

Biblical Preaching as Moral Reflection

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It is commonplace in conversation and writing about biblical preaching to refer to its kerygmatic character or to its pedagogical aspects. Biblical preaching in the life of the church is both proclamation and teaching. It is not at all common to refer to the moral or ethical dimensions of biblical preaching. It is the argument of this brief essay that *all biblical preaching in the church is necessary moral reflection* and that it would serve the church's mission in the world well if preachers became more conscious of this.¹

I have frequently heard pastor colleagues or seminary students refer to the need or the desire to preach a social action or a social justice sermon. Several impressions generally emerge from these conversations. What they are speaking about is generally an issue generated sermon rather than a text generated sermon. Some issue has presented itself urgently demanding the church's response. These sermons tend to be consciously defined as ethical or moral in character, and the implication is that they are only preached occasionally. The moral/ethical dimension of our faith becomes an interest area needing occasional attention, but the suggestion is that the vast majority of our sermons are not thought of in moral/ethical terms.

This impression was confirmed when I recently glanced at several volumes of a widely used series of annual sermon anthologies. The sermons selected for publication each year are grouped by category. One of the categories is "ethical." It takes only a cursory examination to discover that "ethical" seems to mean "focused on a public issue." Abortion, AIDS, peace, irresponsible labelling in political life, racism, and environmental justice are but a few of the issues which appear as the focus of these sermons.

To be sure, such sermons are greatly needed and often among our most courageous examples of faithful preaching. This essay in no way intends to suggest diminished importance for such issue oriented preaching. Rather we wish to argue that such sermons should rest on a foundation of week in and week out preaching that understands all texts and all sermons to have a moral dimension. All preaching is ethical in character and therefore engaged in a process of corporate moral reflection.

What seems needed in the church's preaching is a broadened understanding of Christian ethics, and a heightened awareness of the moral dimensions of biblical texts.

The Breadth of Christian Ethics

To understand the way in which preaching must draw on the Bible as a moral resource requires an awareness among preachers that the Christian moral life encompasses both being and doing, character and conduct.

North American Protestants, in particular, have been prone to think of Christian ethics primarily in the arena of doing. What are we to do about X (any issue)? The emphasis falls on decision making, strategies, and actions. Most of the sermons we think of as ethical in character are preached when an issue has become urgent (locally or in wider social contexts) and seems to demand response. Such preaching often calls for decision making and action.

The role of scripture in such preaching is important but limited. In the first place, the tendency is to limit the portions of the canon to be drawn upon. Emphasis falls on those portions of scripture that are explicitly engaged in moral admonition, for example, the Decalogue, the message of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, or the moral admonishments of Paul. But further, even here the Bible has limits as a guide to conduct. Many issues (nuclear war, genetic engineering, environmental concerns) are not explicitly anticipated or discussed in the biblical witness. Many other issues, although similar in character (e.g., hunger and poverty), present themselves for decision and action in modern contexts that are radically different than the biblical contexts. Although the Bible is the source of the moral imperatives which guide our conduct, it cannot make decisions for us.

This has led many who are concerned for the moral/ethical witness of the church in the world to treat the Bible as if it were only "deep background." In preaching, many so-called "social action sermons" seem to have only a superficial grounding in the biblical foundations of our faith.

The Protestant churches of North America need to recover a sense of Christian ethics as concerned with the shaping of character as well as conduct, being as well as doing. These are but two sides of the Christian moral life. Here the central questions becomes "Who are we to be?" The focus is on the shaping of decision makers - persons and communities of faith. Identity, values, perceptions, ideals, and visions become important dimensions of Christian ethics in this focus. Ethical preaching concerns the long-term shaping of disciples in support of the urgent moments when preaching may call for the disciples' action on a given issue.

In the concern for the shaping of Christian character and identity the whole range of materials and witnesses in the Bible come into play. In encounter with the stories, hymns, teachings, visions, letters, law codes, preaching, and histories of the scripture we are uniquely shaped as a biblical people. No activity is more important in this process of encounter with scripture than the church's preaching. The preaching of God's word experienced over a period of time shapes us as moral agents (as does the teaching of God's word in various forms of Bible study).

In recent years a good deal of new work has been done on the relationship between scripture and ethics in the life of the church, and on the need for an understanding of Christian ethics balanced between emphases on character and conduct.² It is being widely recognized that moral agency in the Christian life requires a concern for being and doing. It is also widely accepted that the context for the shaping of Christians as moral agents in the world must be the corporate confessing community, the church.³ We do not appropriate our biblical foundations as individuals nor are we shaped as moral agents in our character and conduct in isolation. The nature of our biblical faith and our Christian life as moral agents in the world is necessarily in the context of community. The Bible is the church's book and the Christian moral life is the church's activity.

It should be obvious that preaching, which is both biblically based and corporately experienced, is of prime importance in effecting this broadened understanding of Christian ethics. Every sermon is of moral significance because congregations are being shaped by the word they hear proclaimed from the ancient texts of scripture. Every occasion for preaching which calls to decision and action must rely on ethical resources built up by week to week preaching which understands the morality shaping influence of all texts and sermons.

The Moral Dimensions of Biblical Texts

The recovery of biblical preaching as moral reflection will also require, for many preachers, new understandings of the moral dimensions of biblical texts. This begins with the recognition that for Israel and the early church there was no sharp separation of theology from ethics, faith from practice, belief from discipleship. All experience of relationship to God had implications for the way one lived in the world. New understandings of that relationship naturally issued in new dimensions of life as the community of God's people. For preachers who understand this about the biblical text there should be a constant expectation that preaching from these texts affects not only a congregation's faith understanding but its preparation for and summons to life as God's people in the world.

This opens up the possibility of seeing the entire canon as an ethical resource. Every portion of scripture bears witness to the experience of the biblical communities with God, and has been passed on to future generations. As we shall see, this does not mean that all scripture texts model attitudes or behavior for us to emulate. It does mean that for those communities that formed the canon stories were as important as commandments, and visions or hymns as important as admonitions.

It is especially significant that recent biblical scholarship has seen the rediscovery of the theological and ethical importance of biblical narrative - the stories.⁴ Relatively little material in the Old or the New Testament stands outside the framework of Israel's story or the story of Jesus and the early church. In preaching and teaching we pass those stories on to new generations.

The biblical stories have, as all great stories do, the capacity to influence and shape the reality out of which we live. Some stories, like the creation stories of Genesis, chapters 1-3, cause us to see the reality of our own world in new ways. Some stories, like the Book of Job, create a world and invite us into its reality to disclose a meaningful word. Some stories have the power to challenge and transform our reality, such as the parables of Jesus. They shatter our illusions, turn our perceptions upside down, and we see things differently after our encounter with the story. Some stories are so powerfully and perennially transformative that the ongoing experience of those who find meaning in those stories becomes a part of the story's own power. The great, central salvation stories of Exodus and Resurrection are such stories.

Preachers who would gather the rich harvest of biblical stories as a moral resource in preaching must become more experienced in discerning the ways in which stories impinge upon and transform our own reality. Preaching becomes a channel whereby our stories, as preachers and congregants, are intersected by the biblical story. In those intersections the biblical story begins to become our story. In those intersections Christian character and conduct are authentically shaped and influenced.

Within the framework of the biblical story the rich diversity of biblical material influences our identity, values, perspectives, and vision. These materials exert their influence in a variety of ways. Some biblical preaching settles for uses of the variety of biblical materials to simply create religious experiences of the moment. Some use this diversity of biblical witness to suggest a biblical cafeteria line where persons merely select what suits tastes already formed by cultural patterns outside the church. But those preachers who understand the potential of every biblical text to act as a moral resource will seek out the variety of ways in which diverse texts prepare and equip us, individually and corporately, for mission as the church in the world.

The rich variety of biblical witnesses can be problematic and confusing. Texts in one portion of scripture may stand in tension with those in another portion. (e.g., Dan. 1-7 and Rom. 13 on obedience to the state). Perspectives can seem so different from one type of material to another (e.g., the preaching of the prophets and the wisdom advice of Proverbs). Some texts model attitudes and behavior that we cannot understand or approve (I have always told my students that if you take a text such as "Samuel hewed King Agag in pieces before the Lord (1Sam. 15:33b)," and your only pattern for the moral appropriation of a text is "Go thou and do likewise!" then you are in trouble). How do we keep our focus in attempting to appropriate the moral resources of such diverse texts?

Although the theological and ethical witness of the Bible is multifaceted in character there are important foundations for providing focus in the midst of this diversity. These are found in the *constant focus on the character, activity, and will of God* throughout the Old and New Testament, and in the *constant character of scripture as the testimony of the community of the people of God*.

1. No one would be surprised that the moral resources of the Bible are focused in God. However, the chief emphasis in drawing on these resources for preaching or teaching has been on the Bible as a source for the revealed will of God. In the Old Testament this has meant primary attention to God as lawgiver (mainly in the covenant at Sinai and its defenders) and to a lesser extent to the revelatory experience of God mediating the divine will through a human agent (e.g., the calls of Moses, or Isaiah). In the New Testament the emphasis is of course on Jesus as the incarnate mediator of divine will, especially in his teaching, or on those who continue to interpret the meaning of Jesus as a revealing of divine will (e.g., Paul). These are indeed central and important emphases if we are to preach the Bible as a resource for moral formation, but a one-sided emphasis here will again result in attention primarily to texts that engage in direct moral admonition attributed to the divine will.

In the task of appropriating the moral resources of scripture a number of scholars have recently suggested renewed attention to the imitation of God (for the New Testament, imitation of Christ) as a basis of moral character and conduct.⁵ God's character and activity in relation to us models in a variety of ways our relationships to one another and to the creation itself. For example, recent concern in the churches for a variety of human sexuality issues has been grounded primarily in attempts to discern God's revealed will on these matters in the Bible (often without finding many direct, or explicit texts). Mostly overlooked has been the way in which God's relationship to us models qualities of our relationships to one another (including our sexuality). Those qualities include freedom, vulnerability, fidelity, and wholeness. To reflect on how God has demonstrated these for us can put our consideration of specific sexuality issues in an entirely new framework. Preaching which understands that issues are affected by such qualities in imitation of God can open new channels of moral response in congregations that would not be possible by preaching primarily from texts that can be made to function admonitionally or prescriptively.

This stress would also include morality which arises in response to God's presence or activity. The great salvation events of Exodus and Resurrection do not model divine actions we can duplicate, but foster morally significant reflection on what it means to be the recipients of God's grace and to live in the world as God's delivered people. The preaching of texts relating to these great salvation events would focus less on revealed divine will for our behavior than on identity as a people gifted by God's grace and the importance of that identity for our moral character and

conduct.

2. Biblical preaching as moral deliberation will also be aware that the Bible is at every point the testimony of the community of faith, the people of God, Israel, or the early church. Thus, the Bible reflects the diversity of the community's experience with God. This experience includes both testimony to the community's faithful response to God and its failures before God. Not every text or story models behavior of the community that we are to emulate. This is especially important in preaching the Old Testament. The story of Israel unfolds over a long period of time and offers us the opportunity to learn from Israel's unfaithfulness and mistaken understandings of God's will and activity as well as Israel's authentic faith and witness. David is a sinner as well as the prototype of the Messiah to come. Israel is God's covenant partner but must be called to task by the prophets. Election as God's people for special mission in the world becomes mistakenly understood in some moments of Israel's story as election for special privilege.

Even the New Testament affords us a glimpse of the diversity and tensions which affected the early church (e.g., the conflict between Peter and Paul over the Gentile mission). Further, both Old and New Testament demonstrate the inability of human communities to perfectly reflect God's character and will. Acceptance of slavery and patriarchal patterns for family and society amply demonstrate this.

Attention to the struggles and the triumphs of the biblical communities in both Old and New Testament can help those who hear our preaching understand that discerning and living out our mission as God's people in the world is always a complex and demanding task. The community of God's people always falls short of perfectly reflecting the character and will of God. Thus, biblical preaching as moral reflection requires a constant call to critical reflection on our own communities and renewed resolve to draw upon the entire range of biblical resources in helping shape our churches as more adequate moral agents for God's saving work in a broken world.

NOTES

¹ Many of the matters touched upon this essay I have written on more fully in *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) and with Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. and expanded edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

² See, for example, Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), and *Readings in Moral Theology No. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

³ See esp. Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1991).

⁴ The bibliography in this area has grown quite large. Important and representative works include Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, Ill.: Argus, 1975), and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). See my fuller discussion of these issues in "Old Testament Narrative and Moral Address," *Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. G. Tucker, D. Petersen, and R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁵ See John Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 9 (1978): 60-61, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 143, Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 30-34, and Harry P. Nasuti, "Identity, Identification, and Imitation: The Narrative Hermeneutics of Biblical Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 4 (1986): 16-18.