

## *Protagonist Corner*

*Alternative Visions:*

*A Review of Protestant Sermons in the U.S. Related to the Persian Gulf War*

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On a blustery Tuesday afternoon in January 1991, I found myself standing before an anxious and unexpectedly attentive auditorium full of high school students. I had been invited the day before by the district superintendent to address an assembly which had been planned for the last day of the United Nation's deadline for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. The mood among the students, faculty, and staff of the small, rural Pennsylvania school that day might best be described as apprehensive patriotism, perhaps a fair description of the mood of the nation as a whole in those days.

What was expected of me, so far as I was able to discern it, was that I bring words of counsel and comfort. Though I had years of experience with public speaking, I felt woefully unprepared for the task at hand. I have often commented since, only half jokingly, that never in seminary did they tell us what we should say in the event that a war was about to break out. I ended up giving a brief speech encouraging the students to ask questions of those in authority, to resist hatred and prejudice, and not to accept anyone's claim that God was on one side or the other.

A few months later, in the aftermath of what was then looked upon by many as a great victory, I continued to wonder about what I should have said on that January afternoon. In addition, I began to wonder what my colleagues in ministry had said to the gatherings they had addressed, including their own congregations, in the days prior to, during, and after the war.

Out of my curiosity grew a collection of forty-eight sermons, gathered from clergy from around the country. Thirty-three persons sent sermons; eleven denominations were represented (see appendix). Included were Lutheran and Episcopalian bishops, television and radio ministers, famous pulpiteers and many typical parish pastors. The broad spectrum of Protestant theological traditions represented included one of the historic peace churches, several mainline denominations, and a couple of prominent evangelical groups. The earliest of the sermons was originally preached in September 1990; the latest in June 1991.

Not surprisingly, the sermons varied widely with regard to length, formality, clarity, and quality of expression. Quite surprising, however, was the near absence of outright support for the war. With only a couple of exceptions, there was at most an ambivalent acceptance of the unavoidability of the war. Far more common was what I would describe as ambivalent opposition.

Whether or not they found themselves fully opposed to the war, those who provided sermons were unanimous in recommending perspectives on the conflict that were alternatives to official government reasoning. Among the evangelicals, some saw it as a foretaste of events to come. While none wished to identify it as a direct precursor of Armageddon, they felt it had more to do with salvation history than with territorial integrity and the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait.

Among the more mainstream, less apocalyptically minded, the challenge to the

government's official moralities generally came in two forms — theological challenges and challenges of the government's political and strategic analyses. For those who challenged the war on theological grounds, the remarks of Joanna Adams, pastor of North Decatur Presbyterian Church in Georgia, are representative:

Whether we like it or not, God loves the Iraqis as much as God loves the Americans. God does not love Christians any more than God loves Muslims. The sun shines on Baghdad as well as on Boston. These are hard things, but they are the essence of the gospel. These are not peripheral in the life of faith; they are the heart of the matter.

from "A Highway to Iraq"  
preached September 2, 1990

Theological challenges repeatedly invoked the universal love of God as a reason for opposing the war. An inverse variation, of sorts, was the mention of universal sinfulness. There was frequent caution against presuming that we were righteous, simply because it was easy to see the evil in the other. As Lowell Erdahl, an ECLA bishop commented:

One of the greatest follies is to forget or even sympathetically deny the contribution that our own sinfulness and lack of understanding has made....

from "Remember Rehoboam"  
December 1990

Some of the theological challenges to the government's insistence on prosecuting the war took the shape of scholastic debate along the lines of "just war" criteria. These challenges were no doubt prompted by President Bush's own attempts to justify the war on those grounds. While receiving some support from conservative quarters, such attempts were more often opposed, either by denial that the present circumstances fit the just war criteria or by rejection of just war theory in general.

Challenges to the government's political and strategic analyses were less common than challenges arising out of theological commitments, but still common. Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell, a Reformed Church in America pastor, was quick to observe the irony of another war coming directly on the heels of the proud proclamation of a "new world order" as the Cold War ended. As she noted the Sunday after the bombing of Baghdad began:

In this new world order, we still seem to be much better at warfare than we are at diplomacy. Just like in the old world order, action is preferred to patience, confrontation over understanding.... we still seem unable to learn that war has no winners (and) that the seeds spread by war will grow into noxious weeds in the future.

And saddest of all, the dead people of this new world order look very similar to the dead people of the old world order.... It seems to me that this new world order is just the same old world order with a new coat of paint.

from "A New World Order"  
preached January 20, 1991

Accusations that the conflict was primarily due to the United States' gluttony for

oil appeared in many sermons. The Most Reverend Edmond L. Browning of the Episcopal Church Center in New York was among the most direct in this regard:

We know that the reason we have sent troops to the Middle East is to protect the oil supply upon which we have become dependent. We need it, we say, and if it comes right down to it, we're going to take it. We have a sense that oil over there is *ours*. But it is not. Like the rest of the creation, the oil upon which we have based our bloated lifestyle belongs to God. And it rests under land which has been given over to the stewardship of others, not our own.

from "Sermon for Rochester Visit"  
preached November 10, 1990

In this and many other ways, those who preached pressed their hearers to look beyond the government's rationale for war, which was based only on the events of the past several months. The sermons directed attention to the long history of conflict in the region, to the juxtaposition of deep poverty and great wealth, to racial prejudice, to the history of colonialism, and so on. In light of such complex causes for the conflict, several speakers felt war was a far too simplistic and shortsighted attempt to establish peace. As Allan Janssen, pastor of the First Reformed Church of Bethlehem in Selkirk, New York, stated:

We must pray not just for peace, not simply that the guns will stop. We must pray for a just peace, for a world where the causes of resentment may no longer be. We must pray, in short, for God's kingdom, where each child and each mother has enough to eat; where the land over which years of labor and tears have been shed cannot simply be taken away by the more powerful army.

from "What's Next?"  
preached January, 1991

As I write, in September of 1991, it is clear that the war was not the "great victory" it first appeared to be. United States troops and Patriot missiles are on their way back to Saudi Arabia in an attempt to back the United Nations' resolve to inspect Iraq for weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein remains in power, thousands of Kurds have died in part because they acted upon our president's suggestion that they revolt, more than two hundred thousand people in all have died and the environment of the Persian Gulf region is in shambles.

In light of these present circumstances, the ambivalent opposition to the war expressed by a majority of those who provided sermons for my research seems quite laudable. Despite the nagging question, "What might Saddam have done if we hadn't fought the war?", it is at least clear that the war must finally be looked upon as a tragedy. As Ken Gible, pastor of the Arlington, Virginia Church of the Brethren reflected, at the war's conclusion:

I believe the proper response to the war's end should not be one of rejoicing. Rather it should be one of repentance and sorrow. This war, as every war, should teach us the necessity of tears.

from "The Necessity of Tears"  
preached March 17, 1991

## Appendix

### Denominations represented by sermons submitted:

The Church of the Brethren

The United Church of Christ

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Reformed Church in America

The Assemblies of God

The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States

The United Methodist Church

The Southern Baptist Convention

The American Baptist Churches

### Date of original delivery of sermons:

|                                                    |          |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Prior to January 17, 1991 (before bombing of Iraq) | 14       |
| Between January 17 and March 2, 1991 (during war)  | 21       |
| March 3, 1991 and later (after the war)            | 11       |
| Unknown                                            | <u>2</u> |
| Total                                              | 48       |