual and social life. Questions of individual piety and social life could not be separated from one another like in some countries where some preach salvation, others social concerns. So the preacher would not preach about the futility of dictatorship, but would preach a series of sermons on the Book of Daniel where "proud empires pass away" and the Lord's Kingdom grows forever; here the individual had to stand up against the pressures and temptations of the royal court.

In 1955, I had decided to preach a series of sermons on the Book of Nehemiah, which I did in 1956 before, during, and after the time of the Hungarian Revolution (when Hungary was crushed by Russia with the consent of the West). God did speak to us in those critical times of our history, and gave us guidance and encouragement. It was again in 1956, before the Revolution, that Professor John Baillie of Edinburgh University preached in the parish I served. He gave a sermon on Revelation 1. He preached the text, which was about our situation in those days, and it gave encouragement to our people.

The preacher in Hungary during the time of the Communist rule had to be ready to be challenged by the authorities for his preaching. In most cases probably he would not be summoned to give an account. But he would be noted. Perhaps some corrupted church leader would admonish him, he would be regarded as a suspicious person, and his "career" prospects would be very bleak. But he would be rooted in the life of the local congregation who would be behind him in prayer and in the witness of their lives.

To sum up: in a really hostile situation, the biblical vision demands that the people of God and the preachers, being united in Christ, should proclaim the faith in the unity of verbal and nonverbal communication. This includes the preaching of the tremendous treasurehouse of the Bible under the power of the Holy Spirit and the visible and tangible proclamation of the life of the community.

III

It is also necessary to take into consideration the cases when no open war, mental or physical, is declared against the Gospel; when, however, the Gospel and the church are regarded with a deep suspicion for taking away people's attention from the real problems of society, for leading people into a dreamworld, and for aiming at the domination of society.⁴ According to this view, society should be ready to protect its interests against the church, which is a remnant of the past and wants to bring back the past. In order to protect society against this religious backwardness an atmosphere of suspicion can be created by means of reminding the public of all the sins and wrong decisions ever committed by leaders and people of the church, and/or the irrelevance of the church. This attitude may resemble the ones previously discussed, as it might be motivated by denominationalism or agnosticism, or by the militancy of a non-Christian religion. We know that in some countries under militant Islamic rules, serious persecutions of Christians developed during the second half of the twentieth century.

As for the question of how far these suspicions are justified, and what their real causes are, we have to say that views about these origins differ. In many countries they are the result of the centuries long process of secularization.⁵ Memories and lessons of denominational conflicts such as counter-reformation in one country, ultraprotestant intolerance in another; lack of concern for social issues, taking sides with the rich on the side of the church; too much involvement in liberation movements; too much subservience towards the powers that be; these are the characteristic points of critique and objection brought up against the churches. In Hungary we face this problem today. The country has been able to build up various democratic institutions including the freely elected Parliament and Government. Even the economic restructuring has shown some encouraging signs of progress in spite of the economy being suffocated by the twenty-four billion dollars of international debt accumulated by the Communist government. In this situation the ruling coalition represents "Christian values" while the impressively large opposition stands for a liberal secularized society with ideas much in line with secularized Western agnostic/liberal views. However, we who lived through the Communist times with efforts to analyze what was going on around us, have the impression that the secularists' views are also colored by the propaganda of the previous decades, which at its best saw in the church a fundamental irrelevance.

If the church wants to be faithful to her mission to preach a Gospel in such a situation of suspicion, it cannot be done just by building modern sanctuaries in the suburbs instead of neo-Gothic or classicist ones downtown. A

modern, up-to-date style of presentation will not be sufficient by itself. The question is *what is the thing that we want to present in a meaningful and relevant way?* This is the Word of God which endures forever which has to take hold of us, instead of our taking hold of relevant subjects. We must submit ourselves to the Word, to be ready to listen to it through a particular portion of scripture, the text, which speaks about life. This is the life the preacher has to take hold of and be involved in. At the same time we must be ready to listen to our contemporaries. We cannot sit in a balcony over life,⁶ we must know what is going on; that the two levels, or horizons, must be brought together in a careful analysis under the guidance of the Spirit. If this is done in the fellowship of the people of God, supported by the witness of their lives, then something real, a real call sounds forth. Through this message the Holy Spirit can convince the suspicious ones, or even the hostile ones, that in the Word Incarnate, in Jesus Christ, they too can have life abundantly.

NOTES

¹ I am aware of the discussion that is going on concerning the trial of Jesus, concerning who really passed the death sentence. See: Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); August Strobel, *Die Stunde der Wahrheit* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1980.) My conviction is that it is neither the Jews as such, nor the Gentiles as such but humankind that is guilty: "Mine, mine was the transgression, But Thine the deadly pain." (Paulus Gerhard, *O Sacred Head Once Wounded*.)

² A notable exception is the Hungarian Principality of Transsylvania which existed during the time when Central Hungary was ruled by the Ottoman Empire and West Hungary by the Austrian Hapsburgs, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Transsylvania was ruled by Protestant Princes and a Parliament. The Parliament passed the bill of the freedom of religion as the basic law of the land in 1568. Imre Revesz and George A.F. Knight, *History of the Hungarian Reformed Church* (Washington, DC: Hungarica Americana, 1956), 46. Since 1920 Transsylvania belongs to Romania.

³ Women clergy came very late to the Reformed Church in Hungary. The General Synod passed the resolution about women's ordination in 1980. But the first ordinations took place a few years later when the "soft dictatorship" of the Kadar years showed more and more leniency.

⁴ In liberal circles there is a fear that the Roman Catholic Church wants to bring back the old days when it was in a ruling position, as seems to be happening in Poland. There are some forces in the Roman Church in Hungary who would welcome such a development. Considering the realities of Hungarian society, theirs seems to be wishful thinking. Most church people do not want a triumphalist, ruling church either. Just as I was typing this paper a Roman Catholic theologian, Tamas Nyirö, pointed out in the most popular political program on Saturday afternoon broadcast that there was neither room nor real chance for bringing back a society ruled by the church.

⁵ At this point the topic touches what I wrote earlier: "Preaching in Secular Context," *Journal for Preachers* (Easter 1988).

⁶ John A. Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1945), 27-54.