

Preaching for Conversion

D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, Virginia

In her marvelously metaphoric novel, *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich gives voice to profound theological questions in the person of Lipsha Morrissey. Like more than one orphan on the Chippewa reservation in North Dakota, Lipsha had been adopted by grandparents, Nector and Marie Kashpaw. As those adoptive grandparents advanced in years, Lipsha was a keen, insightful observer of the strange wisdom which flowed from Nector's descent into senility. As Lipsha says of his grandpa,

He had gone out to lunch one day and never came back. He was fishing in the middle of Lake Turcot. And there was big thoughts on his line, and he kept throwing them back for even bigger ones that would explain to him, say, the meaning of how we got here and why we have to leave so soon. All in all, I could not see myself...bringing him back, when the real part of him had chose to be off thinking somewhere. It was only the rest of him that stayed around causing trouble, after all, and we could handle most of it without any problem.¹

Lipsha respected the face of his grandpa's senility, and instead of trying magically to deliver him from it, Lipsha tried to be attentive to the wisdom which might emerge. Like the time when he accompanied Nector to mass at the Catholic Mission on the reservation. Having sat down in the pew with Grandpa, Lipsha was startled

when Grandpa filled up his chest and opened his mouth and belted out them words. HAIL MARIE FULL OF GRACE. He had powerful set of lungs. And he kept on like that. He did not let up. He hollered and he yelled them prayers, and I guess people was used to him by now, because they only muttered theirs and did not quit and gawk like I did....Then after a while I guess I got used to it, and that's when I wondered: how come?

So afterwards I out and asked him. "How come? How come you yelled?" "God don't hear me otherwise," said Grandpa Kashpaw.

I sweat. I broke right out into a little cold sweat at my hairline because I knew this was perfectly right and for years not one damn other person had noticed it. God's been going deaf. Since the Old Testament, God's been deafening up on us. I read, see. Besides the dictionary, which I'm constantly in use of, I had this Bible once. I read it. I found there was discrepancies between then and now. It struck me. Here God used to raineth bread from clouds, smite the Phillipines, sling fire down on red-light districts where people got stabbed. He even appeared in person every once in a while. God used to pay attention, is what I'm saying.²

Though expressed in the voice of a particular, highly marginalized young adult in contemporary society, Lipsha speaks unwittingly for many. "God used to pay attention, is what I'm saying." Preaching that aims to gain a hearing (let alone convert!) will necessarily be preaching which effectively proclaims God as the God who pays attention *now*. The notion that "God *used* to pay attention" expresses the

modern unbelief in the central message of the New Testament that in Jesus Christ the reign of God is at hand. Conversely, the notion God *still* pays attention may express a contemporary belief in that same message. And it may become a useful way of articulating something of the evangelistic dimension of preaching.

Efforts to reclaim an evangelistic component for preaching in mainline churches may also be aided by two recent books which help us understand both a theology of evangelism which can guide our efforts and the reality of cultural diversity in the midst of which we preach.

I

In order to preach for conversion, it is obviously important to be clear about what one means by "conversion." In turn, conversion is a term which has its theological home in the house of evangelism. William Abraham's, *The Logic of Evangelism* furnishes a useful starting point for mapping the landscape of both evangelism and conversion. The center of Abraham's theological vision for evangelism is disarmingly simple. He construes it as primary - or first - initiation into the Kingdom of God.

In a carefully developed "logic," he argues that the heart of the gospel is the message of the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Abraham further develops the concept of evangelism as initiation into the reign of God and into the life of the community which lives out of that reign. His detailed analysis of what is involved in such initiation identifies six major components: *conversion* - "a crucial, personal, and experiential dimension of entry into the dynamic rule of God";³ *baptism* - through which one enters "that body where God rules supreme in worship and praise";⁴ *the rule of life* - a matter of owning the moral tradition of love for God and neighbor as an irrevocable commitment; *the rule of faith* - handing over the substance of the church's intellectual heritage as expressed in the Nicene Creed; *life in the spirit* - owning and discerning the reality of the leading of the Holy Spirit in "those who offer themselves unreservedly in service";⁵ and *spiritual disciplines* - practices through which one enters afresh into the rule of God, summarily embodied in the Eucharist.

The ministry of evangelism to which this conception gives rise is one which emphasizes the role and importance of vital worship, the variety of forms of proclamation which are appropriate, and the necessity for a revived catechumenate which judiciously balances all these components of initiation into the reign of God. While neither more nor less important than other ministries of the church, Abraham notes a clear logical priority of evangelism as a means to the end of developing a community which lives out of the reign of God through the multiple ministries of the church.

Beginning from the point of departure which modern New Testament scholarship endorses, that the center of the gospel is the claim articulated by Jesus and embodied in his ministry, death, and destiny - that the reign of God has begun, Abraham helps us to see that evangelism is something in which we have always been involved. That is, we have always been involved in the task of initiating people into this reign of God. Much of our life in the church, education, worship, fellowship, and service aims at nothing less than so initiating us again and again into God's reign. By these ministries we are converted again and again to the conviction that God's compassionate mercy is at the heart of all things. Applied specifically to the ministry of preaching, we can recognize evangelistic preaching as a familiar face: preaching which aims to introduce and reintroduce the hearer to the conviction that God does

reign in the world in the shape of Jesus Christ.

It is true that this describes what we may term ongoing initiation into the reign of God, not *primary* initiation. But the point made clear by Abraham's theological analysis is that evangelism is not substantially different from our general Christian ministry. More specifically, it is not substantially different from our regular preaching ministry, insofar as that preaching addresses the hearer with the reality of God's reign. Evangelism is but the first, initiatory phase of the continuing life in and under the reign of God which defines the Christian life. And when we recognize that we have always been involved in carrying out this first, initiatory phase through our ministries of confirmation - nurturing persons in the Christian community toward a point of personal profession of faith - then we recognize that we are no strangers to evangelism, even in this primary sense.

In Abraham's conception, "conversion" has to do with the experiential component of entering into the dynamic rule of God. Preaching, even preaching that is relevant to evangelism will not consist solely (nor even perhaps primarily) in preaching for conversion. But preaching that is part of a total ministry of evangelism will aim to contribute to conversion - to "a crucial, personal, and experiential dimension of entry into the dynamic rule of God." It will intend to contribute to the sense that God *still* pays attention. It will do this along with making its own contribution to our understandings of baptism, the rule of faith, the rule of life, and life in the spirit. But it will also, and properly, be preaching for conversion.

We may have recently been strangers to applying this language to our particular ministries of preaching, and even greater strangers to focusing our energies on making this first, initiatory phase accessible to persons who have not been part of the Christian community. But we are no strangers to evangelism. We have always been about ministry, even preaching ministry, which aims to participate in the initiation of others into the reign of God, to encourage their profound sense that God still pays attention. And with the help and encouragement of Abraham's logic of evangelism, we may reclaim a proper sense of what it means to preach for conversion.

II

In addition to understanding evangelism and the related phenomenon of conversion, preaching needs to be aware of the cultural context in which the ministry of proclamation goes on. What will constitute preaching for conversion, in the sense just outlined, may well vary from one cultural setting to another.

U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches: A Key to Reaching People in the 90's by Tex Sample describes three major subcultural groups in contemporary American society. Though it remains content with overly bland designations of these groups as the Cultural Left, the Cultural Right, and the Cultural Middle, it provides a discerning glimpse into the variety of people we may be responding to as we undertake to preach for conversion.

The first of these groups - the Cultural Left - is characterized by Sample as having strong inner direction, coming from affluent families, and being committed to personal freedom and tolerance. Within this cultural subtype there are some more focused on personal, vital experience and others more focused on social issues such as environmental integrity, social justice, and peace. Some have strong affinities with aspects of the New Age Movement. One of the most important points Sample makes about this group is: "The people in our society who are least likely to attend church

are those on the Cultural Left.”⁶

Because of their characteristics, Sample believes that reaching this cultural subgroup - the absence of whom accounts for major portions of decline among mainline churches - will require something more than business as usual. He offers a panoply of alternative worship, programmatic, and ministry initiatives which is more responsive to characteristics of the Cultural Left while still being rooted in the gospel. He also poignantly suggests that congregations may be motivated to make the changes such outreach requires as they see faces of their own children among those on the Cultural Left.

Perhaps the clearest point of intersection between the predilections of those on the cultural left and the church is found in preaching. It may be that we will have to rethink more radically than is comfortable how we preach, if we want our preaching to be responsive to these persons. Language, music, prayers - but especially sermon style and content - will need to be reexamined to see how clearly they relate the gospel of God's reign to the life issues and concerns most dominant for those on the Cultural Left. Sample's suggestions clearly point a direction for preaching which hopes to engage the people inhabiting this part of the landscape of contemporary American life. It will be preaching that ranges among personal, experiential concerns and as well as to concerns for the environment, social justice, and peace. Its aims will be to nurture the deep conviction that God still pays attention to life amidst all these. As such it may become preaching for conversion.

The second group - The Cultural Right - is comprised of a segment of society far less oriented to career and, of necessity, far more oriented to making a living, providing for a family, and tending to the details of just getting along. One major segment of this group, the "Respectables," constitute a major component of most mainline churches according to Sample. Despite frequent stereotyping as religiously fundamentalist and politically reactionary, they live by values of family, local neighborhood and community, and love of country - none of which is inherently inimical to apprehending the mystery of God's gracious presence in all life.

The problem, says Sample, is that most mainline ministers are educated and socialized away from an appreciation and understanding of these people and their values, failing to understand that most of the major ethical and theological issues of the day can be helpfully focused in terms of the very value system of the Cultural Right, that is, family, neighborhood, and country. Just as "journey theology" is appropriate for the Cultural Left, Sample believes that "folk theology" which appreciates popular religion is appropriate for the Cultural Right.

Because folk theology in the U.S. is profoundly biblical, there is a broad hint here for preaching which seeks to reach people in this cultural subgroup. To speak in a compelling fashion to people on the Cultural Right, one must speak in the idiom, accent, and stories of scripture. But folk theology also "tends to deal with religious faith and with the Bible in a nonlinear way that takes primarily oral expression."⁷ This leads to an emphasis upon story as a preferred means of communication with the Cultural Right. Preaching for conversion on the Cultural Right will have to take these preferences seriously, nourishing the dynamic trust that God pays attention to their life issues as well.

The third group in Sample's analysis - the Cultural Middle - is typified by its stress on career, though a tension is not infrequently experienced between career and "good life." A concomitant characteristic is tremendous weight on the nuclear family as career removes families regularly from kinship and relationship networks. So

demanding are these careers that they frequently do not permit living out a full range of interests. In particular the spiritual hungers of the self are frequently set aside in the quest for success.

Persons in the Cultural Middle have a high commitment to toleration of diversity, but maintain the tolerance by muting public issues and concentrating on the private domain of family, personal development, and personal morality. Notwithstanding the fact that Christian ministry makes a significant address to such private interests, the temptation in preaching to this group is to direct attention away from the important public issues which surround everyone. With this group, the task of preaching for conversion is to explore the pain of the Cultural Middle in the mode of what Sample calls “explanatory theology,” seeking to account for that pain in the context of a larger perspective on the human condition and human liberation. In its own way, preaching for conversion in this context will be about the work of nurturing the conviction that God still pays attention.

Sample acknowledges that some congregations will specialize in ministry to one particular lifestyle. Thus some of us may end up preaching to one particular part of this cultural mosaic most of the time. However, he believes that a far greater number of congregations will inevitably draw together greater variety and then be faced with the challenge of living and growing with that diversity. Certainly the task of preaching will be a challenge as we seek to find words which convey the word of truth refracted through the cultural particularity that questions God’s attentiveness. As it nurtures, freshens, and gives birth to the conviction that God still pays attention, it will be evangelistic preaching that rightly intends conversion.

NOTES

¹ Louise, Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (Bantam Books: New York, 1984), 193.

² *Ibid*, 194.

³ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 125.

⁴ *Ibid*, 130.

⁵ *Ibid*, 159.

⁶ Tex Sample, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville), 31.

⁷ *Ibid*, 92.